



MID-MINNESOTA LEGAL AID
Legal Services Advocacy Project

It's Not Just Utah:
Minnesota Lunch Rooms Also Refuse Hot Lunch to Children

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With generous support from MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger and Share our Strength, this policy brief was undertaken as part of LSAP's continued commitment to ending child hunger.

Legal Aid has been advocating for six years to prohibit the unacceptable practice of denying hot lunch to low-income children who have insufficient funds in their lunch accounts. Many Minnesota districts employ the questionable practices that have garnered national media attention and scrutiny – such as dumping lunches in the garbage and stamping children's hands. School districts impose these objectionable policies on front line workers who often have no choice but to carry them out.

While many districts attempt to defend these practices by claiming limited resources, fully one third of Minnesota districts across the state have rejected these practices, and work to ensure children receive the most nutritious hot lunch available.

Legal Aid will continue to advocate for state legislation to protect Minnesota's poorest children from being turned away or offered less nutritious alternatives. Expanding free lunch to all reduced-price eligible children will guarantee a nutritious hot lunch to an additional 61,000 Minnesota children statewide. We further encourage every Minnesota school district to revisit those lunchroom policies and practices that allow children to go hungry, impede the ability to learn, and cause shame and embarrassment.

A total of 309 public school districts – or 94% of all districts statewide – responded to a 2013 request by Legal Aid for data regarding their school lunch policies and practices for low-income children who cannot pay.¹ Below are the findings.

¹ 21 districts were unresponsive to our questions: *Battle Lake, Becker, Cass Lake-Bena, Detroit Lakes, Fisher, Glenville-Emmons, Herman-Norcross, La Crescent-Hokah, Lakeville, Martin County West, Melrose, Milroy, Mountain Lake, Sauk Centre, South Koochiching, St. Clair, St. Louis County, Tracy, Wadena-Deer Creek, Watertown-Mayer, and Wrenshall.*

FINDINGS

46 school districts (15%) reported a policy or practice of an immediate or eventual refusal to serve hot lunch or an alternative meal to a child who cannot pay.

- A refusal typically follows some level of deficit in the lunch account. Most districts allow a small number of meals on credit or the districts offer a limited number of alternative meals before a refusal.
- Several districts do not view a refusal to serve food as “turning children away.”
- Many policies are stark. At a certain level of deficit, the language states: “students will not be allowed to eat,” “students will be denied to eat lunch,” “we stop the student from taking lunch,” or “students will be asked to replace wrapped food; unwrapped food will be discarded.”
- One district indicates it allows children to call home during the lunch hour but will not provide food.
- Some districts turn away children of all ages, while others turn away only middle or high school children.
- A few districts responded that they do not strictly enforce their written turn away policies.
- A few districts reported pulling trays and dumping exposed food into the trash in front of the child.²
- One district policy states: “Lunch trays will be pulled from a student if there is not enough money in the account. We do not enjoy pulling trays from students and it slows the lines for other students trying to get through.”
- One district justified its tray pulling policy as a way of teaching children accountability and responsibility.
- Many districts absolve themselves of responsibility for ensuring children do not go hungry, claiming that parents are the ultimate decision makers on whether their child eats.

165 Districts (53%) offer less nutritious alternative meals in lieu of providing a hot lunch or turning a child away.

- Many districts allow a small number of hot meals on credit before a less nutritious meal is provided.
- A few districts reported serving butter sandwiches. The most common alternative meal is a cheese or peanut butter sandwich and milk. A few districts provide a deli meat sandwich.

² Note: These districts defended the practice, claiming Minnesota Department of Health requirements prohibit the food from being recycled to another child.

- Some districts supplement a sandwich with a fruit or vegetable; a few districts allow an unlimited salad bar.
- Some districts retain the hot lunch tray before giving an alternative meal.
- One district said it places a peanut butter sandwich where the entrée is supposed to be on the tray.
- A few districts described efforts to make the alternative meal more discrete, most times by delivering a brown sack lunch to the classroom prior to lunch time.
- Many of these districts described the unfortunate shame and embarrassment that accompany an inability to pay, though none of these districts addressed the concern by guaranteeing a hot lunch.

