

Chicago Tribune

TRIBUNE INVESTIGATION SCHOOL FOOD SAFETY

FIRST OF TWO PARTS

SCHOOL LUNCHES: ILLNESS ON MENU

- The number of school food outbreaks reported to federal officials soared 56 percent in the 1990s.
- In a notorious case, tortillas from a South Side factory were implicated in the illness of 1,200 students.
- It's often difficult to trace spoiled food because companies are allowed to keep their suppliers secret.

By David Jackson

Tribune staff reporter

The outbreaks were swift and violent, and for hours afterward, the children had headaches and stomach cramps. The hospital nurses who arrived at the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation in North Dakota found 1st graders crouched in pain and vomiting two and three times in succession.

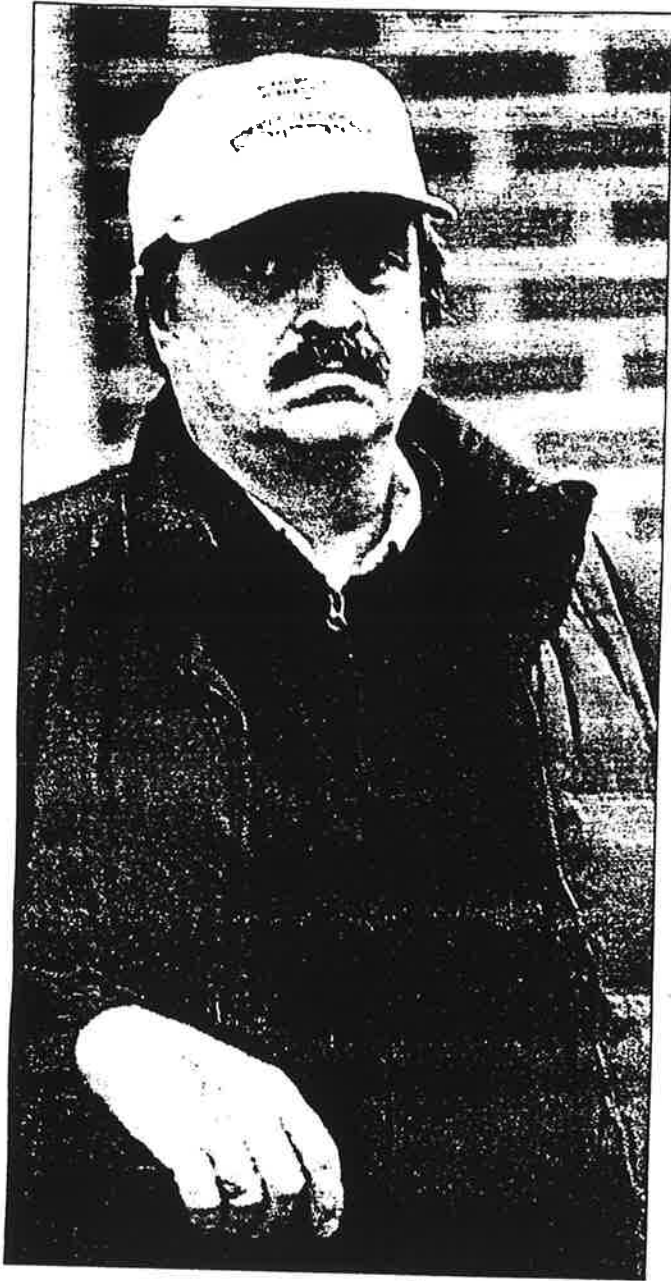
Of the 469 youths sickened by their school lunch burritos, 36 were treated at the local emergency room. Firefighters were called in to hose down the playground.

More than a thousand miles away that day, elementary pupils in Upson County, Ga., and Port Salerno, Fla., got sick after eating burritos packed in the same squat brick plant on Chicago's South Side, run by RHSCO Enterprises Inc.

For four months in 1998, as the illness outbreaks were being linked to RHSCO, the company shipped 80,000 frozen burritos a day to schools and other institutions across the country.



Locked gates surround a plant at 636 W. Root St., where burritos for school lunches were made. The plant now has new owners.



Tribune photos by Chris Walker

Tortillas from Oscar Munoz's South Side plant were linked to the illnesses of 1,200 schoolchildren in separate outbreaks throughout the country. "The kids vomit, but they didn't get sick," he said in a court deposition.

In one of the most far-reaching school food outbreaks in the last decade, more than 1,200 children in at least seven states were sickened.

But even today, details of the case remain hidden from public view, as does much of the rapidly changing, multibillion-dollar industry that feeds America's schoolchildren.

In the sprawling school food industry's darkest precincts, frozen meals are confected in grimy factories, meat is ground in contaminated packing houses and half pints of milk are traded like poker chips, records and interviews show.

The issue is of special importance because food-borne pathogens that may cause only mild indigestion in healthy adults can sicken and kill young people, whose immune systems are

still developing.

Part detective mystery and part gritty business primer, the story of the tainted burritos touches on every facet of the school meal, from the factory bins where raw flour is pumped to make tortillas to the distribution chain that moves the frozen entrees to the child's cafeteria tray. Court and government records expose glaring faults in the government regulatory system, from the initial inspection to the issuing of a recall, and they show how questionable operators can slide from one subcontract to another, while school officials scramble to protect their students.

The number of school food outbreaks reported to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention rose by 56 percent in the eight years from 1990

through 1997, the most recent period for which complete national data are available.

Case reports gathered by the Tribune from health agencies in 10 large states

suggest the number of school outbreaks has continued to climb.

During the five years from 1990 through 1994, for

example, Illinois authorities reported only three school food outbreaks, in which 66 children were sickened. But during the next six years, the average annual number of school food outbreaks more than tripled, and the number of youths affected increased tenfold, state records show.

The U.S. population of school-age children rose 9 percent during that period, and government food safety agencies became more vigilant about investigating and reporting outbreaks. But the large increase in school food illnesses baffles epidemiologists and school officials.

Across the U.S., from 1990 through 1997, the number of outbreaks and illnesses in the general population increased at a less rapid 36 percent, CDC records show. And outbreaks were no more frequent in nursing homes, prisons or other institutional settings, where, as in schools, epidemiologists can easily track patients.

Court, corporate and government records reveal a fragile food safety system struggling to cope with a rapidly changing marketplace.

Powerful distribution companies ship frozen school entrees quickly from coast to coast, and private contractors put them on menus in several cities at once, giving national reach to plants that produce unsafe meals. The distributors draw frozen entrees from a netherworld of scantily inspected subcontractors whose identities are rarely if ever disclosed to school officials.

"I have to rely on the distributor, and I don't know that the distributors know that much," said Mary Kate Harrison, food purchaser for the Tampa, Fla.-area Hillsborough County school district, which was affected by four recalls of contaminated food in 1998.

Plant inspections and illness outbreaks are handled by a complex tapestry of federal, state and local food safety agencies that often do not share critical information with one another, government case files show. The food safety agencies rarely inform schools when they cite plants for serious health violations or even when they temporarily shut down plants because they are unsafe.

When the worst happens and school lunch suppliers send out contaminated meals, the federal government's recall system offers a flimsy safeguard for children. Industry-backed confidentiality rules block state and county authorities from getting company shipping records so they can trace the food to protect children from further harm.

"To assure that the recalled product is removed from circulation, it is critical that state officials know its distribution," said Francis C. Okino, chief of the Illinois Department of Public Health's Division of Food, Drugs and Dairies.

It's all heat and serve

Although America's food supply is considered among the world's safest, rapid changes in the school meal industry have occasioned new health risks.

When Hillsborough County epidemiologist Elliott Gregos began tracking central Florida outbreaks two decades ago, "schools were preparing most all their food from scratch," Gregos said.

"Schools basically don't prepare anything anymore. It's all heat-and-serve," he said. "Everything comes frozen or canned."

Factory-frozen and "pre-plated" meals, manufactured to meet the portion size, nutrition and cost requirements of school lunch contracts, have allowed authorities to trim cafeteria jobs and streamline their food budgets. But when harmful pathogens invade these modern food trays, they are liable to affect more children, records and interviews show.

"The scope has changed," Gregos said.

Among the largest cases are the 400 Sacramento, Calif., children in six schools who were poisoned by staphylococcus aureus in spaghetti in 1996, and the 213 students at 23 Michigan schools who got sick in 1997 after eating strawberries tainted with hepatitis A.

But the reported cases represent only a fraction of the actual total. Ill people often do not seek medical care, health officials

rarely collect food specimens for diagnosis, and only some test results are communicated to health officials. Though Americans experience an estimated 76 million food-borne illnesses a year, fewer than one in 5,000 of those cases—only 15,000 a year—are reported in the CDC outbreak database.

Breakdowns riddle the government-run food safety system.

When U.S. government-donated hamburger tainted with the E. coli 0157:H7 bacteria sickened 18 students in 1998 at Risen Christ Catholic School in Minneapolis, the U.S. Agriculture Department could not trace the beef because of record-keeping flaws in the complex distribution chain that stretched from slaughterhouse to school. "USDA cannot positively say what beef was used in the hot dish, and which plant it came from," an internal Minnesota Health Department report said.

When Georgia-based supplier Zartic Inc. recalled 556,000 pounds of school lunch hamburger in 1998 because a sample tested positive for listeria, Zartic officials notified hundreds of distributors about the problem. But Zartic had no idea which schools the distributors were serving—such records are considered confidential, Zartic Chief Operating Officer Jack Harris said.

The names of some schools that served the hamburger surfaced in press reports, and officials from Clayton, Ga., to Pittsburgh, said in interviews with the Tribune that they received no notice of that recall.

In the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, authorities are considering several measures, such as adding more inspectors, to reform America's food safety system and thwart a possible assault on the country's farm crops, livestock feed supplies and production plants.

White House homeland security director Thomas J. Ridge has said the Bush administration also is taking a fresh look at the idea of merging the nation's fragmented network of 15 food safety agencies under one office, an idea long advocated by U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.).

The rise in food-borne illnesses in schools during the 1990s—and their causes

The Tribune examined records from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention between 1990 and 1997, the most recent year complete nationwide data were available. To account for year-to-year variability when making comparisons, the records were divided into two four-year periods (the same method used by government analysts). More than 9,300 people were reported sick from outbreaks of food-borne illnesses at schools during that time.

MORE PEOPLE SICKENED DURING SCHOOL OUTBREAKS

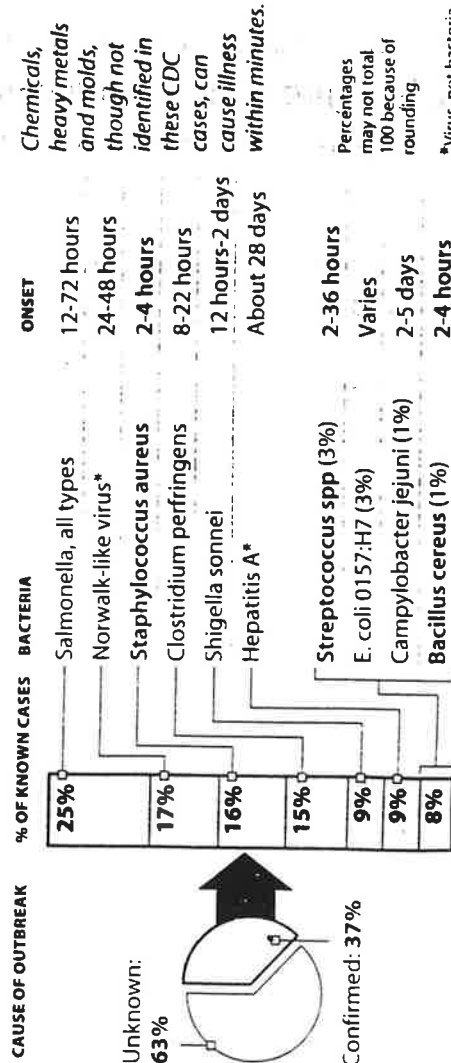
The number of people sickened increased 73 percent over the two periods, while the average number of outbreaks increased 56 percent.

