

## LUNCH SHAMING

### Lunch

#### *Nearly one in 10 children in the Rochester suburbs have a negative account balance*

**Justin Murphy** Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

The cafeteria cashier at Greece Odyssey Academy told David Leonard that his mom needed to add more money to his account, but — typical eighth-grader — he forgot to let her know.

He qualified for reduced-price lunch, just 25 cents, so a small deposit would have gone a long way. As it was, though, he went back through the lunch line the following day and got to the register with a hot meal with no money to pay for it.

No money, no food, the cashier told him. She took his tray and sent him away empty-handed, according to his mother, without even the peanut butter and jelly sandwich mentioned in the school district's written policy.

“What’s that teach a kid?” his mother, Jennifer Leonard, asked. “I’m a tough mom, and I try to teach my kids responsibility. But I don’t think a kid should spend seven or eight hours a day in school without food. Feed the kid and take it up with the parent.”

Children across Monroe County likely have the same experience as David Leonard every day, even as school districts move to change their policies on “lunch shaming.”

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**School lunch at Greece Odyssey. About 5,100 students collectively owed about \$20,000 on their lunch accounts on May 1, 2017, according to records from 18 Rochester-area districts, the *Democrat and Chronicle* has uncovered. STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**



**Jennifer Leonard and her son, David Leonard, a former student at Greece Odyssey Academy.**

PROVIDED PHOTO

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**Colleen Taylor**

co-president of the Greece Parent-Teacher Association

## ***LUNCH SHAMING***

### **Lunch**

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Nearly one in 10 children in the Rochester suburbs had a negative school lunch account balance on a given day last spring, with many being denied lunch as a result.

About 5,100 students collectively owed about \$20,000 on their lunch accounts on May 1, 2017, according to records from 18 Rochester-area districts, the *Democrat and Chronicle* has uncovered. They include children whose parents forgot to put money into their accounts as well as those whose parents lack the means to do so but haven’t signed up for help.

They are separate from students who receive free lunch at school and don’t need to worry about an account balance, including the entire Rochester City School District.

Across the state and nation, there is increasing attention on how those indebted children are treated when they get to the lunch line, with an emphasis on eliminating a practice known colloquially as ‘lunch shaming.’ The term comprises several policies some schools have in the event a child doesn’t have money for lunch:

- Withholding food all together, or providing only an “alternate meal,” usually a cheese or peanut butter and jelly sandwich and milk.
- Throwing a lunch tray in the garbage at the cash register if the student picks up a hot lunch but cannot pay for it.
- Making children help clean the cafeteria or do other chores in exchange for food.

■ Giving the student a wristband identifying them as truant, or otherwise communicating with the parents through the student in a way that could stigmatize them with their classmates.

■ Using aggressive debt collection measures to reclaim unpaid funds.

Only one Rochester-area district, Hilton, has a written policy stating that all students can have a hot lunch no matter their account balance, though several others say they do so in practice.

At least 16 districts have a policy to serve cheese or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in some cases when students have a negative account balance at lunchtime, and seven have a policy that allows denying students food altogether in some circumstances, including at the elementary school level.

That is apparently out of step with the national pattern, in which the vast majority of districts report never allowing children to go without food. The majority of Rochester-area districts, though, have updated their policies in the last year to feed children in more instances.

Legislation is pending at the state and federal levels to ban some of the more controversial practices. In particular, Gov. Andrew Cuomo included a proposal in his 2018-19 budget to disallow all forms of lunch-shaming.

Some community groups are thinking of ways they can be involved, including paying off students' debt.

Wheatland-Chili is home to fewer than 700 students, of whom just 18 had overdue accounts one day last spring. All 18 were served the hot meal, regardless of their financial status — a progressive practice, but not one the district has memorialized in writing.

“Because we’re so small, the numbers we’re dealing with are pretty manageable,” Superintendent Deborah Leh said. “But it’s really the right thing to do, as well. ... To make sure all students have a hot lunch, it’s a small price to pay.”

David Leonard and his family moved out of the area last year, but his mother, Jennifer Leonard, said the treatment her son received still bothers her.

The district could not comment on this particular case because of confidentiality rules but said it is exploring ways to provide food for all students in all cases while staying within its budget.

“He was mostly ashamed that it happened, and he was afraid I’d be mad at him for forgetting to tell me (to add money to the account),” Jennifer Leonard said. “He’s 13 years old, and he doesn’t want his friends to think he’s so poor he can’t afford lunch.

“Kids have enough to deal with these days; they shouldn’t be shamed in the lunch line.”

### **Policies, practices differ locally**

Through numerous Freedom of Information requests, the *Democrat and Chronicle* obtained from each district the number of outstanding lunch accounts, and the overall outstanding balance, on a given date — May 1, 2017 — to take a snapshot of the issue.

