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St. Charles schools launch new service
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Parents of public school students in St. Charles Parish don't have to worry anymore about forgetting to send their child's lunch money to school.

Now, they can pay for meals online or by telephone, courtesy of a new payment service at schools this year. And, beginning in the fall, parents will even be able to track how kids are spending their meal money, school system Child Nutrition Director Cynthia Ruffin said.

The school district piloted a program at *Mealpay.com* last spring at five schools, and began using it parishwide this school year. The service is free to the school system, but parents are charged a fee with each payment, Ruffin said. The fee is \$2 for a payment from a checking or savings account, and 5.75 percent of payments made from credit and debit card accounts.

"I looked into it and realized it would be very beneficial to us," said Ruffin, who supervises meal service in the parish's 19 public schools.

"We did this as a convenience for our parents," Ruffin said. "It allows the parents to view their account before they run out of money," and avoid getting a late-fee notice, she said. "Sometimes, parents get irritated" with the notices, she said.

But the program also has benefited the district in other ways, she said.

Fewer than 45 percent of students in St. Charles schools qualify for free and reduced-price lunches, leaving at least 55 percent whose parents must pay for meals, Ruffin said.

"Our (food service) managers are constantly being interrupted by calls from parents, asking what is my child's balance, and what do they owe?"

Ruffin said as much as half of a high school manager's time is taken up collecting lunch money and recording the transactions in a computer.

All of that can be done automatically with the payment system, and payments are posted in less than 48 hours to a student's account, Ruffin said.

And, even if parents don't use the online or telephone payment system, they can view their child's lunch account online for free.

To view the account or make payments, they only need to get the child's account number from the school secretary or the school's cafeteria manager, Ruffin said.

Beginning next school year, parents will also be able to view their child's food purchase record online.

"This is going to help parents who want to track what their students are eating," Ruffin said.

They can, for example, see how many extra orders of French fries the child has bought, or whether they used the pizza line, or the line for hot entrees, she said.

So far, only about 6 percent of students' parents have signed up for the service.

"That is about 820 students," Ruffin said. But she is confident the number will increase.

"It's going to catch on," she said. Right now, she said, the fee may discourage people from using it. "They don't realize they can use it (at no charge) just to obtain balances" in a lunch account, she said.

Parents who don't have a computer or don't want to use one can call the service by telephone and make payments with credit cards or from checking accounts, Ruffin said.

The district is nearly finished sending parents 5,300 explanatory letters with refrigerator magnets enclosed. The magnets have the telephone number and Internet address of the service.