PERIOD	YEAR	NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO WERE SICK	OUTBREAKS
1	1990	1,212	25
	1991	548	15
	1992	997	15
	1993	676	15
1990-93 avg.		858	17.5
2	1994	1,692	29
	1995	436	9
	1996	1,772	32
	1997	2,026	39
1994-97 avg.		1,481	27.3

Note: CDC reports do not distinguish children from adults, and some school outbreaks sickened a small number of teachers and staff. A small number of outbreaks could have resulted from food prepared at a parent's or teacher's home. Analysis of state records suggests that about one in five of the school outbreaks reported by the CDC could have been at colleges.

DETERMINING THE CAUSES OF ILLNESSES

The cause of most school outbreaks never is determined. When a cause is known, it most often turns out to be a bacteria, some of which can lead to illness very rapidly (indicated in bold).



Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Chicago Tribune/Lauren Cabell, Phil Grib

Under the current system, the lines of jurisdiction between federal agencies are confounding, and investigators are often stymied when they try to track meat, grain and produce as it winds through the production chain from farm to grocery.

The story of the tainted school lunch burritos offers a wrenching lesson in the shortcomings of the current system.

The hidden chef

A grimy plastic window shields Oscar Munoz's headquarters from 47th Street. A side door leads to a second-floor office with two secretaries and a religious calendar.

This is the command post of the school lunch subcontractor no school official seemed to know about. As his company produced the white-flour tortillas suspected in school lunch outbreaks, Munoz served as a hidden chef to hundreds of thousands of young people, and an exemplar of a new American industry.

Munoz declined to answer a reporter's questions. "When I want publicity, I pay for it," he said, with weary, onyx eyes.

Born in the central Mexican state of Jalisco, Munoz described himself in a March court deposition as an uneducated man who lived above his tortilla factory.

But in a notification filed with the Kankakee County assessor's office, Munoz said he lived in a sprawling \$550,000 house on a 12-acre, landscaped parcel near the Indiana border. Ringed with a wrought-iron security fence, that home features an indoor Olympic-size pool and two-story guard tower. There, Munoz registers two Mercedes sports coupes. Munoz and his family own some 800 acres of Kankakee County land and last year received more than \$28,000 in federal farm subsidies.

Using confidential land trusts and unregistered corporate names, Munoz controls at least three Chicago apartment buildings, a dining hall, a meat plant that was abandoned by its former owners, two taco restaurants, and a now-shuttered grocery that was cited for sanitation violations and for selling outdated baby food, according to land, court and city Health Department records.

In 1998, federal prosecutors

filed a civil lawsuit to seize some \$212,000 in a bank account Munoz established, saying in court papers that authorities had probable cause to believe the money was "derived from narcotics trafficking."

Among the evidence was the testimony of an unnamed informant who told authorities that he or she had watched as Munoz counted drug money stashed in duffel bags in the basement of a Little Village restaurant, prosecutors wrote.

Munoz was not charged with any crime as a result of the investigation, and he filed court papers saying he and his money had no connection to drug dealing. He settled the forfeiture case by agreeing to let the government keep \$63,000—made up of cash deposits "structured to evade cash transaction reporting requirements," federal prosecutors said—while releasing the other \$149,000 to Munoz.

Although Munoz wouldn't allow a reporter inside his 47th Street tortilla plant, the factory was described in a 1999 Illinois Department of Public Health inspection. Flies were everywhere, the state inspector wrote. Corn spilled from broken bags onto the wet, broken floor. Toxic chemicals, sacks of cement and cans of paint sat nearby. Bakery equipment had been patched with cardboard, string and tape. The ceiling peeled, the basement reeked of mold and the electrical cords hanging over the corn-grinding kettle were covered with dust.

The white-flour tortillas suspected in the school illness outbreaks were produced in a second Munoz plant, housed in an unmarked former electrical equipment factory a half mile north, at 1850 W. 43rd St.

Inspections from 1996 and 1997 noted sanitation deficiencies there. But that plant was not inspected by any food safety agency during the eight months in 1998 when it produced the tortillas linked to the outbreaks.

At the school lunch plant, called Munoz Flour Tortilleria, Inc., tanker trucks bearing flour from North Dakota rased into the loading dock, court, corporate and government reports show. Pneumatic tubes pumped the flour into 200,000-pound rectangular storage bins before the tortilla ingredients were fed into hoppers where the dough was formed, sliced and pushed through holes in revolving plates. Dough balls sluiced down stainless steel canals to cabinets where they were left to rise. Pressed doily-thin in 8-inch discs, tortillas flopped through a three-tiered revolving oven.

Munoz entered the school lunch business at a propitious time. During the 1990s, a series of 43 recalls of contaminated, adulterated and misbranded hot dogs sent safety-conscious school food directors hustling to find a safe alternative—another hand-held entree that would appeal to kids.

Taco Bell Corp. launched its first frozen burrito line for schools in 1996, and within a year it was supplying nearly 15,000 schools across the country.

But the frozen school lunch burrito, which combines a variety of ingredients gathered from several sources, can pose its own safety problems. In 1997, burritos from Estrada Foods of Colorado were linked to more than 300 school illnesses in three states, federal food safety records show.

In January 1998, Munoz teamed up with food industry up-and-comer Robert Hicks and his RHSCO plant, which was selling \$8 million of frozen Mexican entrees a year to schools, prisons and supermarkets, court records and inspection reports show.

The first outbreak came about four months later. In May 1998, 11 South Bend, Ind., children were sickened. Then nine in Philadelphia.

When federal agencies released records to the Tribune under the Freedom of Information Act, they followed industry-driven guidelines and deleted portions that would show where the outbreaks occurred, how many children were affected and who the food's distributors and subcontractors were.

The Tribune's account was drawn from the files of 20 local health and food safety agencies.

By August 1998, the incidents began to gather momentum, those records show. That month, outbreaks roiled 66 Tampa-area schools, sickening 651 children.



Robert Hicks Jr. owned RHSCO Enterprises Inc. in 1998 when the firm shipped burritos to schools and other institutions across the country. The burritos were linked to an outbreak in which more than 1,200 children in at least seven states were sickened.

In September, 81 students were sickened at five schools in and around the agricultural town of Immokalee, Fla.

Ten days later, five girls held in the Kansas City, Kan., juvenile detention center got sick after eating RHSCO "Correct Choice" correctional services burritos.

Four days after that, 30 children at the Lincoln and Denkmann Schools in Rock Island, Ill., experienced cramps, vomiting or headaches after eating the food, Illinois Department of Public Health records show. "It was frightening—beyond any experience I had ever seen," said Carol Longley, director of food service for the Rock Island school district.

Simultaneous outbreaks at Turtle Mountain and in Florida and Georgia followed in six days.

A day later, on Sept. 17, a half dozen 3rd graders at the Hamilton Crossing, Ga., elementary school got sick about an hour after eating RHSCO burritos.

At some point between May and September, at least one outbreak also occurred in Iowa, court and government health agency records indicate. RHSCO attorney Lloyd said in an interview that Hicks did not take immediate steps to halt shipments or recall the burritos

because none of the initial reports of illness received by the company offered conclusive evidence that RHSCO's frozen entrees—and not some other food—made the children sick.

It was not until Sept. 18, after more than a thousand children had been sickened, that the Agriculture Department requested that Hicks recall the suspect burritos.

"Instead of pointing fingers, RHSCO started recalling product," Lloyd said. "These are not people who shirk their responsibilities."

In theory, recall works

Agriculture Department rules are designed to help companies remove tainted food from commerce as quickly as possible. But federal law does not allow department officials to force plants to recall food.

The company and its government monitors work, in theory, as a closely choreographed team.

Agriculture Department agents gather company distribution records to ensure that potentially dangerous food is identified and returned. Department investigators interview people who got sick, collect and analyze food samples and notify local and state health departments of the problem. Depart-

ment field personnel, who have access to internal company distribution lists, then conduct "effectiveness checks" to make sure the firm made every reasonable effort to locate, retrieve and dispose of the product.

But in practice, as RHSCO's case shows, this carefully woven safety net can function like a sieve.

The Agriculture Department did not learn how many pounds of burritos RHSCO had shipped to its school lunch customers until five days after the recall, case files show. A week later, department officials learned the burritos had been sold to the general public, not just schools and institutions, and belatedly issued a press release warning people not to eat them.

In hastily arranged conference calls, government epidemiologists said they suspected children were sickened by the tortillas used to wrap the burritos, not the meat and bean fillings, internal government case records show. "USDA feels that early information points to the tortilla as being responsible," Florida Department of Health epidemiologist Michael Friedman wrote in a Sept. 21 e-mail to colleagues.

But Agriculture Department officials allowed schools to keep serving the tortilla shells,

which came from Munoz's factory.

Three weeks after the recall, Hillsborough County, Fla., school cooks used the tortillas to wrap their own burritos. Outbreaks in eight schools there sickened 58 children.

In internal memos to their superiors, Agriculture Department officials downplayed the extent of the burrito illness outbreaks. Despite knowing of the massive Florida and North Dakota cases, the department Recall Committee's summary report said that only "several children" were ill; an Oct. 2 report to the undersecretary for food safety cited just the cases in Kansas and Georgia.

Hicks did not know exactly which schools had received RHSCO food, because that information was not disclosed to him by his roughly 200 distributors. To ensure that everyone who bought the burritos was notified of the recall, Agriculture Department field personnel conducted 286 "effectiveness checks" of schools, nursing homes and other institutions. A department report said no problems had been found.

It was impossible to verify that claim because department recall records released under the Freedom of Information Act were heavily blacked out, in accordance with industry-backed laws that protect the confidentiality of food distribution records.

But in Illinois, where the Tribune obtained effectiveness check records that were not blacked out, 14 of the 31 institutions that received the burritos were not informed of the recall by RHSCO's distributors. Another 10 were notified up to 10 days later.

Ten days after the recall, a team of investigators from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration visited RHSCO's burrito plant, seeking information on the plant's operations and suppliers.

Internal RHSCO records suggested the company's burritos may not have been properly frozen before leaving the factory, the FDA team reported. Hicks said those records were "only an indicator" and shipping documents could clarify the issue, the report said. "When we asked him for actual shipping records, he refused." RHSCO attorney Kurt Lloyd said Hicks couldn't give the records to the FDA because the USDA had them.

On Oct. 5, Hicks faxed federal officials a memo saying he was "totally disgusted" with the way

The spread of an outbreak across the country

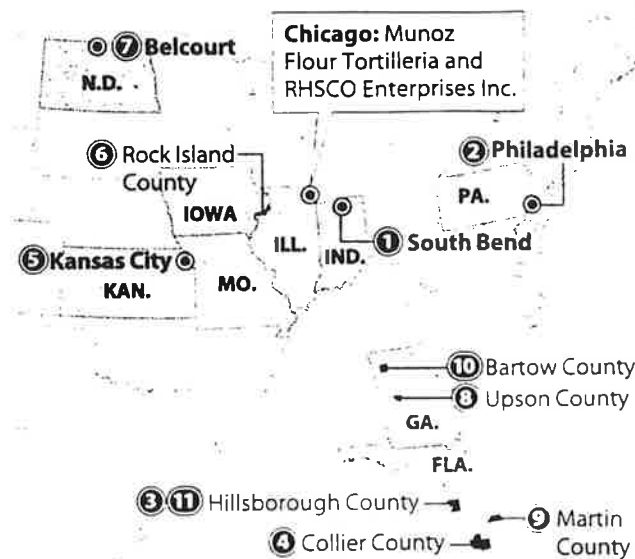
As school lunch distributors expand their national networks, food-borne illnesses often are no longer isolated cases, as one of the past decade's largest school outbreaks shows.

