



School lunch money travels cyber route

For students at two Eastside school districts, money for lunch and milk is just a click away.

Starting this school year, Northshore School District parents can access an online account and replenish their children's lunch money via credit card, or even set up automatic payments so the milk money never runs dry.

Bellevue School District recently started using the program, and it has been successful so far, district officials said. The two school districts, along with Bethel Public Schools in Spanaway, are among the few in the state to have put lunch money online. Seattle said it is looking into the program.

The system lets parents add money to the account at any time of day, see how much the child has spent and what food the child purchased.

"As part of their account, parents can also see exactly what their kids are eating, if they are purchasing burgers, fries, pizza," said Mike Anderson, Bellevue School District's director of support services.

The online lunch-payment program is called PayPAMS, or parent account management system, and has some similarities to PayPal, which is commonly used to pay for online purchases. Parents can log on to www.PayPAMS.com and create a lunch account for their children using a credit or debit card.

There is a 5.6 percent surcharge to use the online program, and parents also will pay any credit-card transaction fees. Northshore had previously assumed the cost of those credit-card fees, which totaled about \$14,000 last year, said Linda Hoel, Northshore food-service director.

Using a credit or debit card has become a popular way to pay for lunches, and it had become a part-time job for a district employee to have each credit-card payment authorized over the phone, Hoel said.

"We were handling 35 to 45 calls a day, and it was becoming too cumbersome," Hoel said.

The district had about 150 families sign up when it was piloting the program in four schools last spring. Another 100 families have signed up for it this year, she said.

The Bellevue School District started using PayPAMS last school year, and so far the system has worked out well, said Larry Gilman, the Bellevue district's business manager for nutrition services.

"We're very, very happy with it," he said. "I've gotten e-mails from parents who say they love the service, and they don't mind the fee. It's worth it because they don't have to worry about how the money will get into their child's lunch account."

Allen Miedema, an information system manager for Northshore, began using the online lunch-money account for his daughter while that district was piloting the program last spring.

Miedema helped set up the system at the district, and decided to test it out as a parent as well. He set up an account for his 7-year-old daughter, Regan, a student at Maywood Hills Elementary.

"I may have been the first one to use the system here," Miedema said. "I started using it before we even announced it was available. It was a piece of cake to walk through and get it set up." Miedema believes other school districts will probably follow.

Fred LaCroix, systems and programming manager for Seattle Public Schools, said that district also was beginning to look at setting up online programs where parents could pay for school lunches, as well as other school and classroom fees.

"It's a great idea, and it would help out some of the parents," LaCroix said. "But there will still be some parents who want to bring a check into the school office, or slip a \$20 bill into their kid's backpack. We need to be open to other ways of receiving payments."

Pat Reilly, food services director for Snoqualmie Valley Public Schools, said his district will be watching how the online lunch accounts work for the two neighboring districts.

"This is the direction we are all headed in," Reilly said. "It does away with the baggies of change that kids bring to school."