

Jan. 24, 2007, 11:22AM

Clear Creek takes lunch online

System provides parental control over children's cafeteria accounts and eating habits

By RUTH RENDON
Copyright 2007 Houston Chronicle

LEAGUE CITY — Students forgetting their lunch money is becoming a thing of the past in the Clear Creek school district with a new program that allows parents to deposit money into their children's accounts via the Internet.

The new MealpayPlus system, which began earlier this month, allows parents to make credit card and debit card payments into their children's account over the Internet or by telephone.

The program also lets parents monitor what their children are buying and how much money is left in their account. Parents get e-mail alerts when their children's cafeteria account is nearly depleted.

"If your son buys a peanut butter and jelly sandwich five days in a row, you're going to know. Or, if every day your child is getting a snack on top of his lunch, you'll know," said Carrie Taylor, a spokeswoman for the Clear Creek Independent School District. "This is much more than a lunch payment system. You'll really be able to monitor what your child is purchasing and how the money is being spent."

Parents log onto the MealpayPlus Web site or call a toll-free number to set up their child's account.

More than 1,000 students have signed up for the program with more than \$15,000 paid into the system since Jan. 13, Taylor said.

The school district, she said, implemented the system in response to parents' requests.

"We want to provide parents with improved access to their students' account and a more efficient payment process," Taylor said.

Some parents have been reluctant to make payments through the new system because of a \$2 transaction fee. Check and cash deposits into an account can still be made at their child's cafeteria.

"For parents that have multiple children, keeping up with school lunch accounts is a challenge. They don't all eat the same thing so the lunch money will be depleted by one child before another child," Taylor said.

Parents can sign up for e-mail notification when their child's balance is low and monitor their child's spending without having to make deposits into their children's account.

Most schools send notes home with children whenever their cafeteria account is low but the notes don't always make it home.

Money deposited into MealpayPlus usually will be available within a matter of minutes.

There is a minimum payment of \$10 and a maximum payment of \$150 per transaction. Parents will receive a \$10 credit for every \$100 deposit.

Other area school districts have implemented similar programs.

The Houston Independent School District launched one a year ago, giving parents the ability to ban their children from spending lunch money on junk food.

The payment plan not only is a convenience for parents but also provides the technology to eliminate the type of bookkeeping errors that caused HISD to overcharge the federal government for meals.

The Houston district had to pay a \$220,000 penalty because of its inability to keep accurate counts of free meals served to students from poor families.

The lunch payment program and tracking system is becoming the norm nationwide. The Dallas, Austin and Pearland school districts also have similar programs.

To register for the MealpayPlus program in the Clear Creek school district, parents can log onto www.mealpayplus.com or by telephone at 866-286-7228. Locally, questions can be directed to the district's child nutrition services office at 281-284-0701.



Brandon Benkula, 6, uses a keypad to pay for his lunch at Bauerschlag Elementary in League City. More than 1,000 students have signed up with Clear Creek ISD's new program since Jan. 13.

TONY BULLARD: FOR THE CHRONICLE