WHERE ILLNESSES APPEARED

More than 1,200 children became ill in 1998 after eating burritos served in school lunches. Though the exact cause of illness never was determined, health agency records show investigations implicated food from two Chicago companies: RHSCO Enterprises Inc., a burrito distributor, and Munoz Flour Tortilleria, which made tortillas for the burritos.

KEY:

 Health agency records show outbreaks  Court and government records indicate an outbreak



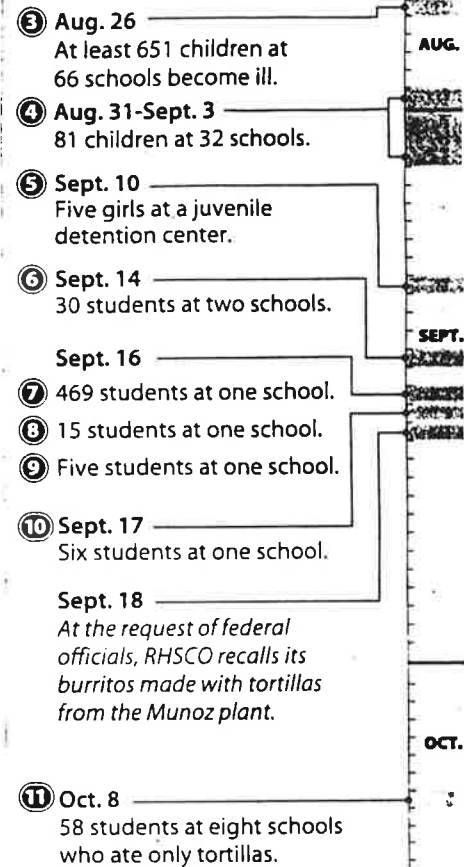
Note: Some illnesses related to this outbreak are not included because many school and health records are confidential.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, court files and records from state, county and municipal health agencies

Chicago Tribune/Lauren Cabell and Phil Geib

WHEN 1998 OUTBREAKS OCCURRED

- ① May-June: Records show the first outbreaks began in South Bend, Ind., and Philadelphia, making 20 children ill, but further details are not known.



the recall had been handled.

"I have got to ask the million dollar question, WHO IS IN CHARGE?" he wrote.

Sifting through garbage

The investigation that led government scientists to Chicago's South Side was a classic example of shoe leather epidemiology.

In Turtle Mountain, investigators from the CDC and North Dakota agencies spent two days sifting layers of garbage in a 26-foot deep pit at a local landfill to recover a cache of half-eaten school lunch burritos. Many were still in their Styrofoam containers, records show.

But none of those samples—or any other sample recovered from cafeteria trash cans and school freezers around the country—tested positive for a known pathogen.

Government epidemiologists built a computer matrix listing the ingredients in the food the ill students ate. The fact that students continued to get sick when school cooks used only the white flour tortillas shipped by RHSCO "suggest[s] that the etiologic agent was in the tortillas," a CDC report concluded.

"There were no other common ingredients identified in the burritos implicated in all of these outbreaks," Gregos, the Hillsborough County, Fla., epidemiologist, wrote in his report. "It is therefore reasonable to conclude that it was some component or contaminant in the tortillas which was responsible for this outbreak."

To determine if there was a

problem with the tortillas, investigators from the Food and Drug Administration, the CDC and the Illinois Department of Public Health arrived at Munoz's 43rd Street flour tortilla factory days after the recall. A helpful employee showed them around the plant, which appeared clean. They tested samples of food and found no pathogens.

In their report, FDA inspectors noted small problems: Cleaning compounds, liquid pesticide and bulk lemon extract were improperly stored in a common area with tortilla ingredients. They came across 20 five-gallon containers of a Mexican-made "anti-adherent" solution that should not come into contact with foods. Munoz told inspectors it was simply being stored there and wasn't used in preparing the tortillas.

In the summer of 1999, state health inspectors returned to Munoz's 43rd Street tortilla plant to find Munoz was using numerous chemicals and preservatives not declared on the tortilla labels. There were flies in the warehouse and production area. The air in the employee lunch room was "smelly" and difficult to breathe.

The plant was not inspected for at least two years after that.

Hicks and Munoz severed ties, and two months after the outbreak, Hicks' company sued Munoz's over the multimillion-dollar costs of the burrito recalls.

Hicks said in court papers that his onetime subcontractor produced tortillas that were

"unsafe for human consumption."

Lawyers for Munoz's company responded that the tortillas were tested several times by government agencies and never proved unsafe, and claimed that RHSCO failed to properly store the shells. RHSCO's attorney said Munoz could provide no evidence that he had cleaned the bins that stored his flour, which could have contracted a harmful mold.

In a March deposition for that lawsuit, Munoz said Hicks talked to him a few times about the illnesses. "I knew that the kids will eat burritos and they vomit, but I did not know that they were from Munoz flour," Munoz said through a court interpreter.

Munoz offered his view of the incidents: "The kids vomit, but they didn't get sick."

Bad record no barrier

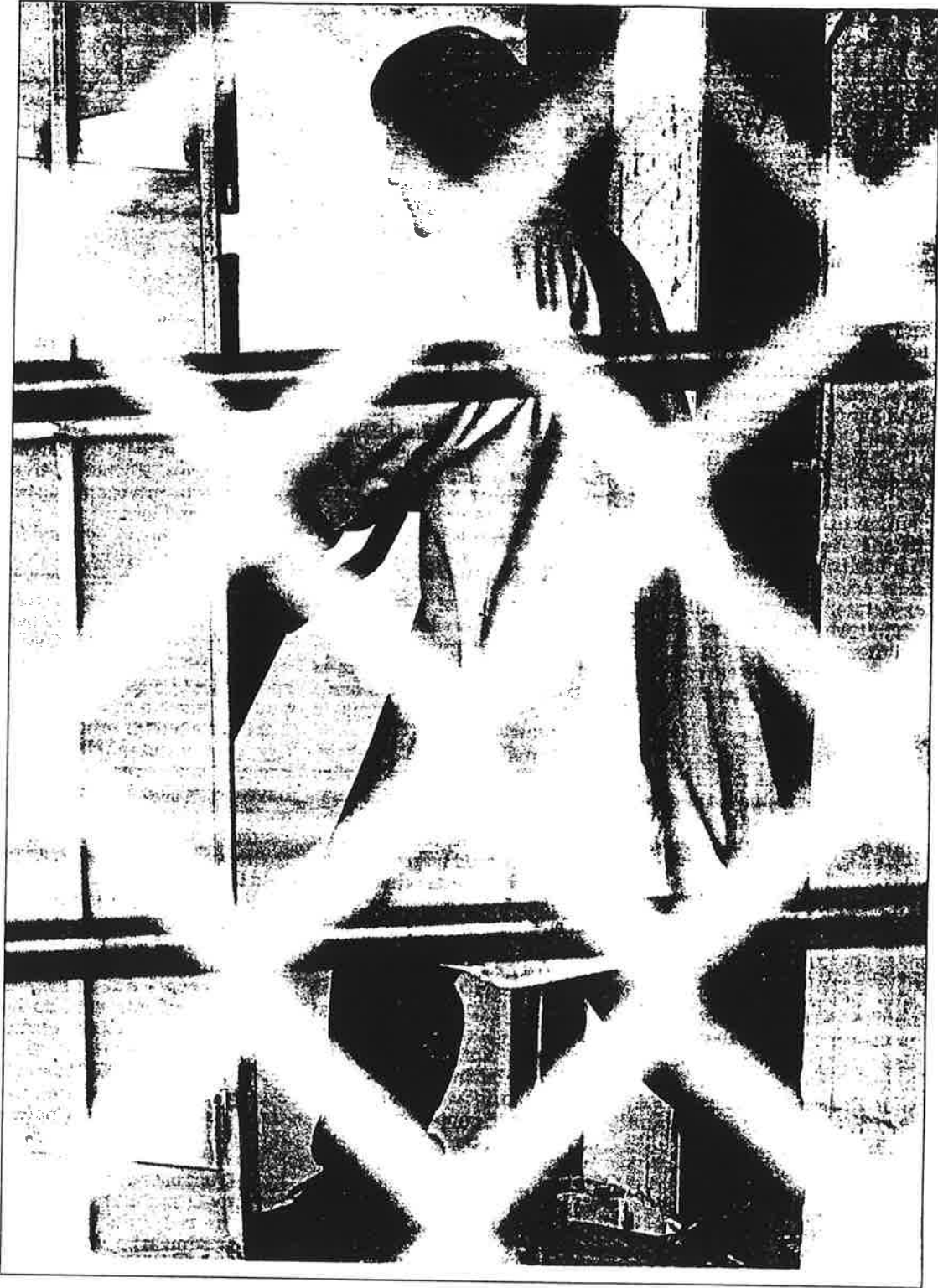
Even without Hicks, Munoz and the RHSCO plant were not done with school lunches.

Munoz began supplying tortillas to companies owned by school food veterans Jorge and Lisandra Reynoso, and he lent them at least \$189,000. Cook County land records and interviews show.

A company controlled in part by the Reynosos eventually bought the old RHSCO plant at 636 W. Root St. for \$1.3 million in 1999. The couple already had a plant on Blue Island Avenue that shipped some 60,000 burritos per day to schools in five states.

The Reynosos' burrito busi-

The federal recall system offers but a flimsy safeguard for children. Confidentiality rules block authorities from getting company shipping records so they can trace the food and protect children.



A worker loads pallets at the burrito plant at 636 W. Root St., the former RHSCO factory. Tribune photos by Chris Walker

ness illustrates how a contractor with a record of unsanitary practices can produce food from a factory that is unseen by school officials and unmonitored by the multistate companies that manage increasing numbers of American school cafeterias.

On their invoices and letterhead, the Reynosos used corporate names including Que Tal? Inc., a company that actually had been dissolved since 1996, and La Morenita. They ascended in the school lunch industry by partnering with the multibillion-dollar private contractors that run school cafeterias around the U.S.

The two biggest, subsidiaries of Sodexho Alliance and Compass Group PLC, currently hold contracts worth \$55 million to manage Chicago cafeterias.

But in Chicago, as around the country, neither company reads the inspection reports of government food safety agencies that monitor their suppliers, and nothing in their contracts says they should, company officials said. And so it is not surprising that no one in charge of children's safety noticed the litany of citations at the Reynosos' Blue Island Avenue school lunch plant.

Last year, a city Building Department inspection cited the plant for 56 code violations, including rat infestation, junk, filth and peeling paint inside the freezer.

Federal inspectors visited the plant for about a half hour a day, Jorge Reynoso said. That October, an Agriculture Department inspector ordered the destruction of 19 60-pound boxes of smelly, off-color meat. In December 2000, a city inspection noted "a large pool" of raw sewage spilled on the basement floor from a rusted pipe.

