

## **Pie for lunch? Watch it, kids.**

By Paul Donsky  
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
Published on: 05/16/05

Hey kids, you had better think twice before reaching for that piece of cake or bag of potato chips at the school cafeteria.

Mom or Dad just might be watching.

Starting this week, parents in four Atlanta area school systems will be able to log on to the Internet and find out what their children have been buying in the lunch line.

Gwinnett County parent Jenni Duncan said she would like to know how her two children spend their lunch money.

"Are they buying ice cream? Are they buying junk food?" Duncan said. "They do have more options, and you just hope that they make good choices."

The Gwinnett County, Cobb County, Atlanta and Marietta school systems use a computerized cafeteria checkout system called MealPay, which allows students to pay for lunch electronically using a numeric pass code. Parents deposit money into an account that can be managed online.

On Tuesday, the company is rolling out a feature that will record students' purchases in an online archive. To see the information, parents simply plug in their child's pass code into the MealPay Web site.

School systems can customize what information is available. In general, only items purchased a la carte, such as hamburgers, pizza slices, french fries and desserts, will be itemized. If a student orders a plate lunch — the day's entree plus a couple of vegetables — the record will simply show that a full meal was bought.

The service is expected to be offered in Fulton County schools starting in August.

The change comes as nutritionists and pediatricians warn about an epidemic of childhood obesity, caused in part by kids' voracious appetites for junk food.

But today's school cafeterias, under pressure to boost sales, are increasingly catering to students' tastes by providing meals that mimic those at fast-food outlets and by offering more choices. Many schools have shopping mall-style food courts that allow students to build their own meals, with burgers, pizza, fries and nachos offered almost every day.

**End of junk food lunch?**

For the most part, parents have been left in the dark about what their children eat at school. The meal history feature is designed to change that, said Tina Bennett, director of MealPay for Loganville-based Horizon Software International.

The system gives parents "some ownership back, so parents can be more accountable and involved," Bennett said.

Summer Manuel, a sixth-grade student at Atlanta's Inman Middle School, often snacks her way through lunch — eating chips, cookies and candy instead of a hot meal.

She worries the increased monitoring could mean that her mother will put an end to her junk food diet.

"She's going to make me bring my own lunch to school, with only healthy food, and I don't want that to happen," Summer said. "I will only be able to have certain things — carrots, celery, broccoli, ham sandwich and an orange juice."

The meal archive might have helped Atlanta parent Ann Ward, who last week was shocked to learn that her daughter, a second-grade student at Sarah Smith Elementary in Buckhead, had run through the money in her meal account several weeks earlier than expected.

When Ward called the school, she learned her daughter had begun buying a bag of potato chips every day.

Ward said she likes the idea of being able to monitor her daughter's eating habits, but she would like the cafeteria to go one step further and stop giving children the option of buying chips, cookies and other snack foods.

"I don't think they need to be offered junk food every day at school," Ward said. "My child is too young to have a charge account for junk food, which is what they've done."

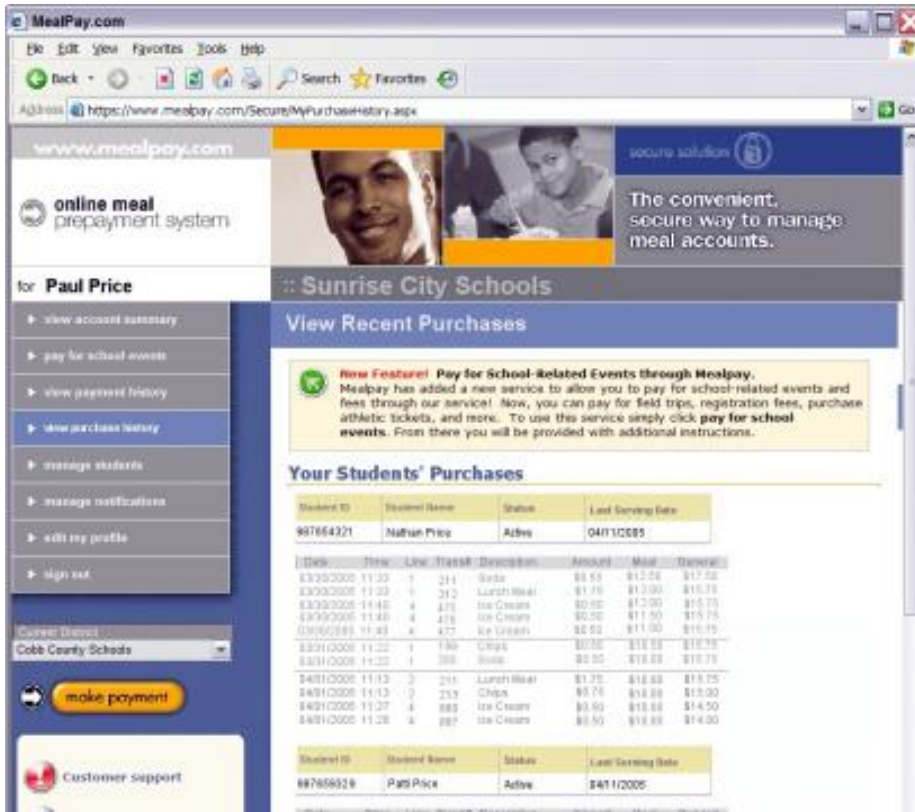
Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Washington-based Center for Science in the Public Interest, agreed that schools should reduce or eliminate junk foods.

"Providing information is one thing, but ensuring that the choices are healthful is much more important," she said.

---

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.ajc.com/metro/content/metro/0505/16schoollunch.html>



MealPay  
A MealPay Web page displays an archive of what students buy in their school's cafeteria.



Keith Hadley/AJC  
Cashier Frances Schwendimann checks her register after student Jovane McDermolt puts in his account code for his lunch. Pictures of students are displayed on the cashier's computer screen after their code has been entered.