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What Do Unpaid Lunch Tabs Mean for Schools?

Some schools are tossing out the lunches of those who don't pay. Others provide free meals to all.

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Like many parents of school-age children, Frances Frost tries to keep up with the papers sent home in her daughter Natalie's backpack. Sifting through permission slips, picture day fliers, field-trip notices, and other forms seems like a daily occurrence, and often somewhere lost in the pile is a reminder to send money to her fifth-grader's school cafeteria. As the mother of four, refilling school lunch accounts is second nature by now, but last week she was caught by surprise. When her youngest went through the cafeteria line to buy lunch, the cafeteria worker told Natalie she didn't have enough money to pay for her food: Her mother had forgotten to make the last deposit.

The Silver Spring, Maryland, mom says the lunch server graciously let Natalie keep her selected hot lunch with a reminder to bring money for her meal account. Still, Frost says a process that subjects children to the embarrassment of returning their lunch—one that isn't uncommon in schools across the country—just isn't sound. "There should be a way to indicate before they get into line that they don't have enough on their account to save [children] the distress of having to return their lunch," she said.

A debate on school nutrition—trading pizza, fries, and cookies for whole grains, fruits and vegetables—has raged for years, while a parallel debate has gone somewhat unnoticed and unaddressed: What should be the consequence for children with delinquent school-meal accounts? While the most pressing issue in some school cafeterias is students tossing [healthier school lunches in the trash](#), in others it is school employees dumping children’s lunches in the trash for nonpayment. And the result is hungry children, stunned parents, and increasing questions about how school districts handle overdue payments.

Last year in Bedford, Kentucky, [parents complained](#) and accused the local elementary school of “bullying” after a child’s lunch was confiscated and thrown away in front of her friends for running a negative balance. In Dowagiac, Michigan, Dominic Gant, a high-schooler, was [left embarrassed and hungry](#) when his lunch was taken and trashed for owing \$4.95. A 12-year-old in Dickinson, Texas had his [school breakfast dumped](#) over a 30 cent debt. And two years ago in Utah, some 40 students had their [lunches seized for unpaid meal debts](#) in a case that caused a national uproar. A parent of one of the Utah children [told the Salt Lake Tribune](#) it was a “despicable” act, and questioned why children should be “punished or humiliated for something the parents obviously need to clear up.”

The notion of taking children’s lunches away and throwing them in the trash—in some cases, in front of the child and their peers—[angers parents](#) and [exposes school officials to scorn](#). But behind the outrage lurks a larger issue. Survey data from the advocacy group School Nutrition Association shows that overdrawn lunch accounts create real financial challenges for school districts, forced to weigh mounting costs against unsatisfied students and families.

Findings from the group’s [“State of School Nutrition 2014”](#) offers a glimpse at the scope of the problem for school leaders. In a nationally representative survey of more than 1,100 school nutrition directors working in public-school districts, nearly 71 percent of districts reported their school nutrition program had unpaid student-meal debt at the end of the 2012-13 school year. The amount of debt varied greatly depending on the size of the district, with school-lunch debt ranging from \$2 among the smallest jurisdictions to \$4.7 million among large districts. And for more than one-third of districts (38 percent), the number of students who can’t afford to pay for their lunch is growing, in part an indication of the [higher percentage of children now living in poverty](#). According to SNA, the increases are most common in mid-sized school districts, and geographically concentrated in the Northeast and Southeast.

Parents and school administrators must work together to reach a balance and develop meal policies “that respect students while preventing escalating unpaid meal debts,” said Diane Pratt-Heavner, the nutrition association’s spokesperson. While federal funds cover the cost of school breakfast and lunch for low-income children, parents “[saddle] the district with a debt that impacts the quality of meals for all students,” [when they fail to enroll in the program](#) or pay for their children’s full-price meals, Pratt-Heavner said, adding that school-meal programs typically operate independently of districtwide budgets and rely on sales to cover food and labor costs.

The USDA, which oversees school-nutrition programs, says unpaid meals are a matter of “local discretion,” according to Pratt-Heavner, whose organization seeks clear and firm federal guidance on how schools should manage unpaid meal debts. To strike a compromise, many districts establish policies to feed students unable to pay for a hot school meal. In the SNA survey, a majority of districts had either a formal policy (46 percent) or informal procedure (29 percent) for students who lack the funds to pay for breakfast or lunch. What’s not so

easily measured, however, is the underlying stigma associated with receiving free or reduced-price meals that might force some families to opt out of the assistance.

While tossing food is not a preferred method, alternatives can be equally tricky. Substitute meals, which some districts use as a compromise, can also earn condemnation from students. Earlier this year, an Indiana student took to social media after witnessing a lunch tray taken away from a classmate at her high school and replaced with cheese and bread. In a [January 5th Facebook post](#), Sierra Feitl shared a picture of the sparse lunch, calling it “absolutely mortifying” that her classmates would receive this as their daily school meal. On the defensive, [the district superintendent countered](#) that Kokomo School Corporation had more than \$50,000 in delinquent meal fees last year, and the new policy was consistent with neighboring districts.

Understanding the impact of these responses to nonpayment is especially important given how many children suffer from food insecurity. A [2015 online survey](#) of K-8 teachers, principals, and support staff conducted by the national anti-hunger organization Share Our Strength found 75 percent of teachers and 84 percent of principals say their students are coming to school hungry, and more than half (59 percent) of educators state “a lot or most” of their students depend on school meals as a primary source of nutrition.

Similar findings on child hunger have led some urban school districts with large numbers of low-income families—including [Boston](#), [Chicago](#), and [Baltimore](#)—to bypass the bookkeeping and provide free breakfast and lunch to all students regardless of financial means. The programs, which are subsidized by the USDA’s Community Eligibility Program, replace cafeteria checkout lines and the angst of overdrawn lunch accounts with universal free breakfast and lunch.

The federal program also helps prevent the [side effects of hunger on education](#), which research shows can interfere with physical and cognitive skills, from strength and coordination to concentration and problem-solving. As the Maryland state lawmaker Keith Haynes [explained to the Huffington Post](#) about Baltimore’s new meal initiative: “Students, whether they can afford to purchase food or not throughout the school year, now have the same access to balanced, nutritious meals ... it lets students focus on getting through the day without having to be hungry.”

In trying to see the issue from all perspectives, Frost, the Maryland mom, settles on what may be the most crucial consideration. “I can imagine it’s hard for the cafeteria worker that has to retrieve a lunch from a child. And yes, parents who can afford to do so should be responsible in paying their child’s lunch fees. Yet children shouldn’t be made to go the day without any lunch because of their parent’s action ... it’s the child who suffers the consequences.”