

Gimme Your Lunch Money!
The working poor vs the school bully

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Lunch Debt

There she stands in the lunch line in her small-town elementary school, kicking at a spiraling thread unweaving from a commercial carpet square. The fifth grader is nervous; she is hungry and ashamed. She knows there's negative in her lunch account balance. Until her account goes back to black, the school has the authority to dispose of her intended meal in front of her and her classmates. She didn't even pick a desert today. Her right leg twists as she digs her toes into a well-worn hole in the carpet in front of the cashier. First a squint, then a grimace, but she's seen pity before and knows what comes next: a look at the ground and a nod. She gets to eat her lunch in peace today, despite being a broke elementary student.

This hypothetical situation is a common daily reality within many schools across the country. All 50 states have and allow negative school lunch accounts; however, many states defer to the schools or districts as to how those debts might be collected. In 2021 Minnesota, state law allowed schools to deal with lunch debt in a number of different ways, including: alternative meals, throwing away meals, work-for-meals programs, utilizing collection agencies, or denying student participation in school activities – including graduation (Hanson, 2021).

If schools use this much zeal to collect from accounts in arrears, then school lunch debt must really affect the bottom line. Incorporating bad debt into operating expenses would place undue burden on the taxpayer. However that's not the case. The poorest children in American receive free lunch through the USDA's National

School Lunch Program which has been in place since 1946. Debt falls mostly middle-class families who struggle to make ends meet and haven't applied for or are ineligible for welfare benefits. In fact, according to EducationData.org, for the vast majority of schools, lunch debt is a small fraction of cashflow. Lost revenue due to lunch debt accounted for less than 1% of their annual expense budget at 90% of school surveyed. At only 0.7% of schools surveyed was unpaid debt over 10% of the school's annual expenses (Hanson, 2021).

A universal meal provided free of charge to all students is one solution to that tackles school lunch debt and resolves the conflicts of interest that occur when a school runs a for profit cafeteria. However, opponents continue to argue that it would lead to a needless tax increase for the majority of families who pay lunch out of pocket. When a universal meal bill was proposed in Minnesota, January 2023, State Rep. Peggy Bennet argued that it was "shotgun technique instead of a surgical approach." (Cummings, 2023).

What should be considered are economies of scale. Significant cost savings could be realized by dismantling applications and processing aspects of federal relief programs and redirecting funds to at-large communities who are in need. Other costs savings could be realized by utilizing prison labor in state operated kitchens, or by including food preparation into the curriculum itself.

The latter is the idea behind The Edible Schoolyard Project. Alice Waters, celebrity chef and early proponent of the farm-to-table movement founded the project whose

mission is ‘dedicated to the transformation of public education by using organic school gardens, kitchens, and cafeterias to teach both academic subjects and the values of nourishment, stewardship, and community.’ As of now, the program has been in operation for over 25 years and operates two campuses in California (Waters, n.d.).

Regardless of how a student gets fed, the effects of hunger are universal. While nearly every other function within a school operates for the public good, the cafeteria is operated as a business and mostly at the discretion of the individual school. Universal meals offer a common-sense solution that has already proven itself incredibly effective as demonstrated by the USDA’s decision to provide meals free of charge and without application to all students during the COVID-19 pandemic. We owe our children a safe and healthy environment to learn in, including a free lunch.

Works Cited

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