Nourishing Minds and Bodies: A Quiet Hero in Our Schools
By: Tom Gray, RSU5 Superintendent

With recent uncertainty around federal SNAP benefits due to the government shutdown, I have been thinking a lot about food, and not just as calories or fuel, but as care. When students come to school hungry, their focus is pulled away from learning and toward a more basic question: *Am I going to eat today?*

School nutrition is not an add-on or a convenience. It is not a "nice to have." It is foundational to learning. For some students, the meals served in our cafeterias are the most reliable nutrition they receive all day. Schools are places where children should be fed, in every sense of the word. This fall, I decided that one of the best ways to understand our district was to roll up my sleeves and serve lunch in each of our schools. It allowed me to greet every student, face to face, and it gave me the privilege of working alongside some of the true unsung heroes of education: our nutrition staff.

Try running a school without them. You cannot.

They know every child by name. They see the quiet ones, the shy ones, the ones who may not have had breakfast. They are the first to notice when a student does not seem quite okay. They feed our students, yes, but many days, they also steady them.

And then there is Bertha.

Bertha has been a kitchen manager in our district for the past decade, and she is the definition of "going above and beyond." A champion of home-cooked meals, she takes extra time to prepare scratch-made food for hundreds of students every day. She keeps a binder of her own recipes, handwritten and well-worn from use, and she brings a pride to this work that you can taste. She does this because she believes that children deserve real food, and that nourishment is worth the effort.

If you speak with Bertha, even briefly, it becomes immediately clear how much she cares. What stands out most, however, is the love she brings to the people she cooks for. One of her most generous traditions is soup. She makes it from scratch in a variety of flavors and offers it quietly, especially to students who, in her words, are "still hungry because maybe they do not have enough at home." As often as she can, she finds an economical way to add delicious, scratch-made soup to the menu, rounding out the school meals. Watching this, I could not help but think of the famous scene from *Oliver Twist*, where a hungry orphan dares to ask for "more." The difference is that with Bertha, the response is always gentle and full of care: "Of course, dear, here you go."

No child should have to hope there will be extra soup.

Bertha recently announced her retirement at the end of this school year. Our district will not be the same without her. She has nourished this community, body and soul, for a decade.

As we approach Thanksgiving, a season that naturally draws our focus toward abundance and gratitude, I find myself thinking of people like Bertha. People who show up before dawn. People who know which students prefer the vegetarian option, who need an extra roll, are gluten-free, allergic to tomatoes, or who could use a kind word right when it counts, offered up with a cup of *soup du jour.*

Schools do not run only on schedules, lesson plans, and test scores. They run on caring, in whatever form it takes. So this season, as we celebrate the harvest and lean into gratitude, I invite you to notice the people who nourish our students: teachers, counselors, bus drivers, ed techs, custodians, and the staff who provide meals for our schools. Bertha and her colleagues in school nutrition remind us that in every dimension of education, it is people who make the difference. Bertha's heartfelt intention of making sure each child leaves the cafeteria fed and supported ripples through the culture of the entire district. Their quiet dedication sustains our students, strengthens our community, and enriches the daily life of our schools in ways that cannot be measured.