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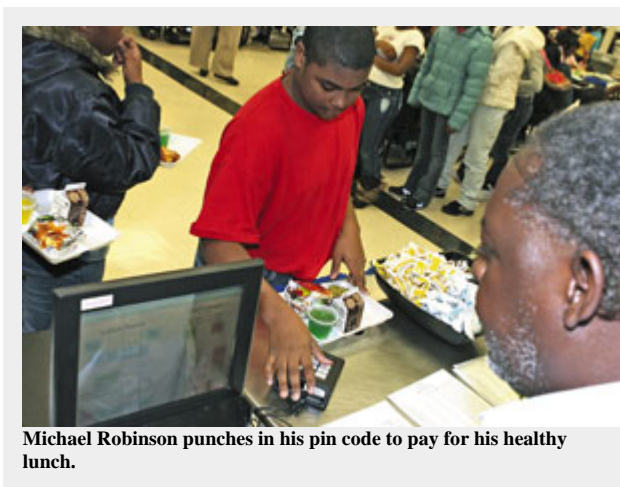
ESPs and Technology

Digital Dining

Serving up healthy cafeteria meals with a side of technology

By Cindy Long

At 11:20 a.m., lunchtime comes early for sixth-graders at Sylvan Hills Middle School in Atlanta, Georgia, but Michael Robinson, a star football player who stands about a foot taller than his classmates, is always ready to eat. Moving through the line, Michael scans the options. Soft-spoken and a little shy, he quietly orders a chicken sandwich, a side of peas, chocolate milk, and Jell-O for dessert.



When he gets to the register, Michael doesn't fumble for a wallet or pull crumpled bills from his pocket. He simply punches his personal code into a keypad, and is on his way to eat with his friends.

Gone are the days when kids had to worry about lost or stolen lunch money, and when parents had to wonder whether that money was spent on a healthy meal or squandered on candy, a favorite comic book, or worse. Electronic lunch pre-payment systems have become the trend du jour in America's increasingly digital dining halls, making it

easy for parents to rest assured that their kids buy lunch every day.

Atlanta public schools use an electronic lunch payment system called Mealpay.com, which not only lets parents prepay online for their children's lunches, but also allows them to check out what their kids are eating. Parents can log onto the Web site with a password, enter the student's ID number, and pull up a page listing what their child purchased in the cafeteria—the entrée or junk food from the à la carte menu. In Houston public schools, Primero Food Service Solutions lets parents actually choose what items their kids can select. If Sally grabs a brownie, or Jimmy a bag of chips, a warning sounds, notifying the cashier about the students' food restrictions. School health and nutrition experts hope these technologies will help curb the childhood obesity epidemic.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the prevalence of overweight children ages 6 to 11 more than doubled in the past 20 years, rising from 7 percent in 1980 to 16 percent in 2002. The rate among adolescents ages 12 to 19 more than tripled, increasing from 5 to 16 percent.

Contributing to the epidemic are the food choices kids make. In most schools, snack bars and à la carte menus offering items such as french fries and onion rings tempt students and compete with the healthier meals the school cafeteria offers.

It's all about healthy choices at Sylvan Hills, according to principal Gwen Atkinson. While many school cafeterias in Georgia offer an à la carte menu, she decided to remove it from her dining facility because she believes a healthy body leads to a healthy mind. "By providing only healthy meals, we're looking for students to trim a few pounds," Atkinson says. "Nutritious lunches improve our students' health, which helps them academically."

Her students have a selection of five entrées each day, which always includes a salad choice. And healthy dessert items like Jell-O, raisins, or fruit cups usually trump ice cream and pie. But that's not to say that the menu is completely devoid of tasty treats. "I have a very vocal student government," Atkinson says.

Healthier students and happier parents aren't the only benefits of the system—the technology also lets food service professionals focus a little less on numbers and a lot more on students.

A Name with a Face

After 18 years as the Sylvan Hills cashier, William Harris has watched a steady stream of kids flow through the lunch line. Mealpay.com has turned what was once a meandering stream into a brisk current, but even though the line moves more quickly now, Harris gets to know more kids than in the days when he had to handle cash and count change. The computer tallies up totals, eliminating the risk of mistakes, while the screen provides information on each of the students passing through the line.

"When the kids punch in their numbers, their names are called up," says Harris. "That way, I get to know them better. I get to put a name with a face and say hello."

The system also displays each child's date of birth. Harris is careful to check the date each day so he can always wish kids a happy birthday. He also gives the students a free cupcake because, on birthdays, it's OK to splurge a little.

Hungry Kids Don't Learn

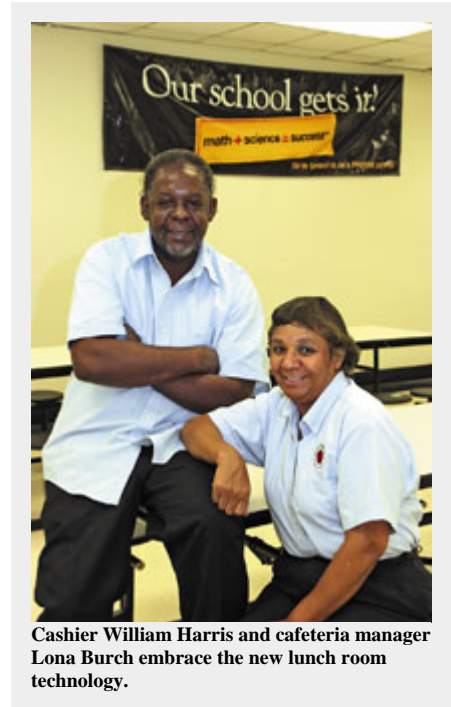
Another benefit of the electronic prepayment system is increased participation in the meal programs offered at Sylvan Hills. Because the keypad is used by students on the Mealpay.com plan as well as those on the federal free or reduced-price school lunch program, low-income kids aren't singled out. Before, some children chose to go hungry rather than accept their discounted lunch in front of the other students.

Additionally, by allowing parents to prepay, participation in the school breakfast program has increased.

"Many parents aren't able to fix breakfast in the morning, and so lots of kids weren't eating it," says Sylvan Hills cafeteria manager Lona Burch. "Now these kids come in and have a healthy breakfast—they even eat oatmeal! It's so important, because without breakfast, kids will be hungry. And hungry kids don't learn."

Burch, who has been at Sylvan Hills for 27 years, says kids are more sophisticated today than when she first started in the late 1970s. "They're a bit wiser a bit earlier," she says.

They're also comfortable with the new cafeteria technology. "They're using technology all the time—at home, in class, playing games, listening to music. They grew up with things like ATMs and self-checkout," Burch says. "Now technology is everywhere, and it all ties into everything. Paying with cash would seem old-fashioned to these kids."



Cashier William Harris and cafeteria manager Lona Burch embrace the new lunch room technology.