

Utah District Hears Why School Lunches Were Seized

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Up to 40 students with overdue food accounts had their school lunches taken away last week because of breakdowns in communication over a new payment system, according to a preliminary report presented to the Salt Lake City School District board Tuesday night.

Board members heard from Kelly Orton, district child nutrition department director, about why 30 to 40 children at Uintah Elementary who were trying to buy lunch had their meals thrown away in an incident that angered parents, stirred outrage around the country and prompted the district to put two employees on leave, [The Salt Lake Tribune](#) [1] reported. School officials apologized and launched an investigation into how far the problem reached.

Several dozen parents attended the meeting, and some said the report was vague and the workers put on leave were being blamed.

The children who had their \$2 meals thrown out were given milk and fruit, a standard practice when students don't have lunch money. The report didn't indicate whose decision it was to toss the lunches.

The report says the meals were seized because nutrition department policies weren't followed, some parents weren't told about overdrawn meal accounts, they weren't given enough time to pay balances and the school principal wasn't included in decision making.

Under board member questioning, Orton said his department didn't properly tell parents about a new electronic payment system and promised efforts so meals aren't tossed again. He said the investigation was ongoing and his report wasn't definitive.

Many parents weren't aware of the system swap that makes it harder to set up email alerts about balances, he said, whereas the old system automatically sent out messages. He says the new system is more cost efficient and processes payments quicker.

But Orton said the department "did fail in getting information out effectively."

The report gave general fixes for avoiding a similar incident in the future. Orton said meals won't ever be taken away from kids, department policies would be followed, parents will be notified of low balances and students can go into the red for a week and still receive meals.

Some parents urged district leaders to hold Orton and his staff accountable. The

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school cafeteria manager and a district supervisor were placed on paid leave as the investigation got underway last week.

"The lunchroom staff should not be held accountable for the policies implemented by their supervisors," said Lynn Lonardo, who said her daughter's lunch was confiscated last week.

But Heather Bennett, board vice president, said the move wasn't disciplinary. District Superintendent McKell Withers said the leave is typical during investigations and was meant to protect them from threats. Police investigated several threatening phone calls made to the school following the incident, but determined they were not credible, Salt Lake City School District spokesman Jason Olsen said. School officials cited privacy concerns in not identifying the two workers on leave.

Bennett and other board members said they were as upset as the parents who attended the meeting.

"We share your real horror at the specific happening that's brought us here," she said.

Some parents weren't assuaged by the report, saying it was still unclear what the payment system's problems were and who was responsible for taking away the lunches.

"It was never answered who decided this," said parent Sarah Turley, who said her child had her lunch tossed. "That accountability and responsibility has never been answered."

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