Schools also provided their policies around charging lunches and any communication with parents on the issue. The *Democrat and Chronicle* then compiled that information into one table to get a county-wide picture.

Overall, 5,082 student accounts were overdrawn that day or 8.4 percent of all students in the 18 school districts who do not qualify for free lunch.

Both East Irondequoit and East Rochester reported that more than 20 percent of students were out of money. By comparison, Pittsford, Rush-Henrietta, Brighton and Wheatland-Chili had fewer than 4 percent of accounts

overdrawn.

The schools with the most overdrawn accounts were all high schools, which tend to have more students. Two Spencerport elementary schools, Canal View and Leo Bernabi, had the greatest outstanding balances. Spurred by guidance from the state and federal education departments, many Rochester-area school districts have been updating their policies over the last year in the direction of providing more food to students without money.

However, some policies are unclear or differ from the district's actual practice.

Schools typically adopt boilerplate policies written by outside entities, and some of the recurring language regarding lunch debt appears to be intentionally vague. Many districts grant to all students "a reimbursable meal (that is available to all students)," a term that doesn't distinguish between a hot meal and a cold sandwich with sides and a beverage.

Brighton is an interesting case. Its written policy says that, after two charged hot meals, the district "may" provide students with a "reimbursable meal," which allows for either a hot meal or sandwich.

That language would seemingly allow for the district to provide no meal at all on the third day, or only a sandwich meal. In practice, though, all students are always allowed to get the hot meal, district spokesman Dan Goldman said.

Wheatland-Chili does not have any written policy whatsoever around charging lunches, though it said it is now working to address that. Several districts, including West Irondequoit and Victor, address the question through regulations that are not published online.

### **Local schools run against national trend**

Overall, Rochester-area schools appear to have less liberal policies than in other parts of the country. According to the most recent national data, from 2011-12, only 6 percent of districts reported that they refuse meals to any students, elementary or secondary, under any circumstances.

By comparison, seven Rochester-area districts have policies that permit denying food to students in some circumstances, including three — Brighton, Gates Chili and Victor — where elementary school students can be left hungry. All three districts said that is not their practice, despite the policy.

No Rochester-area school district reported having received any complaints from parents regarding its policies around lunch-shaming or having spent any dedicated money on collecting from families whose accounts were overdue.

Debbie Beauvais, school nutrition director for East Irondequoit, East Rochester and Gates Chili, and treasurer of the national School Nutrition Association, said it was "the school of hard knocks" when the Gates Chili district stopped letting high school students charge meals, but that families eventually responded by doing a better job of keeping accounts replenished.

The policies are put to the test when a student who is out of charges brings a hot meal to the register. Officials from Gates Chili and Webster — and they, with Greece, are surely not alone — conceded that in that case, the cafeteria worker takes away the tray and ultimately throws it in the trash.

"Shaming is definitely an issue in some of our schools," said Colleen Taylor, co-president of the Greece Parent-Teacher Association. "You're basically telling the individual, I'd rather throw this food in the garbage than let you eat it."

### **'Difficult decisions to make'**

Families with delinquent lunch accounts fall mostly into two categories: those who have the money to buy lunch but forget to replenish their account, and those who don't have the money and can be signed up for free

or reduced lunch.

Districts have an array of methods to reach each of those groups. For the first, many schools send out automated emails, text messages or phone calls warning when a child's account is low or overdrawn.

District officials said those messages are largely effective, even if they sometimes prove annoying to parents.

"It's bat crazy," Taylor said. "My kid owed \$2.50 and you'd think they were going to repossess my car."

In David Leonard's case, his mother said she never received an automated message telling her to replenish his account, though she has received similar messages other times.

When families are truly struggling to make ends meet, districts try to be proactive about signing children up for free or reduced-price (25 cents) lunch.

The threshold for qualifying for a family of four is 130 percent of the poverty level, or \$31,590, for free lunch, and 185 percent of the poverty level, or \$44,955, for reduced-price lunch.

Schools also have the option of using "administrative prerogative" to fill out a free lunch application for a child if the family isn't willing to do so.

The most difficult cases, though, are families who are above the limit for help — earning, say, \$50,000 for a family of four — but still struggling to pay for food. According to 2016 U.S. census data, 11 percent of families in the Monroe County suburbs make between between \$35,000 and \$50,000, and another 20 percent make between \$50,000 and \$75,000.

Foodlink has 31 distribution sites for its "BackPack" program, through which students who may be at risk of going hungry over the weekend or holiday breaks are given a package of nonperishable food to take home. Foodlink distributes about 2,000 bags a week, Chief Operating Officer Terra Keller said.

"One-income families just making ends meet are probably over the poverty line and might not qualify for the reduced-price category," she said. "I have to imagine (struggling to pay for lunch) is a reality for them."

