

Site lets parents peek at kids' lunches

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Sorry, Billy. Mom's on to you. And she's not buying that story about eating salad for lunch the other day.

She's got the Web site to prove it.

Hidden Oaks Middle School parents, who once had to rely on intuition to bust their kids if they fibbed about what they buy in the school cafeteria, now have a new tool: the Internet.

Since January, parents at the school near Palm City have been able to log on to a Web site to see exactly what their children are buying in the lunch line. The program, called MealpayPlus, has proven so popular, it will be available next year at all Martin schools.

"I've had moms say, 'this is wonderful,'" said Rae Hollenbeck, director of food and nutritional services for the school district. "One lady came up and said 'thank you, we found our daughter telling us a fib.'"

Parents now know if their children are buying cookies instead of apples or tater tots instead of sandwiches.

Here's how it works: A child goes through the lunch line, picking out whatever he wants to eat, Hollenbeck said. When he reaches the cash register, he scans a school-issued lunch card. The child's photo pops up on the register screen, along with the items for sale that day. The cashier records the items that are on the child's tray and the information soon becomes available for the child's parents to view online.

Parents long have had the option of transferring money to their children's lunch account through the Internet or by sending checks to the school, Hollenbeck said. But before, if parents wanted to know why the \$50 they transferred disappeared so quickly, they had to call school district officials, who had to pull the information from a computer and print it out. Parents had to come in person to view it.

The new system has "taken us out of the loop," Hollenbeck said.

At Hidden Oaks, about 20 parents a day are using MealpayPlus, which still lets parents add money to their children's lunch accounts through the Internet or by phone, cafeteria manager Melissa Franklin said.

The service doesn't cost the school district anything. Parents are charged a few dollars for each transaction, Hollenbeck said.

MealpayPlus is used in about a dozen other school districts across the state, including Indian River County, according to the Web site of its company, Horizon Software International LLC.

"We push it pretty hard because it reduces the amount of cash in the system and we don't have to worry about bounced checks," said Joe Clark, an educational technology specialist for the Indian River County school district, which has used the program for three years.

"Routinely, you would hear parents call you up and say, 'I gave my child \$50 last month, and it never showed up in his account.' And then they'd find a check buried down at the bottom of their child's backpack," Clark said.

Once, a dad called to say how much he liked the system. He discovered his child was buying cookies and Gatorade for lunch, which the father casually mentioned at dinner one day.

"The student looked at him in awe," Clark said. "When the child asked how he knew, the father just said, 'I have my ways.'"