That month, federal inspectors condemned 480 pounds of green-gray, sour-smelling meat that spilled from blood-soaked boxes; 300 additional pounds of dirt-streaked beef; and five open boxes of school lunch sandwiches that were stored beneath a dripping fan.

Five days before Christmas, a federal inspector noted rust in the bean cooker and a black greasy substance dripping from an exhaust fan onto the tamale cooker. A "strong odor was present." There was mold and hanging caulk on the cook room ceiling and the freezer floor was "black with ice, dirt and grease."

The next day, La Morenita's license was suspended for five

days by Chicago health inspector Franklin Jenkins. Then the plant resumed production.

When the Agriculture Department finally forced La Morenita to stop packing burritos on Dec. 29, the company's food remained in circulation through warehouses that had stored the food in freezers for distribution to schools. Three times during January 2001, the Agriculture Department detained a total of 10,170 pounds of adulterated and mislabeled food linked to La Morenita, records show.

None of these enforcement actions were communicated to Chicago school officials by Sodexho or Compass, the private companies that served La Morenita food to the city's children.

In late January, a sample of burritos destined for the Chicago schools tested positive for the potentially deadly listeria bacteria. It took 13 days before the U.S. Agriculture Department confirmed the presence of the bacteria, and another three days before department officials forced the Reynosos to announce a recall of the tainted school burritos on Jan. 26, records and interviews show.

Agriculture officials never determined how much food was infected with listeria because of "inadequate record keeping by the firm," a USDA memo said. Distributors who held hundreds of cases were not notified of the recall.

For a few months this year, the Reynosos stopped selling burritos to school lunch programs.

But, through the Root Street plant, they got another chance. Using a new corporate name, they lobbied Chicago school officials to help them become a subcontractor again.

In April, Chicago school food service director Sue Susanke wrote a short letter to Sodexho saying a Reynoso company's foods may "once again be menued for use in the Chicago Public Schools."

This fall, the company resumed feeding Chicago students through a Sodexho subcontract. Sodexho spokeswoman Jeanette Jurkiewicz said her company was unaware that the Reynosos had any problem at the Blue Island plant. "To our knowledge, they had no prior record of food safety incidents," Jurkiewicz said.

"They are under no obligation to notify any of the parties they supply product to" of the government enforcement actions, said Linda Galarti, Quality Assurance director for Compass, which no longer uses companies linked to the Reynosos.

Her brown hair shrouded in a sanitary net, Lisandra Reynoso insisted in an interview that her school food entrees have always been safe and wholesome.

The real problem, Reynoso said, is America's strict food safety laws.

"The more we battle these so-called pathogens, the more problems we're creating," she said.

She let the smoke of her cigarette curl against the window of her office, obscuring a view of Chicago's Stockyard district bungalows and a shuttered fish packing plant.

"Our immune systems here are in pathetic shape," Reynoso said. "We're not able to deal with elevated levels of bacteria that people in other parts of the world can deal with because we are in such a sterile environment," she said.

"I think we're harming ourselves and our children by weakening ourselves."

Meat from troubled plants sold to U.S. lunch program

By David Jackson
and Geoff Dougherty
Tribune staff reporters

The cattle were herded into the grease-slicked east Texas slaughterhouse, then the cuts of beef were trucked to a germ-ridden grinding plant.

Even as safety citations piled up at those plants in 1999, their owner remained one of the top hamburger suppliers to the National School Lunch Program, which provides roughly 15 percent of the food American students eat.

That year, as Supreme Beef Processor's grinding plant and sister slaughterhouse each failed three consecutive rounds of tests for the salmonella bacteria, the company sold \$23 million in meat to schools through the federal program.

Supreme presents the cardinal story of a troubled U.S. program. To procure the roughly 300 million pounds of frozen beef it provides to schools each year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture buys meat from plants that violate critical food safety rules and have undergone recalls of bacteria-contam-

inated meat, government records show.

Plants that sell frozen beef to the National School Lunch Program violated food safety rules at rates higher than the industry as a whole, a Tribune computer analysis of U.S. Agriculture Department data shows.

Over the past five years, the USDA used two inspection systems to collect data on meat plants, and the two systems yielded different violation rates. In one, which phased out between 1998 and 1999, school-lunch plants had violation rates 25 percent higher than the plants overall. Under that system, the school-lunch plants accrued violations in 2.03 percent of the 459,000 times they were inspected. In plants that did not sell to the federal lunch program, the violation rate was 1.63 percent.

In the other system, which is newer but contains information on far fewer inspections, school-lunch plants had violation rates 7 percent higher than plants overall. That number, however, could understate the problem at school-lunch plants because records for two plants—including

a large one with a history of violations and recalls—could not be included.

"We've seen improvements in our food safety system and inspection systems," Agriculture Department spokesman Kevin Herglotz said. "It's moving in the right direction [and] we need to continue to make sure we're using the best available science and strengthening the program."

Food safety experts say higher violation rates are cause for concern, although they do not necessarily indicate that a group of plants is producing contaminated food. That's because some violations deal with record-keeping problems and other difficulties.

One of the plants with repeated violations, Bauer Meat Co. of Ocala, Fla., underwent a massive recall while Bauer and its distributing company sold \$38.7 million to the program. In November, a Bauer employee was sentenced to 36 months' probation on a graft charge related to the company's school contracts, federal records show.

After some 38,000 pounds of E. coli-tainted Bauer hamburg-

er sent to Florida and Georgia schools hospitalized a 5th-grade boy and sickened several other children in 1998, the Agriculture Department inspector general found Bauer employees shipped hundreds of products up to two years old to schools. The company is now shuttered.

The meat plant recalls and safety violations reveal the conflicting missions of the National School Lunch Program, which was launched in 1946 to bolster American agricultural markets, as well as to give students nutritious meals. When prices drop because of a food surplus, the USDA uses the \$650 million designated for school commodities to buy up the surplus.

The USDA has been criticized for dumping high-fat products into schools, compromising the health of children to support the politically potent farm lobby.

The inspection records raise new questions about the department's ability to simultaneously shop the market for inexpensive food and police it for the presence of pathogens that are especially dangerous to children.

When the Agriculture Depart-

ment moved to shut down Supreme's processing plant at the end of 1999, the company filed a federal lawsuit saying the department's salmonella testing standard was based on flimsy science and questionable law. Many scientists agree with that assessment, and so did the federal judge who heard the case. The judge ordered the Agriculture Department to keep its inspectors at the plant, and Supreme kept supplying the federal school lunch program until the processing plant failed an unprecedented fourth round of salmonella tests in June 2000.

The Supreme case continues to reverberate through the industry and shape the government's effort to make sure school meals are safe.

As the Agriculture Department appeals the court decision, the government has in several cases negotiated with beef producers that subsequently failed three rounds of salmonella tests, rather than attempting to shut them down, industry officials said.

Embarrassed by Supreme's continued involvement in the school lunch program, the Clin-

ton administration last year instituted a "zero tolerance" standard for salmonella in school purchases.

The department has rejected a growing amount of school lunch ground beef because it fails bacteria tests. As of October, it had rejected 12 percent of the 34 million pounds of ground beef it had purchased, up from 7 percent last year. That meat can be resold on the commercial market, where there is no zero tolerance standard, sometimes directly to schools, industry officials said.

This spring, Agriculture Department officials proposed replacing the tough salmonella testing standard at the heart of the Supreme Beef case. In its place, department officials said they would sample for several other "indicator organisms," and consider allowing plants to irradiate school lunch meat, reversing a previous ban.

In the political brushfire that followed, Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman quickly withdrew the proposed regulation and restored the salmonella standard.

SCHOOLS FLUNK FOOD SAFETY

■ One in four city schools cited for rodent infestation in food storage areas.

■ When food-handling problems are found, a report is filed but follow-up is rare.



Victor Tlaseca, a 3rd grader, eats his turkey and dressing meal at Kanoon Magnet School, one of several sites where children became sick after eating school lunches.

Tribune photo by Chris Walker

By David Jackson

Tribune staff reporter

Rodents and bugs infest Chicago school kitchens and cafeterias. Chips of paint float into the cooking pans, and walls are slicked with chronic grime.

Frozen entrees wrapped in cellophane are warmed then left to sit for hours in plastic containers that do not hold a safe temperature. Children's illness outbreaks are mishandled and brushed aside.

America's third-largest school district presents a case study in the government lapses and lax food handling practices that can put children at risk.

Since 1999 there have been at least 41 suspected food poisoning incidents at Chicago schools, in which at least 215 children were sickened, city Department of Public Health reports and school records show.

None of those incidents was reported to state or federal officials. And in none were city health officials able to determine the cause of the illnesses. Despite the filth and unsafe food handling practices found inside many schools, officials insist that the meals are not to blame.

"Most the time, it was the flu," said Chicago school food service director Sue Susanke. "I don't think it has anything to do with the food."

School Department of Operations chief Tim Martin added that children frequently faked illness to get out of classes, and "some of

them think it's neat to ride in an ambulance."

Whatever the cause of the suspected school food poisoning cases, interviews and records show the illnesses are occurring with increasing frequency.

"In the past couple of years, they've been more prevalent," Susanke said.

The least affluent students appear to be most at risk, a Tribune computer analysis of school data shows. More than 92 percent of the children live below the poverty line at schools that experience suspected food-borne illnesses, compared with 84 percent at the schools that did not.

Chicago authorities often appear ill-prepared for the fast-moving events of the illness outbreaks, case

SAFETY LAX

Food-borne bacteria can be especially dangerous—sometimes crippling or deadly—to young people, whose immune systems are still being formed.

records and interviews show. They do not respond forcefully to children's complaints, nor do they appear to use the reports to isolate systemic problems. Suspect meals were sometimes tossed out instead of tested for pathogens, and parents say they were given the runaround.

"The school was not concerned, period," said Carol Curtis, whose 9-year-old son was diagnosed with food poisoning at West Suburban Hospital after he began throwing up at Ellington School. "The principal told me there was no way he got sick from the food they served."

Ellington Principal Hattie Spires said she did not recall the incident.

Chicago school officials could produce records on only 16 suspected foodborne illness outbreaks in city schools since 1999. Another 16 incidents are listed in a Suspected Foodborne Illness Log maintained by the city health department and in inspection reports. Government scientists define an outbreak as two or more people getting a similar illness from a common source.

In addition to those 32 incidents, there were 9 suspected food poisoning cases in which only one student was affected, health department records show.

Contaminated meals are especially dangerous for children because food-borne pathogens that may cause only mild cramps in healthy adults can cripple and kill young people, whose immune systems are still being formed.

A Tribune investigation has found dangerous faults in school food manufacturing plants and in the government regulatory system that oversees them. But while government agencies usually focus their limited resources on unsanitary practices in the factories that produce food, inspection reports and site visits in Chicago underscore the perils lurking at the final stages of the school lunch: the kitchens where meals are heated and the cafeterias where they are served.

"The real hazards are in food service, where the regulatory system is weakest," said Dr. Susan Brewer, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign food science professor.

Five years ago, when Chicago became the largest school district in the nation to privatize its meal program, city officials said the initiative was designed to improve the quality and wholesomeness of student food.

Under contracts now worth \$55 million a year, two private firms were put in charge of the day-to-day operation of about 450 of the city's school kitchens. Another roughly 200 schools serve frozen meals under the supervision of school staff. In the schools managed by private firms, pest control and peeling paint are the responsibility of the schools. The companies devise the daily menus and order the food.

But while the two private firms train lunchroom staff on how to keep facilities in sanitary condition and maintain the food at proper temperatures, the companies have no authority over the 4,200 food workers in the schools, whose wages are paid by the Board of Education. The food workers answer to their school principals.

