

Kosher meals implemented in PSB cafeterias

Alexa Lieberman, Opinions Editor

Turkey, mashed potatoes and steamed vegetables. At first glance, lunch trays across Brookline cafeterias looked no different than they usually do on the eve of Thanksgiving break. But there was one crucial difference: for the first time, some students were eating school-provided kosher lunches.

First served on Nov. 25, these meals marked the implementation of an initiative that had been in the works for years: kosher meals available in all Public Schools of Brookline (PSB) cafeterias to any student, kosher or not. Brookline School Committee representative Dr. Jesse Hefter and Director of Food Services Sasha Palmer have been integral to the planning and execution.

In the past, the district has implemented options for those with dietary restrictions, including vegan and halal. However, while desire for kosher offerings in PSB cafeterias existed for years, the idea didn't gain traction until Hefter was voted into office in the spring of 2024. Around this time, a group of Brookline parents reached out and asked him to support a kosher meal program. Hefter, who was president of Kashrus Vaad Harabonim (an organization that certifies kosher products throughout New England and parts of the United States), said that he partnered with Palmer to take on the project.

"This is another step in demonstrating the values of the district in terms of recognizing the diverse needs of the student body, and trying to respond to that with providing food that meets the requirements of different cultural groups within the school community," Hefter said.

The first challenge was infrastructure because PSB cafeterias do not have the means to support kosher food storage or cooking. As a result, all meals must be prepared in a kosher-certified kitchen, pre-packaged in a double wrap (in accordance with kosher requirements), then shipped to PSB cafeterias where they are reheated and served.

"The materials used in the [PSB] kitchens are all considered to be non-kosher, and we're not in a situation where we could [use] capital dollars to put in a kosher kitchen with new cooks and all of the supervision called hashgacha that would be required to certify fresh, made-in-the-kitchen food," Hefter said.

PSB is distinct in terms of its menu structure and its implementation of kosher meals into cafeterias: the program employs a cycle menu with both hot and cold options daily that closely mirrors the regular school lunch menu and meal patterns. In contrast, Palmer said that Food Services found that the kosher menus of other districts in the state consist of a list of repeated items, rather than a cycle. Hefter said that meal variability was central to the menu-designing process.



ALEXA LIEBERMAN/CYPRESS STAFF

Kosher food is now on offer for the first time in PSB cafeterias, thanks to an effort spearheaded by Brookline School Committee representative Dr. Jesse Hefter and Food Services.

“We tried to use the variety of options that we identified that suppliers could provide to us in Brookline to align certified kosher products with the daily theme that the regular non-kosher food line is providing,” Hefter said. “Just to try to make it a little more exciting, and to help the students that are choosing the kosher option to feel like they’re getting something similar to what’s out there, rather than something completely different than everyone else every day.”

Before the implementation of kosher meals, many kosher students would rely on the vegan option or the salad bar, or simply bring their own lunch. Junior Simon Gil, a co-leader of the Jewish Student Union, said that he is glad that there is now an option for kosher students.

“It’s good to have lunch at school that I can eat too, in case I don’t bring my lunch or need more,” Gil said. “I would eat [the lunches] if they were vegetarian, but I strongly preferred not to.”

One concern among students directly after the implementation of kosher lunches was the practicality of waiting in a long lunch line for a pre-packaged, grab-and-go meal. In response, cafeteria staff moved the lunches to their own section of the cafeteria to improve accessibility. Gil said he was pleasantly surprised with the quality of the meals, despite the limitations.

“It was cheese ravioli, and it was ‘pareve,’ which means that there wasn’t any dairy or meat in it. So it wasn’t actually cheese ravioli,” Gil said. “But it was heated well, and it was pretty good as far as pre-packaged meals go.”

Food Services implemented the meals without any additional cost to the district, using state funding. While Food Services is still unsure about the demand for kosher meals, it plans to administer surveys and monitor participation to adjust meal quantities. According to Palmer, kosher meals will continue to be available as long as there is demand. Palmer said that implementation of kosher meals is a huge achievement.

“We’ve looked across the state, across everywhere we can, to see if we can find something that’s available like [what we offer] out there,” Palmer said. “We haven’t found it, so we’ve had to go ahead and create our own menu and our own procedures. We started this from scratch and it blossomed into us being able to serve kosher meals to families.”