



Case Study: School District Taps Mass Notification System to Collect Unpaid Lunch Balances

Unpaid lunch program balances are one of the most frustrating financial problems K-12 school districts struggle with today. The federal government funds free lunch programs for families who qualify. It also requires schools and districts to craft policies that provide healthy lunches to children when their accounts run in the red.

Schools and districts must recoup the costs of these meals on their own, but those efforts are too often unsuccessful. According to the School Nutrition Association, 75 percent of all districts have accumulated debt due to unpaid meal bills, and that debt only continues to grow.¹

In addition to expanding deficits, unpaid lunch balances burden schools and districts with labor costs. Program staff have resorted to calling parents, an often fruitless pursuit. And notifying students, in person at mealtime, is just as futile and often embarrassing.

Another equally labor-intensive and ineffective option involves writing personalized letters to parents. In some

cases, the staff member doesn't realize that their recipients don't speak English, resulting in another missed opportunity.

A Large, Bay Area School District Finds the Answer in Technology

In the East Bay region of the San Francisco Bay in California, the Hayward district food service provides daily meals to more than 20,000 students at 31 schools. Like most districts, Hayward continually contends with unpaid meal balances.

Lunch program staff regularly contacted parents with unpaid bills. Methods were manual, including making phone calls and mailing letters. These inefficient processes

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resulted in thousands of dollars in labor costs, with thousands more lost due to unpaid balances.

Lunch program staff tried handing students notes to give to their parents, but it was unclear whether those messages ever reached their intended audience. Students often forgot to pass these messages to their parents, and staff were concerned that discussing unpaid bills in front of a student's peers could bring shame and humiliation.

"There had to be another way to do it," said a staff member with the Hayward district's food service. In 2016, the district evaluated critical communications systems to interact more effectively with parents.

Their requirements included the ability to integrate with the district's lunch billing and payment app, Nutrikids, and the capability to translate messages into Spanish. (Sixty-five percent of the district's students are Hispanic or Latino.)

The district chose One Call Now®, the mass notification system (MNS) from OnSolve®. They set up queries to extract contact information for families with unpaid balances from the lunch billing and payment database. One Call Now filled in students' names and balances and then automatically called and emailed the selected contacts. (One Call Now also sends alerts and notifications via SMS text.)

Additionally, they took a proactive approach by sending friendly reminders to parents when balances were running low or a payment date was upcoming soon. A district staff member estimated that the system automates and targets 1,100 notifications to parents every two weeks. This enables school staff to focus on other pressing responsibilities and saves thousands in labor, printing and mailing costs, not to mention the greater percentage of paid meal payments recouped.

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Are you looking for a more efficient way to collect your meal program's unpaid balances and communicate more effectively with parents and families?

With One Call Now, you can automate personalized reminders and collection notices to parents via SMS text, voice and email in 50 languages. To learn more, **visit [OnSolve.com/k-12](https://onsolve.com/k-12)**.

¹<https://schoolnutrition.org/aboutschoolmeals/schoolmealtrendsstats/>