

Mon February 11, 2008

Like life, schools now taking Visa

By Wendy K. Kleinman
Staff Writer

MIDWEST CITY — A first-grade boy slid his tray to the end of the lunch line and then stuck his hand in his jeans to retrieve his lunch money.

The students behind him waited while he fished for the dollar bills, something many of his classmates no longer do thanks to a new online program.

"See, this is where it holds things up, because his money's not out and ready," said Terri Karami, the cafeteria supervisor at East Side Elementary in Midwest City.

The scene played out like one of the popular "Life Takes Visa" credit card commercials: a checkout line moves in swift, orchestrated motions until someone stops to pull out a few green reproductions of George Washington.

Here in the Midwest City-Del City School District, life takes MealPay Plus.

The school district is one of seven in Oklahoma that uses the program, which allows parents to pay for their children's meals online.

The program is free to school districts. MealPay Plus, which was started in 2005 by Horizon Software, collects money like ATMs do — through transaction fees.

The site charges \$2 per transaction fee.

How parents benefit

Shaunda Poe works nights. When her children go to school, she goes to bed. So on the days before MealPay Plus when one would call and say she forgot to take her lunch money, Poe would have to get out of bed, maybe go to the ATM and then drive to the school.

"Now, I can do it from home, in my pajamas," Poe said, by using her bank card.

The Mid-Del district began using MealPay Plus at the beginning of the school year.

When she logs onto the system, she also can see what her children are buying.

How students use it

As students move through the line, they enter a PIN number on a keypad. Their account balances appear on a computer screen in front of Karami and she hits "enter" for the cost of the meal to be deducted.

The prepayment helps speed up the process, Karami said.

And the less time students spend in line, the more time they have to eat, East Side Principal Rod Boyer said.

