



NEVER WORRY ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S LUNCH MONEY AGAIN!!

Now there is no need to provide lunch money to your child. Nor is there the need for your child to remember a PIN number or carry a personal lunch card.

For parents everywhere, it's been a persistent and nagging problem: A child, provided with lunch money, bypasses the lunch line entirely and spends that money at the corner store on candy and soda. Or, worse, has that money stolen by a bully and is forced to go hungry. A parent providing hard cash to a child can do nothing but hope and worry, having no control over what their child does with that money or what happens to it before it is properly spent on a nutritional lunch.

One solution has been PIN numbers or swipe cards, instituted in schools, that access personal accounts into which parents have deposited money for lunches. But kids will be kids. PIN numbers become forgotten, forcing school lunchroom staffers to look them up for the children, causing lunch lines to come to a complete stop. Or, children give the numbers to friends which in the end cause parents, being billed for extra food they know their children didn't purchase, to burn up the phone lines to the school to get their billings corrected.

As for the swipe cards, these can also be slipped to friends so they can buy lunch, be stolen by bullies or—probably more frequently—become mysteriously lost or turn up destroyed in washing machines.

The solution to these problems is amazingly simple. It's something the child doesn't have to memorize or remember to bring—in fact, it will always be in the child's possession no matter what. It's something that cannot be stolen by a bully, and cannot be “loaned” to friends. Best of all, it means a parent never has to provide cash—and worry over its destination—again.

This amazingly twenty-first century resolution is biometrics—the use of finger scan reading to access personal accounts set up in advance by parents. Already instituted in numerous school systems across the nation, it is solving a plethora of problems for both school administrators and parents alike.

“The parents have said that it's really great to simply deposit the money and know it's there,” says Mike Tubbs, IT Manager at JSerra Catholic High School in San Juan Capistrano, California. “The kids don't have to take money to school, and parents can simply know their children will be buying lunch every day.” The school utilizes a biometric system developed especially for schools by Food Service Solutions (FSS), and has two point-of-sale readers set up in the school's cafeteria.

Parents have also been very happy with the fact that their children simply have to swipe their fingers when they come in—it's extremely easy to use and requires no remembering of numbers or cards.

JSerra's previous purchasing system, based on a child's student number, created many problems. For example, a student would provide their number to a friend who would pay the student for the food purchased, and the student would simply pocket the money. Or, other students would purchase with another student's number.

Because of its loopholes, the old system made it very difficult for the school to provide accurate accounting to parents, and parents, seeing the odd or additional purchases made on their childrens' accounts, would be making daily complaints. “Any complaints now are few and far between,” Tubbs says.

Another successful implementation of biometrics is in three schools in the Fairfield School District of Fairfield, Texas. “The majority of parents here think it's great,” says Crystal Thill, Food Service Director for the district. “They know that their money is going for their child, instead of somebody else using their account.”

“Before we got this system, there were quite a bit of parents calling in saying, ‘my child didn't purchase that,’” Thill continues. “Of course, we had no way of telling whether their child purchased it or not, and we would have to delete the charge. Now it's of course a given that their child did purchase items.”

The system has also made a great difference with the younger students at the Fairfield District's elementary school—they're not now having to remember a number. “With the PIN numbers, we would have to manually pull them up, which is a lot more time consuming,” Thill says.

Initially there were also worries from parents in both school systems, as would be expected, of the “big brother” aspect—that fingerprints would be stored and provided to law enforcement or other agencies without authorization. But in both cases, once parents were assured that the information would only be locally stored and would under no circumstances be provided beyond the school, and also once they saw the system in action, worries abated.

The fingerprint is not stored as an image—something that other agencies would need for their files. It is stored as mathematical information only. “We explained to parents that the fingerprint is not taken as it would be in law enforcement, where it would be rolled in ink and pressed,” JSerra's Tubbs says. “It is simply a mathematical ‘map’ of the fingerprint digitally stored, and used only here for purchases. Our computer system is also a local, secure system, not open externally.”

Initially some students had the same worries, but when the system went in and they saw how it worked, they enjoyed its ease. For many it also became a “cool” novelty—“Hey, we're scanning our fingerprints!”

Students at the Fairfield School District had a similar reaction. In fact, there was quite a length of time between the time students' prints were scanned and the point at which the system went into use. During this period, students kept excitedly asking, “When are we going to use it?”

Another aspect to the new system is its ease of set-up for parents. Parents can easily set up an account for their children online.

“The old system basically made parents jump through hoops in order to deposit money online,” JSerra's Tubbs says. “They had to go onto the company's web site, create an account, then go to the Pay Pal web site, deposit money there, then be returned to the company's site to finish creating an account.”

“Implementation of this system really simplified what the parents had to do,” Tubbs continues. “It's pretty easily laid out in a form in which they can go online and create their account in minutes.”

Fairfield School District's Thill agrees. “Since we've put in the system, I've had very few parents contact me with issues from it. It's very simple to use—I tried it myself, using my husband, who works here, as my ‘child’ just so I could see how it worked.”

For parents, fingerprinting is a dream come true—never worry about what happened to that lunch money again!

For more information about school lunch biometric identification systems, call (814) 949-2037; Fax (814) 941-7572; visit the website www.foodserve.com; or write to Food Services Solutions Inc. at 3101 Pleasant Valley Boulevard, Altoona, PA 16602.

Bruce Boyers is a freelance writer based in Glendale, California