Dawn Rockefeller, president of the Victor-Farmington Food Cupboard, sees those families on a regular basis.

"The families I've known face to face want to take care of their families," she said. "They just can't, and they have difficult decisions to make. ... I just think New York state, and the United States in general, can do better. There's got to be a way to ensure that kids are fed."

### **An expense, but no revenue**

The flip side to the free lunch argument is financial — after all, there's no such thing as a free lunch. Districts already struggle to break even on their nutrition programs; providing hundreds of free hot meals over the course of the year would make it even more challenging.

The most common counterargument to anti-lunch shaming legislation is that families will take advantage of it and never pay their bill, even if they can afford it.

"If a parent sees all of a sudden their debt is gone, they'll just wait for someone else to take care of it," Beauvais said. "I don't want to stand in front of a little 6-year-old and say, 'Mom didn't send money, you can't have lunch.' ... But the bottom line is, it's an expense with no revenue to cover it."

No school lunch official in the Rochester area said they had ever seen a family attempt to take advantage of school largesse, even in cases where there is no limit to hot lunches.

“Families do struggle sometimes,” Leh, the Wheatland-Chili superintendent, said. “But in my experience, they’re always responsive when we reach out.”

According to the School Nutrition Association, three-quarters of school districts across the country had unpaid debt at the end of the year; in 2009, 21 percent of them said it was a very pressing issue.

The median outstanding sum, though, is a few thousands of dollars, a small fraction of even the smallest districts’ annual budgets. In the Rochester area it was even less.

Of 18 suburban districts, 11 reported having some unpaid lunch debt at the end of 2015-16. Three wrote off more than \$500: Greece (\$1,250), East Irondequoit (\$1,084) and Churchville-Chili (\$706). The median loss was \$109 per district, and the countywide total was about \$4,000.

“It’s more of a time-consuming inconvenience than a financial burden,” said Brian Freeman, assistant superintendent for business in the Webster Central School District, which lost \$78 that year. “It probably chews up more time for the principals and food service director than they want ... but at the end of the year, when we look at who owes us money, it’s not a financial burden on the program.”

### **State changes may be coming**

Lunch debt and schools’ policies around it have come under increased national scrutiny in the last several years. The United States Department of Agriculture in 2017 recommended — but did not require — a series of best practices intended to avoid penalizing children if their parents haven’t paid their lunch bill.

Among them, it “encourages (districts) to provide regular, reimbursable meals to all children who want one.”

There is bipartisan legislation in the U.S. Congress to end some lunch-shaming practices. It is co-sponsored by U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, D-NY, and Representatives Louise Slaughter, D-Fairport, Chris Collins, R-Clarence, and John Katko, R-Onondaga, among others.

In 2017, New Mexico became the first state to address the issue through legislation, barring controversial practices like making children help clean the cafeteria if they don’t have money, or giving them identifying wristbands.

Cuomo’s 2018-19 budget proposal includes a plan to disallow lunch shaming, including the provision of alternate meals. That would go further than the New Mexico law, which does not ban alternate meals. “No child should ever go hungry, and by launching the No Student Goes Hungry Program, New York will ensure hundreds of thousands of students of all ages will receive access to free and reduced-price meals,” Cuomo said in a statement. The proposal does not appear to include any funding to cover districts’ added expenses.

Similar legislation is in committee in Albany now; Rochester Assemblyman Harry Bronson is a sponsor of the bill.

“It is important we standardize rules for addressing unpaid meal debt and by no means single out individual students with demeaning ‘shaming’ tactics,” he said in an email. “I believe legislation is necessary in reducing the stigma attached to free or reduced school meals and assuring that students of families that cannot afford meals receive adequate nutrition during the school day.”

Elsewhere in the country, outside groups have stepped in to pay off students’ lunch debt, including via online fundraising pages. That happened last year at a Gates Chili elementary school, where the parent-teacher organization used some of its funds to erase year-end debt, Beauvais said.

On a more private level, teachers or other school staff can pay for lunch for students in line. Taylor said she knows of teachers in Greece who give the cashier a \$20 bill to pay for students lacking money.

Rockefeller said the food cupboard has thought about how it or other nonprofit organizations could work with local school districts to do that as well.

“I think it’s awful to have anything that points the finger, especially when it’s a kid who can’t help it,” she said. “Life’s already tough enough. When you’re pointing out about a kid, ‘I’m hungry and my family can’t take care of me’ — that’s really hard.”

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Jordan Chizuk, a fourth-grader at Victor Intermediate School, reaches for

**Jordan Chizuk, a fourth-grader at Victor Intermediate School, reaches for vegetables to put on her tray in 2015. STAFF FILE PHOTO**



**Rochester-area schools are less progressive than the national trend when giving children who have overdrawn accounts lunch. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**