In theory, when kitchens are dirty or food is not handled properly, the companies devise a "corrective action plan" along with the principals, who may fire workers or mete out discipline.

In practice, when bad food reaches children, the lines of accountability tangle and unsafe conditions persist, inspection reports and site visits show.

"No system is foolproof," said Peggy Davis, chief of staff for school CEO Arne Duncan. "If there are things falling between the cracks, we want to address them. The safety of our children is our highest concern."

The frailties of Chicago's food practices are on display at Pasteur Elementary School, 5825 S. Kostner Ave., where at a recent lunch each student was served a shrink-wrapped tray that held a single hot dog and three fried potato nuggets. Buns were dispensed from plastic bags. The students also got a cup of Jell-O and half pint of milk. There was no fruit or vegetable, despite a federal rule that schools offer them.

The lime green cardboard lunch trays bore a bright inscription: "Food for thought!"

To cope with its growing population of immigrant students, Pasteur School last year tore out its kitchen to make space for more classrooms. And so the school's 720 meals were warmed at Morrill Math and Science Specialty School, a 4-mile drive away, then placed in 29 large plastic containers. Each container's lid was loosely secured with a single piece of masking tape before the food was stacked in an unheated truck.

A total of 136 Chicago schools—about one in five—ship meals to and from each other, city contract files show. Chicago school bureaucrats call these "inter-unit commodity transfers."

Alex Andrade, the former city food services executive who designed Chicago's 1996 privatization initiative, said Chicago privatized in large part to get rid of such roving meals. But a lack of kitchens and equipment has thwarted progress, school officials say.

When the cardboard trays arrived at Pasteur, lunchroom attendant Ann Prendergast quickly peeled one open and rammed her meat thermometer into a hot dog to test its temperature.

To ensure harmful bacteria are not present, cooked items such as hot dogs should be held above 145 degrees, Chicago regulations and federal food safety guidelines say. If the food won't be eaten for two hours or more, it should be reheated to a minimum temperature of 165 degrees.

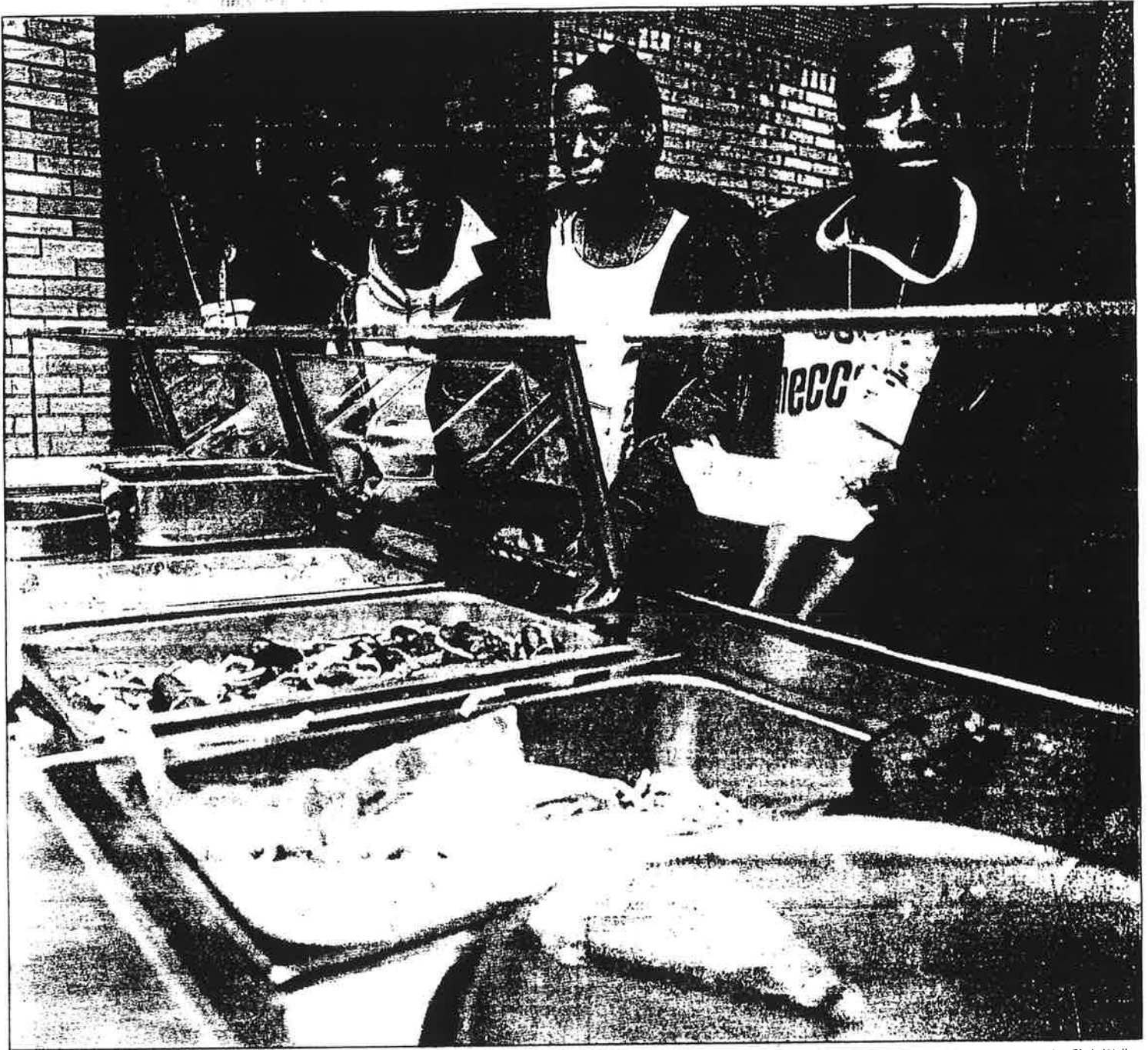
The Pasteur hot dog was a little more than 120 degrees.

"That's pretty good," said Prendergast, a 17-year veteran.

As the cellophane-wrapped trays were unloaded, sorted and counted, the hot dogs and potato nuggets cooled further.

Because Pasteur has converted its lunchrooms to classrooms, students pick up their lunch trays in the hallway, then file back to eat at their desks.

In May 2000, five Pasteur children got ill after eating a lunch of nachos, applesauce and milk.



Tribune photos by Chris Walker

Students go through the serving line at Fenger High School in the Roseland neighborhood on the Far South Side. Since 1999, there have been at least 41 suspected food poisoning incidents at Chicago schools, in which at least 215 children were sickened.

Last March, a Pasteur server noticed a hot dog contaminated with a black substance, inspection records show. That month, city inspectors cited Pasteur for having the food delivered and served at improper temperatures, a critical health code violation. No follow-up steps were recorded in city case files.

Rodents and lead paint

Inspectors from the Chicago Department of Public Health and the Chicago Public Schools visit each lunchroom and cafeteria at least twice a year. In handwritten reports, they record a litany of hazardous management lapses.

Then their pink and white sheets are carefully folded and filed in the black metal cabinets that line the city Health Department's Lexington Street office. The handwritten reports highlight the failure of city officials to follow up on the inspectors' findings.

Frances Patch, director of the city Health Department division that oversees the inspectors, said inspectors work hard to teach proper food handling techniques to the cafeteria workers and to uncover problem schools.

"We follow through to make sure the food is safe," Patch said.

But the Tribune found case after case where no follow-up occurred.

When seven Kanoon Magnet School children vomited after a taco and salad lunch in December 1999, the school nurse sent the principal a note saying the city inspector informed her that "he will not have to investigate Kanoon school. He feel (sic) it was a isolated case."

In October 2000, an inspector found "a large amount" of water dripping from a refrigerator motor onto the food at Newberry Math/Science Academy, 700 W. Willow St. Instead of immediately destroying the tainted meals, the inspector instructed the lunchroom manager to "protect all foods in dripping area with plastic bags" if the cooler had to be used, city records show.

In September 2000, an inspector found wastewater had spilled from a leak in the walk-in freezer at the North Side Peirce School of International Studies, soiling several cases of frozen hamburger patties. Rather than

toss out the potentially contaminated food, the inspector instructed the lunchroom manager to move the patties to another freezer and "avoid that area of the freezer."

When 8th graders were sickened by chocolate milk at Paderewski School, 2221 S. Lawndale Ave., the kitchen staff quickly tossed out the offending food instead of saving it for tests. This year, when seven more Paderewski children got sick after a lunch of pizza, corn and salad, the inspector who arrived at the scene reported that the kitchen staff was "gone for today. Unable to do an investigation at this time."

Sometimes, the inspectors report they are stymied when trying to follow up on hazardous conditions. In March 2000, after two Lawndale Community Academy 4th graders vomited their lunch of turkey sandwiches and bananas, an inspector visited the kitchen and found dead water bugs, improperly exposed insect poison, rusted racks in the walk-in cooler, dirty floors, and food held at an unsafe temperature on the serving line.

A month later, when a city inspector went to reinspect Lawndale, 3500 W. Douglas Blvd., she was turned away by Principal Mary Neely, inspection reports show. Neely told the Tribune: "That's a lie. There's been no food poisoning in Lawndale."

In the illness outbreaks that have flared with increasing frequency across U.S. schools since 1990, investigators were able to identify the cause in about 37 percent of the cases, records from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show.

But in Chicago, where authorities were unable to determine the cause of a single school outbreak since 1999, health officials said they doubted any of the illnesses were linked to school meals.

Said Chicago Department of Public Health Commissioner Dr. John L. Wilhelm: "Our data shows children are not being sickened by the food."

Wilhelm said he had a similar level of confidence in the city's thousands of restaurants.

"The bottom line," he said, "is people are not getting sick."

Epidemiologists say small numbers of children are typically sickened in outbreaks because pathogens usually exist in low numbers and are unevenly distributed through large batches of food. But Chicago inspectors sometimes cited the low numbers of illnesses to question whether the food was at fault.

In September 1999, for example, 15 Libby School 3rd graders got sick and vomited after a lunch of cheeseburgers, green beans, milk and yogurt. The inspector in charge minimized the outbreak by noting that "a total of 391 children [ate] without becoming ill, cannot determine if complaint is justified."

A total of 172 of Chicago's schools—roughly one in four—were cited for rodent infestation



Patty Marini directs her 1st graders to pick up their prepared lunches at Pasteur Elementary School on the Southwest Side. Pasteur's kitchen was converted to classroom space last year

or droppings in food preparation areas.

Since 1999, health inspectors cited 151 of the city's more than 600 public schools for having peeling paint in their kitchens, food storage areas or lunchrooms. Sixty-two of those schools were cited repeatedly for the code violation.

In several cases, the chronically peeling paint in lunchrooms and food preparation areas was found to contain lead, which can cause brain damage to children who eat it repeatedly. But sometimes years dragged on before the walls were repaired.

At Schubert Elementary, 2727 N. Long Ave., for example, a 1999 report said paint was peeling onto the food and should be tested for lead. In May of 2000, "the paint [is] still coming down," an inspector noted. Abatement of lead paint was not done until this summer.

At Moos Elementary, 1711 N. California Ave., inspectors repeatedly noted paint peeling in the food preparation and eating areas, and a city contractor found lead in 18 of 20 paint samples taken in January 2000. But the abatement effort did not begin until last month and will not be completed until January.

Inspectors cited dust and "heavy peeling paint from the kitchen ceiling" at Talcott Elementary, 1840 W. Ohio St. "Possible lead poison," the inspector wrote last year. The abatement is scheduled for completion next year.

