

Fort High students pushing to reopen cafeteria

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Students at Fort Frances High School are making their voices heard concerning the lack of a school-run cafeteria and the need for better lunchtime options.

A petition, started two weeks ago by Grade 10 student Janissa Judson, is asking the Rainy River District School Board reopen the school cafeteria and once again provide students with healthy, easily-accessible food.

The cafeteria had been run by Kathy Cuthbertson of Kathy's Katering until issues with a new contract from the school board forced her to refrain from submitting a tender.

For a few years after that, the cafeteria was run by teacher Kelly Connor and the hospitality program at the high school. But that ended in 2013 as Connor felt it was too difficult to balance operating the cafeteria with teaching three other classes.

Now Judson's petition is asking that the cafeteria be reopened after years of students bringing their own lunches, getting something from the vending machines, or going to the nearby fast-food restaurants.

The petition is located at www.change.org and can be found by searching for "Reopen the Fort Frances High School Cafeteria."

As of last Thursday, it had nearly 300 supporters.

"Because I am in Grade 10, I never had the luxury of having a cafeteria program," Judson told the Times.

"A lot of students talked about there not being a program running," she added.

"After all, there is a kitchen area just taking up space in our cafeteria."

Judson started the petition with the help of a few friends because they felt a lot of students really were missing the cafeteria program.

"After sharing the petition, people in the school came up to me and asked about it and

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how it was doing, and some even expressed how much they would want a cafeteria program," Judson said about the support she's received so far.

"I think it just took a group of people to finally put it out there and say something about it," she remarked.

Judson said that for the most part, she and her friends would pack lunches and bring them to school.

"Sometimes that's a big task, though, and we decide to eat out—even though we know how unhealthy the food is," she conceded.

"If a cafeteria was in place, it would definitely be convenient and we would not have to worry about packing a lunch all the time."

Judson said she's aware of some of the obstacles involved in preparing inexpensive, healthy food that also is more attractive to students than fast food, especially considering the school's location.

"Since there are many fast-food restaurants and even a grocery store nearby, students opt out of paying \$5 for a meal

and pay \$2 more for a fast-food meal," explained Judson, adding that pricing also became an issue with the Ministry of Education's food and drink policy.

"The caterer had to adapt to the new policies and in doing so, the prices were raised," she noted.

"Essentially, students had to pay more for cafeteria food.

"Teachers we have spoken to informed us that the caterer could not even keep a business running there," Judson added. "It was tough.

"Our food and nutrition teacher attempted, as well, but found it too difficult to manage his teaching responsibilities."

Still, Judson is hopeful for a future program, and thinks the board should keep trying and looking at new ideas.

"Although there are many problems, we believe that there are numerous ways we can work around them," she stressed.

"It will be hard but with the amount of people supporting our petition, it could work."

Judson also noted the increased enrolment at the school now that there are Grade 7/8

students attending there, as well.

"They could come and get lunch from the cafeteria since they aren't allowed to go to fast-food restaurants," she reasoned.

Judson also believes that—with the help of the board—student volunteers could be key to getting the cafeteria reopened.

"I know that many students feel they are missing out on having a program there, so I know many would be willing to help get it running again," she noted.

"I'm not one to criticize anyone," Judson stressed.

"We just want the board to know that many people really want this cafeteria program."

Judson did express some frustration at the situation, explaining the food and beverage policy was meant to encourage healthy eating.

Instead, now that the cafeteria has shut down, many students are turning to unhealthy fast food for lunch.

"We just want to bring convenience and promote healthy eating towards our fellow students," Judson said.