

Lunchtime computerized for county students

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The lunch cafeteria has gone high-tech.

The Cajon Valley Union School District has a lunch-payment program called MealpayPlus that offers parents the convenience of online payments, secure access and even a feature to automatically replenish their child's school lunch account.

Parents no longer have to worry about their children losing lunch money or spending it on something else, or bullies hounding a child for lunch dollars.

Rachel Bailey, who has two sons, Mitchell, 8, and Joshua, 6, at Vista Grande Elementary School in Rancho San Diego, has been using MealpayPlus since December.

"I have a good idea of how the money is being spent," Bailey said. "I don't have to send a check with my child to the office. My boys would feel really bad if something were to happen to the check, if it got lost or misplaced."

Vista Grande Principal Craig Wollitz said the lunch line goes much faster. School office manager Holly Sage said parents can track how many meals remain in their child's lunch account by going online.

The district started researching meal-payment programs a few years ago with two primary goals: to move lines through cafeterias faster and keep accurate records for the national school lunch program, said Wayne Oetken, assistant superintendent of business services for the Cajon Valley district.

Linda Patzold, Cajon Valley's director of child nutrition, conducted extensive research before her team chose Horizon Software International for the cafeteria computer systems. Horizon Software uses MealpayPlus as its online payment system for lunches. It has been operating in the Cajon Valley Union School District since fall 2007.

Lunch costs \$2 a day at Vista Grande. Cafeteria computers pull up the student's MealpayPlus account balance when the child gives his or her name to the employee at the register.

Patzold said the program provides numerous conveniences to parents, including a secure, online payment option and automated e-mail reminders of when the lunch account has a low balance.

Parents can opt for an automatic replenishment feature. They select an account-balance minimum, and funds are automatically drawn from either a credit card or bank account.

Parents can access and print their online account history. When a child advances from an elementary to a middle school, the remaining balance in his or her MealpayPlus account can be rolled over to the new school. The system also provides a help line to assist parents with any problems.

It's free to create an account, but a \$2 fee is charged on deposits into the account. Cajon Valley gives a \$2 credit for any deposit of \$25 or more to offset the fee.

Patzold said the program has gone better than expected, with an increase in revenue and participation over last year.

Of the district's 16,269 students, 3,701 use MealpayPlus.

MealpayPlus has existed for 4½ years. Ashley Freeman, product coordinator for the company, said 250 districts encompassing roughly 3,000 schools and 3 million parents across the nation use the system.