When Sabin Magnet School, 2216 W. Hirsch St., was visited in September 2000, the inspector noted that previous violations had not been corrected. Paint peeled in the storage room, the freezers leaked tainted water onto food, rodent droppings were scattered about and the walls and ceilings were "damaged all over."

In response to one inspection, Sabin's facility engineer "said the kitchen is better than most schools'."

And in a way, he was right.

In all, 28 schools were cited for having rusty metal shelves in

their coolers and refrigerators, many of them repeatedly.

So many schools had lunchroom managers whose health certifications had lapsed that some inspectors stopped citing this food safety violation.

At least 73 lunchroom managers are not certified, school officials say. An unknown number of additional managers had their certifications lapse in recent months, and another 28 who were hired recently have not yet been certified.

In some schools, the problems were chronic.

At Morse Tech, 620 N. Sawyer Ave., the taco meat was held at an unsafe 120 degrees, an April 2000 report said. Paint peeled from the walls and ceilings, and there were mice droppings in the storage room. A year later, in March, Morse's hamburger was only 135 degrees, peeling paint hung in the kitchen and the equipment and floors were dirty.

2 million meals

The bid proposals filed by the multibillion-dollar contractors that supply Chicago school meals are as bright and reassuring as the new textbooks young scholars tote home in their backpacks.

Called "A Partnership for the Kids," Sodexo's star-spangled program description is layered with menus that spell out the nutritional value of crunchy celery sticks and juicy raisins. The subsidiary of a French-based company, Sodexo serves 2 million meals in 450 U.S. school districts each day and boasts annual sales of \$4.9 billion in North America. The company also runs cafeterias across the nation, including the one in Tribune Tower.

The British-based Compass Group PLC, which reports more than \$4 billion a year in North American revenue, prefaces its subsidiary's bid proposal with a form letter promising "a program unlike any other, just as the Chicago Public School system is unlike any other school system."

School food authorities in-

creasingly are hiring private contractors for food service to reduce the burden on administrators, bring healthier meals to children and, ideally, to lower costs.

The trend has generated interest on Wall Street, as profit-making firms manage an expanding portfolio of core school services, from bus fleets to custodial staffs, testing programs and foreign language lessons.

Market analysts estimate that 15 percent to 20 percent of U.S. schools currently contract out their lunch programs, paying private companies more than \$1 billion a year. The private firms are expected to double their school market penetration over the next seven years.

Much of the growth of private food management firms has come in poor school districts, a U.S. Department of Agriculture report said this year. The number of high-poverty districts using private firms nearly doubled between 1998 and 1999, as complex federal regulations were eased to allow private firms to use meat, cheese and vegetables donated by the U.S. government.

Chicago school officials said privatization has turned out to be more costly than the school-run program.

Today, food service is the second biggest—and fastest growing—item on the Chicago school budget not related to teaching. The city is slated to spend \$171 million for lunchroom food service this year, a 50 percent increase from the \$114 million spent five years ago when the private management companies were first hired, school budget reports show.

Sodexo and Compass officials said they ensure the sanitation of school kitchens and cafeterias by periodically walking through lunch lines and checking the temperature and quality of food, as well as by instructing cooks on safe food handling techniques.

James Ooms, a school dining supervisor who monitors on Chicago schools for the Compass subsidiary, said "our main focus" is ensuring that schools are preparing the food on menus.

How lunches get to Chicago schools

Chicago Public Schools officials have no way of knowing most of the companies that make their lunches. The two private companies that plan and supply meals for about 450 schools are only required to disclose their women- and minority-owned suppliers. This example of a privatized system uses part of the meal scheduled to be served Monday in most Chicago Public Schools—a corn dog, potato rounds, a soft pretzel and juicy treat—as an illustration:

SUPPLIERS OF INGREDIENTS

Several different suppliers provide the ingredients, many of which have been processed before at other plants.



Ingredients



Ingredients



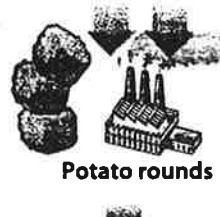
Ingredients

FOOD PLANTS

Manufacturing plants around the country make the individual entrees and side dishes for school menus.



Corn dogs



Potato rounds



Soft pretzels

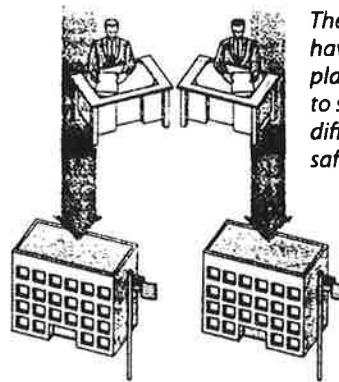
DISTRIBUTOR

A handful of large distributors store entrees shipped from food plants. They also store ingredients and other foods such as fresh fruit, which later will be shipped to schools.



PRIVATE CAFETERIA MANAGEMENT COMPANIES

Two companies, **Compass Group** and **Sodexo**, are paid \$55 million a year to oversee day-to-day management of Chicago's school kitchens and cafeterias. They control the schedule and content of deliveries. Schools deal only with these companies, not with the distributors.



The companies do not have to identify food plants and distributors to schools, making it difficult to check the safety records of plants.

SCHOOLS

Schools receive about two shipments a week from a single distributor. Meals are assembled daily in each school's kitchen.

About 200 other Chicago public schools are not under contract with Compass Group or Sodexo. These schools receive preassembled frozen meals on plastic-wrapped trays that are heated in school kitchens.

Source: Interviews with school and food industry officials
Chicago Tribune/Lauren Cabell and Phil Geib

"We don't want any kids to get sick," Ooms said. But when it comes to cleanliness of the kitchens "this is where it gets a little tricky. Obviously we are concerned, but if the employees don't [keep kitchens clean], we don't have a crew that can. All we can do is suggest."

Meals thaw, heat, sit

As she stirs a steaming tray of mashed potatoes, Juarez Community Academy cafeteria manager Emma Leachman keeps a watchful eye on her staff of 13 and an open heart to the young people whose hugs and frank complaints measure the value of her work.

Leachman found her vocation when her Mississippi-born mother stood her on a crate to make her first tray of biscuits. Over 19 years in Chicago schools, she worked her way up

by cleaning kitchens and laddling out portions on the serving line.

"I prayed for this job and worked my butt off and put the children first," Leachman said. "A nonchalant manager is something you don't need in food service."

Saying she was risking her job by speaking openly, Leachman said she had seen the quality of the food deteriorate under privatization. "Ninety percent of the stuff we get now is pre-made," she said. "We just warm it."

Each day, her staff heats breakfast and lunch for 1,700 students at Juarez, 2150 S. Laflin St., and sends another 680 meals to three elementary schools. A morning spent in her kitchen, alongside some of the most experienced cooks the Chicago schools have to offer, highlights the chronic food safety issues with the heated meals that are trucked from kitchen to kitchen.

By 8 a.m., 2½ hours into their workday, Leachman and her staff have thawed, sliced and baked three trays of frozen turkey roll and begun to load the trays into plastic storage boxes.

The plastic containers issued to Juarez are ideal bacteria hosts. Piled on the wet floor near the kitchen delivery door, the boxes are battered, nicked and sealed with ill-fitting lids and clasps that do not lock into place.

After they are filled with trays of hot food, the boxes are stacked in an unheated truck that will bounce its precious cargo through a round-robin of pick-ups and deliveries to and from nine schools. When the food containers are unloaded at 9 a.m. at Medill Primary, 1301 W. 14th St., the 4-inch-deep pans of turkey are set in steam tables,

where they will sit until groups of students stream in for their 20-minute mid-morning meal.

The way the food is transported, handled and monitored undermines Leachman's fastidious attention to detail.

In March, when 11 Pope Elementary students reported getting sick after a Juarez lunch of hot dogs, fries and spaghetti, a city inspector went to Juarez to review the temperature logs, part of the simple safety checklist to which every school must adhere. There were none.

Leachman had the day off, records show, and Juarez had no certified manager on duty when the food was prepared and no documentation of truck pickup times.

At Pope, 1852 S. Albany Ave., where the meals were held for about three hours until serving and the milk was warm, there was no hand sink for the cooks, the dining and storage room walls peeled and there were mice droppings and ants in the storage area.

That was Pope's second suspected food-borne illness outbreak since 1999, when four children were reported sick after lunch. There were no temperatures or delivery times recorded in the earlier incident either.

The problems at Juarez and Pope can be seen across the city.

Some 600 meals a day are cooked at Field Elementary, 7019 N. Ashland Blvd., then sent to an annex building on Lunt Avenue that has no ovens or heated holding equipment. The fries were only 100 degrees on the day the facility was inspected in September 2000.

At Reilly Annex School, 3303 N. Lawndale Ave., which holds the food it gets from area high schools for four hours in warmers and on steam tables, the pizza was 120 degrees when inspectors

visited in May.

The sending schools have their own sanitation problems. Lane Tech High School, 2501 W. Addison St., which sends warmed meals to three schools, has been cited for mice infestation, peeling paint in the walk-in cooler, dirty deep fryers and "mold and green bacteria" in the ice machine.

Taft High School, 6545 W. Hurlbut St., which sends meals to three schools, has been cited for having rusted metal shelves in the walk-in cooler, mice droppings in the storage area, inaccurate temperature gauges and "thick black soot" on the oven hoods.

At Prosser Career Academy, 2148 N. Long Ave., which feeds Farnsworth Elementary, inspectors found leaking water dripping onto food through the rusted racks in the walk-in cooler, hamburger held at unsafe temperatures and food stored on the floor. When the kitchen was cited for unsanitary conditions in October 2000, the inspector noted that the lunchroom manager was shorthanded, and so "in the meantime, they do the best they can with cleaning."

At Clissold Elementary, 2350 W. 110th Pl., cold sandwiches are driven from Chicago Vocational Career Academy and stored for a day in a food locker in a dirty basement boiler room. The food handler serves the prepackaged lunches to students in a hallway.

At Clissold's sending school, Vocational, 2100 E. 87th St., inspectors found peeling paint, rodent droppings and rusted refrigerator racks.

While the conditions in Chicago's aging facilities haven't been affected by privatization, Leachman said her confidence in the food had.

When school officials ran the

kitchens, "they had a hands-on approach," said Leachman, the Juarez cook.

"If something happened with the food—like finding a piece of metal in it—you could call the board and get a person who

would have an answer to your problem. Now, something may go wrong and you can't get in touch with someone [from the private management companies] for three or four hours.

"That's a long time," Leach-

man said, "when you're dealing with kids and food."

Tribune staff reporters Michael Martinez and Geoff Dougherty contributed to this report.



At Medill Primary, Betty Robinson lifts a tray leaking gravy from its carrying container. The pans of turkey will sit on a steam table before being served.

Vendors reap millions from schools

By David Jackson
Tribune staff reporter

The half-pints of fresh milk that build strong bones in children also provided a steady income to a trio of veteran contractors who learned to tap the profits embedded in America's \$6 billion-a-year school food market.

While his delivery vans plied Chicago's school milk routes, Frank McMahon cruised Lake Michigan on the 32-foot motor boat he named "Milk Money" and his company donated more than \$25,000 to local politicians.

One of McMahon's milk business partners during the 1990s was Ronald J. Blackstone, who held Chicago school food contracts while dating then-chief of schools Blondean Davis. Before she retired this summer, Davis acknowledged on her résumé that she was living at Blackstone's sprawling \$785,000 suburban home.