98 school districts (32%) will always provide a full menu-of-the-day hot lunch to a low-income child even if the child cannot afford the fee.

- Many districts described the critical importance of a healthy lunch and ensuring the best nutrition for all students, particularly for those students who are economically vulnerable.
- One school district described other districts' practices of providing alternative meals and turning away children as "unconscionable bullying."
- Several districts expressed a concern that a healthy school lunch may be the only meal the child eats for the remainder of the day.
- These districts employ a number of strategies to absorb the cost, including community and PTA angel accounts, principal discretion, school board approved appropriations, and future recovery when parents are able to pay.

Most districts reported using a variety of methods to reach out to parents.

- Many districts use letters, emails, and telephone calls. Some involve social workers.
- Several districts stamp children's hands as a reminder for the parent to put money in the account. Some of these stamps are animals, others say "LUNCH" or "MONEY."
- A few districts described giving "verbal warnings" to children about low and negative account balances.
- Many districts reported they are under no obligation to feed a child who has insufficient funds in the lunch account— even though many of these districts provide an alternative meal.
- One district encourages students to borrow money from a friend.
- Some districts threaten legal action against parents for unpaid lunch debts.

The 46 school districts listed below reported a policy or practice of an immediate or eventual refusal to serve food to a child who cannot afford the 40 cent copay. The circumstances of refusal typically involve some level of account deficit. Some of these districts allow a small number of meals to be provided on credit or offer limited alternative meals. However, these districts will not always guarantee food to a low-income child who cannot pay. Some of these districts turn away children of all ages, while others turn away only middle or high school children.

Ashby Public School Dist.
Bagley Public School Dist.
Bertha-Hewitt Public School Dist.
Bird Island-Olivia-Lake Lillian Public Schools
Blooming Prairie Public School Dist
Blue Earth Area Public School
Chatfield Public Schools
Deer River Public School Dist.
Eastern Carver County Public School
Elk River Public School Dist.
Eveleth-Gilbert School Dist.
Fergus Falls Public School Dist.
Frazee-Vergas Public School Dist.
Houston Public School Dist.
Howard Lake-Waverly-Winsted
Hutchinson Public School Dist.
International Falls School Dist.
Inver Grove Heights Schools
Kasson-Mantorville School Dist.
Lac qui Parle Valley School Dist.
Lake Crystal-Wellcome Memorial
Lake of The Woods School Dist.
Lanesboro Public School Dist.

Mahtomedi Public School Dist.
Minneota Public School Dist.
Montevideo Public School Dist.
Moorhead Public School Dist.
Moose Lake Public School Dist.
Ortonville Public Schools
Osseo Public School Dist.
Owatonna Public School Dist.
Pillager Public School Dist.
Pine City Public School Dist.
Pine River-Backus School Dist.
Redwood Area School Dist.
Sauk Rapids-Rice Public Schools
Sebeka Public School Dist.
St. Francis Public School Dist.
St. James Public School Dist.
Stillwater Area Public School Dist.
Upsala Public School Dist.
Waseca Public School Dist.
West St. Paul-Mendota Hts.-Eagan
Willow River Public School Dist.
Windom Public School Dist.

The 165 districts listed below will not always guarantee hot lunch to a reduced price student who cannot afford the 40 cent fee. While many of these districts allow some number of hot meals on credit – all of these districts have policies or practices of eventual alternative meals until a child can pay. The most common alternative meal is a cheese or peanut butter sandwich and milk.

