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**Shaming Children So Parents Will Pay the School Lunch Bill**

On the first day of seventh grade last fall, Caitlin Dolan lined up for lunch at her school in Canonsburg, Pa. But when the cashier discovered she had an unpaid food bill from last year, the tray of pizza, cucumber slices, an apple and chocolate milk was thrown in the trash.



**Hazel Compton, 12, recalled being denied a hot lunch at her elementary school in Albuquerque.**

“I was so embarrassed,” said Caitlin, who said other students had stared. “It’s really weird being denied food in front of everyone. They all talk about you.”

Caitlin’s mother, Merinda Durila, said that her daughter qualified for free lunch, but that a paperwork mix-up had created an outstanding balance. Ms. Durila said her child had come home in tears after being humiliated in front of her friends.

Holding children publicly accountable for unpaid school lunch bills — by throwing away their food, providing a less desirable alternative lunch or branding them with markers — is often referred to as “lunch shaming.”

The practice is widespread — a 2014 report from the Department of Agriculture found that nearly half of all districts used some form of shaming to compel parents to pay bills. (About 45 percent withheld the hot meal and gave a cold sandwich, while 3 percent denied food entirely.)

A Pennsylvania cafeteria worker posted on Facebook that she had quit after being forced to take lunch from a child with an unpaid bill. In Alabama, a child was stamped on the arm with “I Need Lunch Money.” On one day, a Utah elementary school threw away the lunches of about 40 students with unpaid food bills.

Hazel Compton, 12, remembers being given a sandwich of white bread with a slice of cheese instead of the hot lunch served to other children at her Albuquerque elementary school. (A school district spokeswoman said the sandwich met federal requirements.)

“They would use the sandwich like a threat,” Hazel recalled. “Like, ‘If you don’t want it, your parents have to pay.’”

Oliver Jane, 15, said that when she had meal debt at Shawnee Heights High School in Tecumseh, Kan., she was told to return her tray of hot food and was given a cold sandwich instead.

“If you didn’t eat the lunch, they were just going to throw it away,” she said. “It seems unfair to me to expect a bunch of kids to be responsible for putting money in their lunch accounts when they don’t even handle their own funds.”

Marty Stessman, superintendent of the Shawnee Heights Unified School District, said that younger children were allowed to take a limited number of meals despite debt, but that high school students were not.

“Notices are sent home automatically when they go below $5, so it shouldn’t be a surprise,” Dr. Stessman said. “They should know before they get to the cashier.”

The problem of meal debt is not new, but the issue has received more attention recently because the Department of Agriculture, which oversees school lunch programs, imposed a July 1 deadline for states to establish policies on how to treat children who cannot pay for food.

“It has been a longstanding issue in schools, one that’s gone on for decades,” said Kevin W. Concannon, who was the department’s under secretary for food, nutrition and consumer services in the Obama administration.

After a 2010 overhaul of school nutrition standards, the department heard from schools and advocacy groups about the burden of lunch debt and the shaming practices that often result. Last summer, the Agriculture Department concluded that meal debt should be managed locally, but required states to formalize their debt policies.

“We’re not telling schools what to put in their policy, but we do want them to think about the issue,” said Tina Namian, who oversees the school meals policy branch.

The department does not prohibit practices that stigmatize children with meal debt, but offers a list of “preferred alternatives,” such as working out payment plans and allowing children with unpaid balances to eat the regular hot meal.

In March, New Mexico passed a law that directs schools to work with parents to pay debts and ends practices like cold sandwich substitutes that may embarrass children.

“Our biggest hope for this bill is that no student will have to contemplate what meal they are going to get,” said Monica Armenta, a spokeswoman for Albuquerque Public Schools, where Hazel Compton was given a cheese sandwich.

Minnesota and the San Francisco Unified School District, among others, also have adopted anti-shaming policies. Recently, the Houston Independent School District notified its food service department that children with debt should be served the regular hot meal.

“This is fundamentally a right-versus-wrong decision,” said Brian Busby, the chief operating officer for Houston schools. “If a kid needs a meal, he’s going to eat.”

But feeding hungry children whose families have meal debt does not solve the problem for schools, which still must grapple with paying the bill. In 2016, the School Nutrition Association published a review of almost 1,000 school lunch programs, finding that nearly 75 percent of districts had unpaid meal debt.

One solution is the federal free meal program. But not every struggling family meets the income requirements, and those that do may have language barriers or fears over immigration status, or fail to file the paperwork.

An Agriculture Department guidance document suggests that districts reach out to the community for help, for example through “random acts of kindness” funding and school fund-raisers. Such efforts around the country have begun to help some districts solve the problem.

In 2014, when a theater technician, Kenny Thompson, was mentoring fourth graders in the Houston-area district of Spring Branch, he saw a cafeteria worker refuse to serve a child the hot meal of chicken, potatoes, fruit and milk.

“The lunch lady says: ‘I’m sorry, I told you yesterday you couldn’t have this today. You need to tell your parents to pay their bill.’ And then she turns around and gives him two slices of bread with cold cheese,” Mr. Thompson said.

He knew the child’s mother was in the hospital, and he stepped in to pay the bill.

Later, Mr. Thompson started Feed the Future Forward, which has hosted crawfish boils and charity golf tournaments to raise money for lunch debt. It has wiped out more than $30,000 in food bills and is planning an additional $23,000 in donations. The giving comes with a catch: Schools must promise they will not give alternative meals to children with unpaid bills. Spring Branch, where Mr. Thompson first witnessed the practice, has taken the pledge.

Rob Solomon, chief executive of GoFundMe, said it had about 30 active campaigns to raise money for meal debt. Camille Billing, a teacher in Hamilton, N.J., recently started a GoFundMe page. In Galveston, Tex., a retired teacher, Donna Woods-Stellman, paid off the city’s meal debt after raising $1,000.

A YouCaring page has raised more than $6,000 for students at impoverished high schools in Virginia. In West Palm Beach, Fla., two high school juniors started School Lunch Fairy to help erase lunch debts.

While the efforts are laudable, “they should be a last resort,” said Abby J. Leibman, president and chief executive of Mazon, a Jewish anti-hunger organization.

Others argue that school meals should be offered free to all children, regardless of income, as is the case in Sweden and Brazil.

“We need to provide school meals on the same basis on which we provide school transportation and textbooks,” said Janet Poppendieck, a senior fellow at the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute and author of “Free for All: Fixing School Food in America.”

Some cities, including Boston, Chicago and Detroit, offer free meals to all students under the Community Eligibility Provision, a federal regulation that allows schools and districts in high-poverty areas to do so regardless of individual need. In New York City, a pilot free lunch program is under review. Most schools in the United States, however, do not qualify for the provision, and only about half of those that do take advantage of it.

As a result, districts struggling with unpaid lunch bills, which can run into the millions in large urban areas, often resort to shaming tactics to push parents to pay.

Crystal Jarek, a retired teacher in Lee County, Fla., said she remembered the staff taking debt notices to class. “The cafeteria staff would come in at noon, wearing their hairnets, and hand out letters,” she said. “All the kids would turn around to see who was getting one.”

During the 2015-16 school year, Lee County began offering free meals for all students at 76 of its schools, including the one where Ms. Jarek taught.

Kerry Krepps, a retiree in Kansas City, Mo., has seen the lasting effects of lunch shaming. Her adult son refuses to eat peanut butter because it reminds him of middle school in western Minneapolis, when students with debt were sent to a table to make peanut butter sandwiches.



“The humiliation has persisted for 20 years,” she said. “It shows how lasting these experiences can be.”