In an interview, Davis declined to answer questions about her relationship with

Blackstone. She said she had no conflict of interest because "I had no input into any [school food] contract decisions." Davis added that Blackstone had school food contracts "before I met him."

Another McMahon milk partner, Nick Grillo, was asked in one civil lawsuit to explain the unwritten agreements and off-the-books financing schemes that lay behind his half-pints.

Grillo testified that his business was housed at McMahon's garage and Blackstone "own[ed]" the contract under which he delivered milk. "You can't bid on your own name," he said, "you need a minority, OK?"

McMahon, Blackstone and Grillo have not been charged with any crime or contract violation, and none of them would comment for this article.

For a time, at least, they were among the chief suppliers for a school system that each year spends about \$9 million to buy 70 million half-pints of milk, an essential component of the school lunch. But now, in a re-

cent twist to a colorful Chicago story, the trio's past dealings are under investigation by the schools' inspector general, who is examining potential waste and fraud in school milk contracts, court records show.

At the center of that probe is McMahon, who had the milk trucks and garage the others used. In September, a Cook County judge ordered McMahon's milk company to comply with a 1999 inspector general's subpoena for financial records about its dealings with firms owned by Blackstone and Grillo.

The McMahon Food Corp. has refused to turn over the records and said in court papers that it plans to appeal the order.

During the 1990s, Blackstone ran unsuccessfully for Congress and won a seat on the Homewood-Flossmoor school board even as his portfolio of two restaurants and a copy shop crumbled financially.

Blackstone reinvented himself by winning millions of dollars in government contracts

under affirmative action provisions. Bid records show he often used joint ventures or subcontracts that gave operational responsibility to white-owned companies.

When his RJB Properties won a contract to service a Federal Aviation Administration cafeteria in Aurora, for example, Blackstone quickly turned the contract over to a white-owned company for a monthly fee.

During an employee's wage-dispute lawsuit that raised questions about that contract, an attorney asked Blackstone about what he did for the monthly fee:

"You're thinking that for shuffling a few pieces of paper, I can make myself maybe \$1,000, \$1,200 a month, is that correct?" the attorney asked.

"That's correct," Blackstone testified.

By 1998, his RJB Properties reported sales of \$12 million, about three-quarters of it from government contracts. On school milk bid proposals, Blackstone said his company's

warehouse was at 2110 S. Marshall Blvd., which is McMahon's truck yard.

Grillo's company, called Nick's Dairy Service, also used the address at McMahon's garage. Under an unwritten agreement, Grillo testified for a lawsuit, his company bought milk from McMahon, then resold it to the Chicago schools. Grillo's trucks were leased from McMahon, and Grillo's employees got paychecks prepared on the McMahon company computer.

In that case, the legal status of Nick's Dairy, which won millions of dollars in Chicago school milk contracts, was described by Cook County Circuit Judge Stephen A. Schiller as being, "at best, ephemeral."

Margins are so slim in the school milk business that the price of a half-pint is measured in fractions of a penny called "mills." And so, throughout much of the eastern U.S. during the 1990s, the number of school milk suppliers dwindled, and those that remained sometimes resorted to collusion and bid-

rigging, federal records and interviews show. Since 1988, the U.S. Justice Department has convicted 134 school milk companies in bid-rigging, fraud and conspiracy cases.

In 1990, Grillo turned government witness and provided evidence against other Chicago contractors for a federal bid-rigging trial. Testifying under an immunity order, Grillo told the jury that he and a half dozen colleagues carved up the South Side school routes in a meeting.

The milkmen agreed to raise the price of a half-pint by about a cent, giving them \$1 million more than the year before, and to make their scheme appear legitimate they filed artificially high bids on each others' routes. Grillo took two districts and arranged for a colleague to win two, court records show.

The milkmen Grillo testified against were acquitted.

Four years later, Grillo had put the episode behind him. By 1994, he controlled Chicago school milk deliveries worth \$2 million.

Duncan vows food safety

By Lori Olszewski
and David Jackson
Tribune staff reporters

TRIBUNE INVESTIGATION SCHOOL FOOD SAFETY

FOLLOW-UP

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"Nothing is more important than the health and safety of our children. We are absolutely committed to doing what is necessary to ensure that," he said.

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missioner John L. Wilhelm have already produced a commitment that schools officials will get immediate access to all data about suspected food-borne illness outbreaks, Duncan said. The Tribune found 41 suspected food poisoning cases that affected 215 Chicago students since 1999, while school officials had records on only 16 of them.

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cation has to be immediate," Duncan said.

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PLEASE SEE LUNCH, BACK PAGE



Chicago Public Schools chief Arne Duncan Monday responded to the Tribune food safety stories by announcing reforms.

LUNCH: Food safety reforms may not be costly

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

gens, and parents say they were given the runaround.

"It is unacceptable for any child to get sick from a meal served in the schools," Duncan said.

He said his staff would launch a wholesale review of the city's meal program by looking "at the best practices around the country to evaluate what we need to do." He put no deadline on that review process but said he did not expect the reforms that emerged to be costly.

"Many of things we can improve on are not big-ticket items," Duncan said. "There are some common-sense things that cut through bureaucratic red tape. Some of this stuff will not cost significant dollars."

Among the immediate changes: Duncan said his staff will hold mandatory regional meetings with principals to communicate all food service procedures. The principals, in turn, will be required to ensure their kitchen workers know the pro-

cedures and adhere to them.

"We have to make sure that our policies are clear and that they are being followed," Duncan said.

The Tribune found more than a hundred lunchroom managers were not certified. Duncan said kitchen and cafeteria workers will be given more guidance. "We are expanding the scope of our training," Duncan said.

"The policies we have are very good, and they have to be followed 100 percent of the time," he added.

Safe food temperatures

Citing cases in which food was held for hours in plastic containers and served at unsafe temperatures, for example, Duncan said: "Our policies are clear that if food is at an inadequate temperature, it should be destroyed immediately. We have emergency backup meals available and they should be used whenever there is any question about temperature."

Duncan said his staff also would review the terms of the contracts with the private vendors that run the city's meal programs. Under the current contracts, which total \$55 million a year, the city buys most of its food from two large firms, Sodexo and a subsidiary of Compass Group PLC, and they in turn buy food from dozens of subcontractors.

Under the terms of their con-

tracts, Sodexo and Compass are required to disclose only the minority- and women-owned subcontractors, who supply less than a third of the provisions. And the companies do not inform school officials when government inspectors cite their subcontractors for serious health and safety violations.

"We are looking at everything, including those contracts," Duncan said. "We are going to get better, and part of that is clearly the controls with the vendors."

Said Sodexo spokeswoman Jeanette Jurkiewicz: "We, too, are concerned about the issues raised by the Chicago Tribune. We commend the Chicago Public Schools for the initiatives they announced today and look forward to working with them."

A Compass spokesperson said the company was reviewing the matter.

The private companies also are responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of school kitchens. Duncan said he would ensure that when kitchen staff members allow filth to build up, or when they handle food improperly, the lines of authority do not tangle.

School officials will increase the frequency of site visits to inspect cleanliness of kitchens and food service storage areas. "We will hold ourselves and the contractors accountable," Duncan said.

The Tribune found a litany of building code violations in school food preparation areas. Of the city's more than 600 schools, 172 were cited for rodent infestation, 151 for peeling paint and 28 for having rusty food storage shelves.

Lead paint cleanup promised

City schools operation chief Tim Martin added Monday that school officials would "tighten" their procedures for referring potential lead-based paint for cleanup. The Tribune found several cases in which chronically peeling paint was found to contain lead, which can cause brain damage to children who eat it repeatedly.

"We're trying to tighten how we deal with that and how it is reported," Martin said.

Said Julie Westerhoef of Parents United for a Responsible Education (PURE): "Clearly there needs to be more oversight of the the lunch programs. There is a lack of accountability when something goes wrong with the food."

Westerhoef said she hoped parents would get involved in their children's school lunch programs, possibly reviving the largely moribund "menu committees," which meet to monitor meals and plan menus.

"Give parents more responsibility and give them a way to make things better," Westerhoef said.

Schools push food-safety plan

New guidelines, repairs in works around the city

By David Jackson

Tribune staff reporter

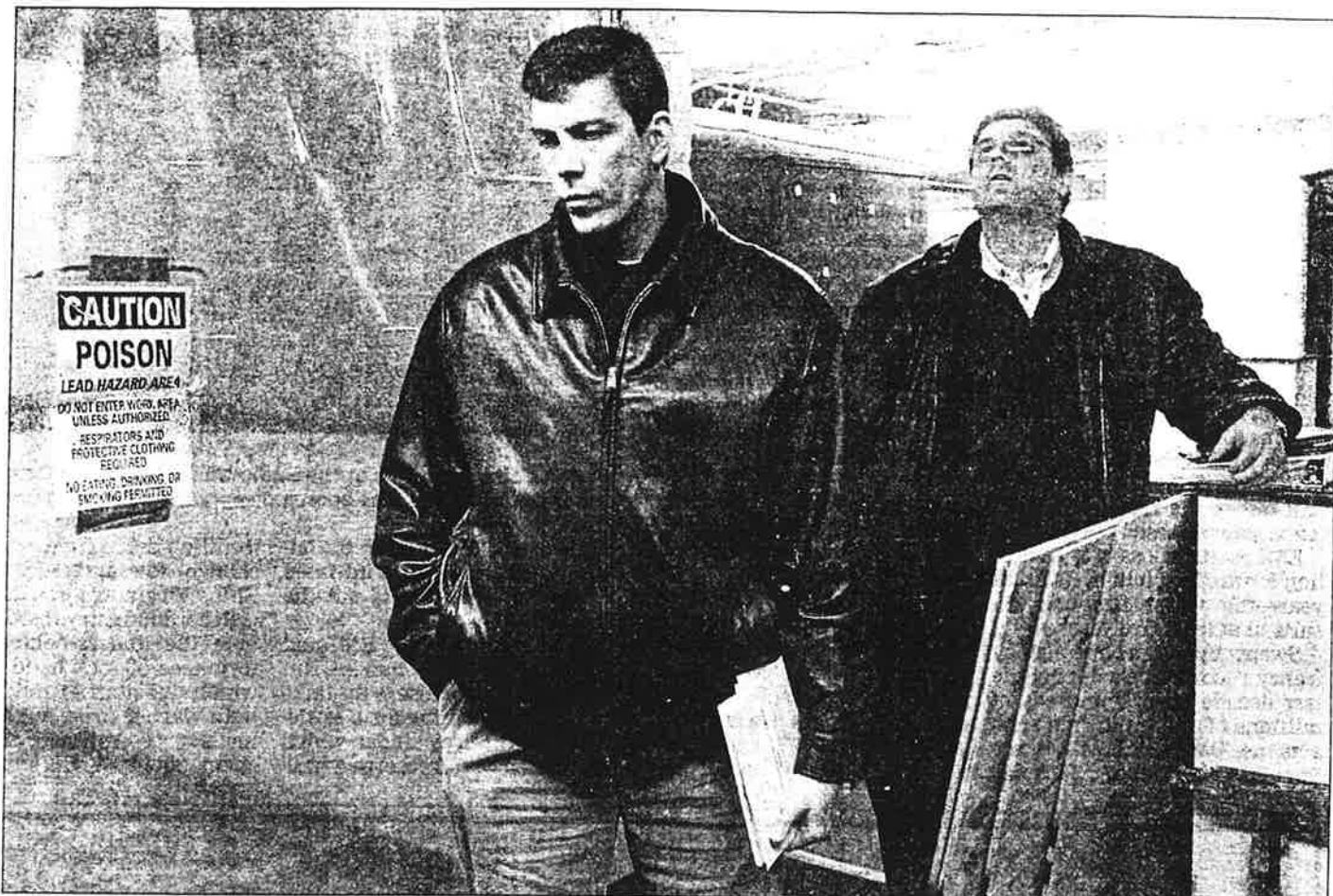
As he inspected a freshly painted cafeteria Thursday, Chicago schools chief Arne Duncan announced an expanded set of initiatives to ensure student meals are safe and school kitchens are sanitary.

