

Stigma sandwich: School district gives students with cafeteria bills bread and cheese

by Chris Moran - CNS

CHULA VISTA, Calif. - The cheese sandwich has been a remarkably effective collections notice in Chula Vista's elementary schools. When schools give kids no lunch choice but cheese, parents pay what they owe.

Lunch costs \$1.50 a day, but the past-due bills aren't small change. Four years ago, Chula Vista parents had run up a lunch tab of \$285,000.

"It's a problem across the country," Dennis Doyle, Chula Vista's assistant superintendent, told an audience of principals and parents this week at a monthly meeting as they noshed on roast beef and turkey sandwiches. "How do you make sure that you're not letting children go hungry, and yet at the same time you don't end up with a \$300,000 debt?"

CHEESE - Cafeteria workers at Juarez-Lincoln Elementary made American cheese sandwiches for kids whose parents are behind on meal payments. Photo by Nelvin C. Cepeda. The answer in Chula Vista is the cheese sandwich. It's the centerpiece of what's known as the "alternate meal," which also includes milk and a trip to the salad bar. In 2003, the year American cheese on wheat bread made its entry as an entree, the debt shrank by more than \$100,000. It stood at \$67,800 according to the district's most recent figure.

As a student's account balance dwindles and dips into the red, the school sends a letter home, calls the parents and gives the child a verbal reminder to tell Mom and Dad to send in some money.

When parents fall three meals behind, their child finds a check mark on his personalized lunch card when he picks it up at the beginning of the cafeteria line. That tells him he has no choice but cheese.

It also brands him with a culinary scarlet letter, detractors say; the cheese sandwich unfairly broadcasts that a student has deadbeat parents.

The sandwich has brought students to tears. Teachers sometimes spend their own money to get their students out of hock.

William Perno and Alice Coronado, who have children in district schools, have lobbied for the abolition of the alternate meal for seven months.

"Instead of choosing to hold the parents responsible, they (Chula Vista schools) implemented the alternate meal to have the child be the messenger about the account," said Coronado, a social worker.

Perno suggests getting tougher with recalcitrant parents: demand letters, reports to credit bureaus and the use of collection agencies. He even suggested siccing the district attorney on them.

None of this applies to the poor. There really is such a thing as a free lunch, and Chula Vista serves 6,000 of them daily to children from low-income households. The district has 27,000 kindergarten-through-sixth-graders.

The problem is those who can afford to pay but don't, Doyle said, and restricting lunch choice has proved to be an attention-getter.

"If you're paying the debt of the families in your highest income bracket who should be paying for their children's meals, that's coming out of the (cafeteria) fund, which is all the poor kids and everybody else who are paying for the meals of those who are most able to pay for themselves," Doyle said.

That is, a cafeteria that can't collect its debts has to raise prices for the people who do pay.

Escondido elementary schools handle debts by denying the entree to students after two unpaid meals and handing them either a piece of fruit or what its food services director calls a peanut-butter-and-jelly bar. Starting in fourth grade, Santee students with a debt of at least \$6 are turned away at the register, after they've loaded up their trays with food. Cafeteria workers take the trays, then send the kids to the office to get a peanut-butter-and-jelly-sandwich voucher. Santee has almost zero debt.

Oceanside Unified and Cajon Valley Union school districts use the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich to deliver the same message. San Diego Unified School District doesn't order schools to serve an alternate meal but keeps dunning parents for payment and hopes for the best.

These districts reported they rarely, if ever, receive complaints from parents about alternate meals.

Even before Perno and Coronado began advocating the end of the alternate meal seven months ago, Chula Vista began tinkering in the kitchen.

Last fall two Chula Vista schools started a pilot program - just an experiment, mind you - that offered an alternative to the 2-slice cheese sandwich. The turkey-flavored ham sandwich received favorable enough reviews that it's on all 43 school menus now, though some have had it for only a few weeks.

This fall, Chula Vista schools will rotate the alternate meal. One week might be tacos, and another cheeseburgers.

The cheese sandwich isn't going away.

In fact, some kids want the cheese sandwich, and there are unconfirmed reports that kids have thrown away their bag lunches to get it.

The best solution, all agree, is better communication. Chula Vista plans to start making computerized reminder calls, invoicing by e-mail and allowing parents to pay electronically on the district's Web site.

The fall will be a test of whether technology can help create cafeterias where kids can eat what they want, and where schools don't have to eat the bill.

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