

# Cafeteria workers take their concerns to school board

By **DAVID HINCHEY**  
Chronicle Staff Writer

WILLIMANTIC — Members of the Windham school system's food service union spoke in front of board of education officials this week, asking them to abandon plans to seek a request for proposals for cafeteria services.

Members of the Connecticut State Employees Association, Service Employees International Union Local 2001 (CSEA/SEIU), were on hand Wednesday with the union president reading a statement to education officials asking the education board to avoid outsourcing food services.

Deborah Dubord, president of the Windham cafeteria workers union, said her employees are the lowest paid in the district and many work two or three jobs to support their families.

"Contracting out should not be a part of a short-term solution when it will have long-term consequences for the school system

and the kids we serve," Dubord, reading from a statement, told the board of education. "We urge you to reject the shortsightedness of contracting out in our schools and think of the long-term solutions that we can work on together."

Board of education Chairman Kenneth Folan said Windham Superintendent Doreen Fuller is doing her "due diligence" in looking for potential ways to save the district money.

Folan said Fuller doesn't need the board's permission to put out the RFP and contracting out food services is not an uncommon practice.

He said changes, if any, likely wouldn't take place until the 2010-2011 school year and he believed the cost savings number would have to be significant to sway the board. "It may die in subcommittee," Folan said, adding a board of education subcommittee would review the proposals and a public hearing would be held prior to a

board vote.

"We're collecting information," Fuller said. Fuller said the school system is balancing its commitment to its workers and the commitment to taxpayers.

She added if the school system doesn't look at potential cost savings, then it is not exercising duties to town taxpayers.

Fuller said the district put out an RFP for bus services a few years ago and a stipulation in the contract was that drivers keep their jobs.

Still, food service workers said the school system benefits from their service.

"I don't think it's fair for the kids to have to suffer," said Carla Welden, assistant manager at North Windham School. "We know these kids by name," she said, adding workers know the children — even down to their food allergies.

Vanessa Gonzalez, a concerned parent with two children in the

school system from Willimantic, said she valued the work food service workers do, especially with her two children.

She said one has a food allergy while the other is hypoglycemic — a condition where the body produces a lower amount of blood sugar.

"The cafeteria people know him," she said of one of her children, adding workers are aware of her children's allergies and don't let them eat anything that would conflict with their allergies.

"They're wonderful," Gonzalez said, of the food service workers.

"It's sad for the community," said Melissa Cramer, a food service worker from Willimantic, "We don't make big bucks over here."

Cramer, who has three children in the school system, said she didn't believe there would be any savings from contracting out the services and was disappointed RFPs were being sought.