Ada-Borup Public School Dist.
Aitkin Public School Dist.
Albany Public School Dist.
Annandale Public School Dist.
Austin Public School Dist.
Badger Public School Dist.
Barnesville Public School Dist.
Barnum Public School Dist.
Belle Plaine Public School Dist.
Big Lake Public School Dist.
Blackduck Public School Dist.
Brainerd Public School Dist.
Breckenridge Public School Dist.
Browns Valley Public School Dist.
Buffalo Lk-Hector-Stewart Public
Buffalo-Hanover-Montrose Public
Burnsville Public School Dist.
Butterfield Public School Dist.
Byron Public School Dist.
Caledonia Public School Dist.
Cambridge-Isanti Public School Dist
Campbell-Tintah Public School Dist.
Carlton Public School Dist.
Cedar Mountain School Dist.
Centennial Public School Dist.
Central Public School Dist.
Chisago Lakes School Dist.
Chisholm Public School Dist.
Cleveland Public School Dist.
Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley
Cloquet Public School Dist.
Cook County Public Schools
Crookston Public School Dist.
Crosby-Ironton Public School Dist.
Dassel-Cokato Public School Dist.
Dawson-Boyd Public School Dist.
Dilworth-Glyndon-Felton
Dover-Eyota Public School Dist.
Eagle Valley Public School Dist.
East Central School Dist.
East Grand Forks Public School Dist.
Eden Prairie Public School Dist.
Edgerton Public School Dist.
Edina Public School Dist.
Fairmont Area School Dist.
Faribault Public School Dist.
Farmington Public School Dist.
Fertile-Beltrami School Dist.
Fillmore Central
Floodwood Public School Dist.
Foley Public School Dist.
Forest Lake Public School Dist.
Fridley Public School Dist.
G.F.W.
Glencoe-Silver Lake School Dist.
Goodhue Public School Dist.

Goodridge Public School Dist.
Granada Huntley-East Chain
Grand Meadow Public School Dist.
Grand Rapids Public School Dist.
Greenbush-Middle River School Dist.
Greenway Public School Dist.
Grygla Public School District
Hastings Public School Dist.
Hendricks School District
Henning Public School Dist.
Heron Lake-Okabena School Dist.
Hibbing Public School Dist.
Hill City Public School Dist.
Hills-Beaver Creek School Dist.
Holdingford Public School Dist.
Hopkins Public School Dist.
Ivanhoe Public School Dist.
Jackson County Central School Dist.
Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton
Kenyon-Wanamingo School Dist.
Kerkhoven-Murdock-Sunburg
Kimball Public School Dist.
Kingsland Public School Dist.
Lakeview School Dist.
Laporte Public School Dist.
Le Sueur-Henderson School Dist.
LeRoy-Ostrander Public Schools
Lester Prairie Public School Dist.
Litchfield Public School Dist.
Long Prairie-Grey Eagle School Dist
Lyle Public School Dist.
Lynd Public School District
M.A.C.C.R.A.Y. School Dist.
Mahnomon Public School Dist.
Maple Lake Public School Dist.
Marshall County Central Schools
Marshall Public School Dist.
Medford Public School Dist.
Mesabi East School Dist.
Minnetonka Public School Dist.
Minnewaska School Dist.
Monticello Public School Dist.
Mora Public School Dist.
Morris Area Public Schools
Mountain Iron-Buhl School Dist.
Nashwauk-Keewatin School Dist.
Nevis Public School Dist.
New London-Spicer School Dist.
New Prague Area Schools
New Ulm Public School Dist.
Nicollet Public School Dist.
Norman County East School Dist.
North Branch Public Schools
North St Paul-Maplewood School Dist
Ogilvie Public School Dist.
Onamia Public School Dist.

Osakis Public School Dist.
Park Rapids Public School Dist.
Parkers Prairie Public School Dist.
Pequot Lakes Public Schools
Pierz Public School Dist.
Pine Island Public School Dist.
Pipestone Area School Dist.
Plainview-Elgin-Millville
Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools
Proctor Public School Dist.
Randolph Public School Dist.
Red Rock Central School Dist.
Red Wing Public School Dist.
Renville County West School Dist.
Richfield Public School Dist.
Rocori Public School Dist.
Roseau Public School Dist.
Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan
Roseville Public School Dist.
Round Lake-Brewster Public Schools
Royalton Public School Dist.
Rush City Public School Dist.
RTR Public Schools
Sibley East School Dist.
Sleepy Eye Public School Dist.
South St. Paul Public School Dist.
South Washington County School Dist
Southland Public School Dist.
Springfield Public School Dist.
St. Anthony-New Brighton Schools
St. Charles Public School Dist.
St. Cloud Public School Dist.
St. Michael-Alberville School Dist
St. Paul Public School Dist.
Swanville Public School Dist.
Thief River Falls School Dist.
Tri-City United School Dist.
Triton School Dist.
Truman Public School Dist.
Ulen-Hitterdal Public School Dist
Underwood Public School Dist.
Virginia Public School Dist.
Wabasha-Kellogg Public School Dist.
Wabasso Public School Dist.
Waconia Public School Dist.
Warren-Alvarado-Oslo School Dist.
Warroad Public School Dist.
Westbrook-Walnut Grove Schools
Westonka Public School Dist.
Wheaton Area Public School Dist.
White Bear Lake School Dist.
Willmar Public School Dist.
Win-E-Mac School Dist.
Zumbrota-Mazeppa School Dist.
Sartell-St. Stephen School Dist.