Over the winter break, school officials are overseeing fast-track repairs of schools with peeling paint in their lunchrooms or kitchens, Duncan said. Authorities are setting up a hot line for parents to report food-safety concerns. And strict new rules have been put in place for the private companies that provide school meals under contracts worth \$55 million a year.

The initiatives, which build on measures announced earlier this month by Duncan, were spurred by a series of Tribune reports on dangerous practices in the factories where school food is made and in the kitchens and cafeterias where it is heated and served.

"Food safety is something you can never take for granted," Duncan said, as he examined repair work being done at Moos Elementary, 1711 N. California Ave. "Safety and security are the fundamental building blocks to teaching and learning. Kids are not going to fulfill their academic potential on empty stomachs."

Moos was one of several schools cited by the Tribune for having lead-based paint



Tribune photo by Chris Walker

Chicago schools chief Arne Duncan (left) and Tim Martin, the schools' operations chief, inspect peeling walls that are being repainted at Moos Elementary School on Thursday. Over the winter break, school officials are overseeing fast-track repairs.

peeling in the food preparation and eating areas. Because of overcrowding, Moos pupils eat in a basement hallway. Loose, lead-based paint has been removed from that area, and on Thursday the walls were being sealed.

Recently completed health inspections found 45 schools with peeling paint, and all of them will be repaired on an expedited schedule over the hia-

tus, Duncan said. That is twice the number of schools authorities had planned to repair.

"We are on an extremely aggressive schedule. We have doubled the work, but we think we'll be in a real good place once school gets back in session," Duncan said.

Chicago school cafeterias and kitchens are managed by two private contractors, So-

dexho Inc. and a subsidiary of Compass Group PLC. Until recently, those companies were not required to tell school officials where the food they used was manufactured, or whether those factories had been cited for health violations by government food safety inspectors. But in the last two weeks, Duncan said, the relationship between school officials and the contractors has changed

dramatically.

Sodexo and Compass now furnish updated lists of their food suppliers to school authorities, and have agreed to pass along all government inspection reports of those factories. In addition, they have agreed to notify school authorities when they conduct random inspections of the plants,

PLEASE SEE LUNCH, PAGE 5

so that school officials can go with them.

"The vendors know how important this is, and they're committed to stepping up their game," Duncan said.

Authorities are establishing a toll-free number for parents, teachers and students to report any concerns with the food. The initiative is modeled on a violence-prevention hot line already in place. "That has continued to be a valuable tool," Duncan said.

Duncan said school officials have streamlined the process for cafeteria managers to report suspected foodborne illnesses and other safety infractions in order to track and resolve the incidents more efficiently.

Also, training for the roughly 80 school cafeteria managers who do not have the required certificates in food safety has been scheduled to begin in January, Duncan said. School authorities also will give the cafeteria managers five refresher classes a year, Duncan said. And beginning in February, authorities will hold food-safety training sessions for principals.

School officials have strengthened their lines of communication with the Chicago Department of Public Health, which inspects school lunchrooms as well as the city factories where school food is made. In the past, Duncan said, the Health Department sent over a batch of school inspection reports once a month. Starting on Jan. 7, Duncan said, the reports will be faxed over within 24 hours after they are completed. Duncan likened the food-safety initiatives to the administration's ongoing effort to stop weapons from being brought into schools.

"When we stepped up random metal detector searches, we found we were looking more and finding less—which is good, but you have to be constantly vigilant," Duncan said.

Food-safety risks also need to be managed through continual monitoring, Duncan said. "You are never done, and can never get complacent," he said.

108TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 506

To amend the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to ensure the safety of meals served under the school lunch program and the school breakfast program.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MARCH 4, 2003

Mr. DURBIN (for himself, Mrs. CLINTON, Mr. KENNEDY, and Mr. SCHUMER) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

A BILL

To amend the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to ensure the safety of meals served under the school lunch program and the school breakfast program.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the "Safe School Food Act
5 of 2003".

6 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

7 Congress finds that—

8 (1) the national school lunch program under the
9 Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (42

108TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 1551

To amend the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to ensure the safety of meals served under the school lunch program and the school breakfast program.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

APRIL 1, 2003

Ms. SCHLAKOWSKY (for herself and Ms. DELAURO) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Education and the Workforce

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GAO finds barriers to school food safety

By David Jackson
Tribune staff reporter

WASHINGTON — American schools are experiencing increasing numbers of food-borne illness outbreaks, but complex federal laws and bureaucratic turf battles hamper the government system designed to protect children from harm, a congressional watchdog agency reported Tuesday.

Responding to the issue, Bush administration officials announced reforms in the school lunch program, saying they were implementing new rules to give schools more information about the safety of factories that provide student meals.

The focus on school food safety came at a joint Senate-House hearing that examined how lapses in federal oversight allowed contaminated meals to reach students. The hearing was held in response to a Tribune investigation last year that found unsafe practices in the factories that make school meals and in the kitchens and cafeterias where they are served, congressional leaders said.

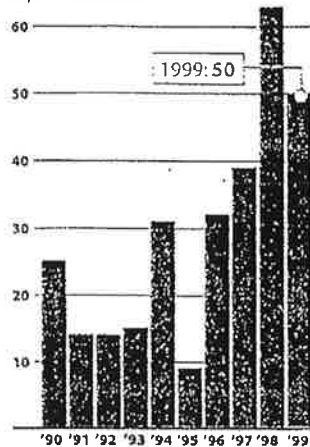
The General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, said that the number of school-related outbreaks reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention doubled over the last decade, and generally increased an average of 10 percent per year.

Incidents increasing

Outbreaks of food-borne illnesses in American schools sickened 16,000 children in the 1990s.

ILLNESS OUTBREAKS

Incidents of food-borne illness in public schools



Note: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines an outbreak as an incident in which two or more people experience a similar illness after eating a common food.

Source: General Accounting Office

Lawrence Dyckman, an official with the General Accounting Office, said the CDC recorded 292 instances of food poisoning between 1990 and 1999, affecting approximately 16,000 children.

"Our analysis clearly shows an increasing trend," Dyckman

testified.

Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and other lawmakers questioned administration food safety officials at the hearing, and took the unusual step of requesting that they remain in the room during testimony from families whose children had been sickened by school meals.

"Victims are too often treated like second-class citizens by health officials whose main interest is covering up for any misdeeds," said Cheryl Roberts of Comer, Ga. Seated in the audience was her 15-year-old son, Tyler, who in 1998 suffered kidney failure after eating an undercooked school lunch burger that was contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7.

The government has put price above safety in purchasing foods, and that has "resulted in school lunches becoming a dumping ground for ground beef and other agricultural products of questionable safety," Roberts said.

More and more school districts—especially in poor areas—are turning to private contractors to plan menus, order food and oversee kitchens and cafeterias. But the contractors often do not disclose where they are getting their food and rarely provide inspection reports on their suppliers.

When the school lunch suppliers deliver contaminated meals, the federal government's recall system offers a flimsy safeguard for children.

Shipping records blocked

Industry-backed confidentiality rules block state and county authorities from getting company shipping records so

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Nation's Restaurant News

January 14, 2002, Monday

SECTION: COVER ;

LENGTH: 786 words

HEADLINE: ON-SITE FOOD FIRMS DEFEND OPERATIONS IN CHICAGO SCHOOLS AFTER SAFETY EXPOS
Byline:

BYLINE: Paul King

BODY:

Chicago -- Sodexho and Chartwells, the two foodservice management firms under contract to provide some 400,000 meals a day at most of this city's public schools, defended their operations after an investigative series in the Chicago Tribune questioned food safety in the schools' cafeterias. Officials of the two contract foodservice firms told the Tribune that they follow proper procedures on safety and sanitation and denied knowingly serving food prepared by companies that practice unsafe food-handling procedures. Sodexho and Chartwells added that they would take whatever steps they can to improve food safety even further. "We are concerned about the issues raised by the [Tribune] article," said Jeannette Jurkiewicz, spokeswoman for the School Services division of Sodexho, which is based in Gaithersburg, Md. "Our top priority is to make sure that the kids we serve receive nutritious, healthful meals in a safe environment."

Officials for Compass Group North America, the Charlotte, N.C., parent of Chartwells, did not make an official statement concerning the Tribune articles. However, one company source indicated that Chartwells has been one of Chicago schools' foodservice providers only since 2000, while the incidents mentioned in the Tribune series occurred before 2000.

Chartwells and Sodexho are the Chicago's school system's principal foodservice providers, together serving more than 400,000 meals a day. The third company is Preferred Meals, a local outfit that sells prepared food to the school system in trays that are reheated on site. The Chicago Board of Education decided four years ago to outsource the management of the cafeteria program in order to save money. The district chose to split the contract -- worth about \$80 million annually -- among three companies in the hope of making foodservice more competitive and accountable.

However, the companies are hampered by the fact that although they manage the foodservice program in their assigned schools, hourly foodservice workers are hired and paid by the school district. When an employee is suspected of not following proper food-handling procedures, the foodservice manager must work with his or her school's principal to deal with the problem.

The Tribune's two articles, which ran last month, were prompted by reports of food-borne illnesses in at least eight states across the country allegedly caused by burritos prepared at a plant in Chicago's South Side. The first of the two articles dealt with an investigation of RHSCO Enterprises Inc. and Munoz Flour Tortilleria, the food manufacturers responsible for preparing the burritos.

The burritos also were implicated in suspected food-borne illnesses at schools in Pennsylvania, Georgia, Florida, Indiana, North Dakota, Kansas, Iowa and Missouri.

In its report the Tribune said the school district's efforts to ensure food safety are hampered by rules that permit food management firms to withhold the names of their suppliers unless they are owned by women or minorities.

The second article focused specifically on Chicago schools, detailing rodent and insect infestation, dirty kitchens and unsafe food-handling practices. The day the second article was published, Schools Superintendent Arne Duncan introduced several steps to improve the quality of foodservice in the school system. Duncan said the district would schedule more inspections of school kitchens and cafeterias, provide better training for staff and make a detailed review of the district's foodservice contracts.

He defended the school district's food safety policies but noted that "they have to be followed 100 percent of the time." However, he added that "the reality is that we serve 70 million meals a year, and I think the findings have to be reviewed in that context."

According to the Tribune, at least 41 cases of possible food poisoning have occurred in Chicago schools, with at least 215 students being affected. Only 16 of those incidents were documented by the school district, while another 16 were found in reports kept by the city's Health Department. Susan Susanke, foodservice director for the Chicago schools, did not respond to requests for comment. However, in the Tribune articles, school officials were quoted as saying that most reports of stomach-related illnesses have been found to be caused by viruses, such as the flu, or attempts by children to avoid school. "I don't think it has anything to do with the flu," Susanke told the Tribune.

Dr. John L. Wilhelm, commissioner of the **Chicago Department of Public Health**, also told the Tribune that he doubted claims that food-borne bacteria were the cause of many of the illness reports.

LOAD-DATE: January 31, 2002, Thursday

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