The 98 districts listed below will **always** provide a full menu-of-the-day hot lunch to a reduced price eligible child even if the child cannot afford the 40 cent copay. (*Note: Nett Lake was listed in incorrectly in the original report, and the report has been updated to reflect that Nett Lake always feeds reduced price children without charge.*)

A.C.G.C. Public School Dist.
Adrian Public School Dist.
Albert Lea Public School Dist.
Alden-Conger Public School Dist.
Alexandria Public School Dist.
Anoka-Hennepin Public School Dist.
Belgrade-Brooten-Elrosa Public School Dist.
Bemidji Public School Dist.
Benson Public School Dist.
Bloomington Public School Dist.
Braham Public School Dist.
Brandon-Evansville Public Schools
Brooklyn Center School Dist.
Browerville Public School Dist.
Canby Public School Dist.
Cannon Falls Public School Dist.
Chokio-Alberta Public School Dist.
Clearbrook-Gonvick School Dist.
Climax-Shelly Public Schools
Columbia Heights Public School Dist.
Comfrey Public School Dist.
Cromwell-Wright Public Schools
Delano Public School Dist.
Duluth Public School Dist.
Eden Valley-Watkins School Dist.
Ellsworth Public School Dist.
Ely Public School Dist.
Esko Public School Dist.
Fosston Public School Dist.
Fulda Public School Dist.
Hancock Public School Dist.
Hawley Public School Dist.
Hayfield Public School Dist.
Hermantown Public School Dist.
Hinckley-Finlayson School Dist.
Isle Public School Dist.
Jordan Public School Dist.
Kelliher Public School Dist.
Kittson Central School District
Lake Benton Public School Dist.
Lake City Public School Dist.
Lake Park Audubon School Dist.
Lake Superior Public School Dist.
Lancaster Public School Dist.
Lewiston-Altura Public School Dist.
Little Falls Public School Dist.
Littlefork-Big Falls School Dist.
Luverne Public School Dist.
Mabel-Canton Public School Dist.

Madelia Public School Dist.
Mankato Public School Dist.
Maple River Public Schools
McGregor Public School Dist.
Menahga Public School Dist.
Milaca Public School Dist.
Minneapolis Public School Dist.
Mounds View Public School Dist.
Murray County Central School Dist.
Nett Lake Public School Dist.
New York Mills Public School Dist.
Norman County West School Dist.
Northfield Public School Dist.
Northland Community Schools
NRHEG School Dist.
Orono Public School Dist.
Paynesville Public School Dist.
Pelican Rapids Public School Dist.
Perham-Dent Public School Dist.
Pine Point Public School Dist.
Princeton Public School Dist.
Red Lake County Central Public Schools
Red Lake Falls Public School Dist.
Red Lake Public School Dist.
Robbinsdale Public School Dist.
Rochester Public School Dist.
Rockford Public School Dist.
Rothsay Public School Dist.
Rushford-Peterson Public Schools
Shakopee Public School Dist.
Spring Grove School Dist.
Spring Lake Park Public Schools
St. Louis Park Public School Dist.
St. Peter Public School Dist.
Staples-Motley School Dist.
Stephen-Argyle Central Schools
Stewartville Public School Dist.
Tri-County School Dist.
United South Central School Dist.
Verndale Public School Dist.
Walker-Hackensack-Akeley Schl. Dist.
Waterville-Elysian-Morristown Public School Dist.
Waubun-Ogema-White Earth Public Schools
Wayzata Public School Dist.
West Central Area
Winona Area Public School Dist.
Worthington Public School Dist.
Yellow Medicine East