

More Than Peanut Butter and Jelly

Should districts “punish” students for their parents’ unpaid bills?

By Robert Ruder, Ed.D.

In the realm of public education, flying below the radar as it relates to negative publicity is usually considered a good thing. Yet despite the efforts of public relations spokespeople whose job is to disseminate information and to answer questions from the media, a blip sometimes appears on the screen.

In one small town, the blip presented itself as a headline in the local newspaper that read, “School Board Pulls PB&J Policy for Lunch Bill Scofflaws from Agenda.” In an era when funding for public education is being slashed, school administrators are being held to a redefined level of fiscal scrutiny. In reality, the PB&J headline was a spin-off of the real issue the district was facing: an outstanding debt of \$10,000 owed by parents who were delinquent in paying for their children’s lunches.

In an attempt to recoup the funds at the start of the new school year, and as recommended by the school district’s outsourced food service provider, the school board considered providing students of parents who had an outstanding lunch debt of \$15, and who arrived at the schoolhouse door without funds to purchase lunch, a peanut butter and jelly or cheese sandwich along with a fruit and a drink.

Once the print media caught wind of the suggested policy, the PB&J item was removed from an upcoming board agenda. Although the rationale for the removal was

not shared, I hazard a guess that the district administration’s wisdom prevailed to explore other viable options to recover the funds without negatively affecting the students.

In addition to a barrage of comments on social media, some members of the community chose to use the opportunity to share their feelings in a public forum that accompanied the posting of the article on the newspaper’s website. An examination of the comments revealed layers of misinformation and speculation related to the school district’s decision. The so-called scofflaws were also bombarded with frivolous and hurtful name-calling and labeled as low-income, lazy, or both.

Begging the Question—and Some Answers

As the district prepares to do internal and external damage control, that sad and unnecessary exposé is rich in questions to be asked and lessons to be learned.

Most glaring of all the questions is, how could a school district with a student population of 1,535 accrue a deficit of \$10,000 during the previous school year and allow that debt to go unnoticed? Adding more intensity to that already-perplexing question is the supposition that students would be penalized for the previous year’s sins of their parents.

Perhaps most damaging are the public declarations by community members that low-income parents are lazy,



which further polarizes the district's students and parents on a socioeconomic level.

Dick Learn, a former chief financial officer of a number of public school districts in Pennsylvania, likens this scenario to one where district officials are "trying to lock the barn after the horse is stolen" and stresses the need to have proper policies and accounting procedures in place so that such situations do not occur.

Learn adds that in his more than 40 years of experience in school business administration, he has heard of food service programs getting into financial difficulty but has never known of those organizations having to deal with such matters *ex post facto*. He shares: "School food services programs are entrepreneurial from the standpoint of generally accepted accounting practices (GAAP) for schools, but a school administrator has to be responsible for regularly 'looking at the books' to ascertain that all is well. When school food service programs contract with a third-party vendor, it can become a situation of out of sight, out of mind."

To move forward in a manner that addresses the outstanding debt yet allows students and their parents to begin the school year on a solid footing requires some creative problem solving. Addressing the debt in a way that causes no further harm to the students, their parents, or the district is a good starting point. Rather than turn over the names of the parents with delinquent accounts to a collection agency, which will reduce the amount of money actually recovered, the district may consider offering parents one of these options:

- Declare an amnesty day when all or a portion of the debt can be paid.
- Create payment plans for those who face financial challenges but who want to restore positive standing within the district.



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- Offer an opportunity to provide volunteer service to the school district in exchange for debt forgiveness.
- Allow those with debt the opportunity to determine and suggest a manner in which to address the debt within a reasonable established time frame.

As the previous year's debt is being satisfied, school officials need to generate internal auditing procedures or policies that will prevent recurring debt accumulation related to school lunches. Once in place, those guidelines will eliminate or reduce subsequent missteps that are equally problematic for parents and school officials. Food service-related policies, like all other district policies, must be included in all district publications, in back-to-school letters to parents, and on the district's Website.

Reaching Out

In a parallel effort, school officials should reach into the community and encourage parents who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals to

process the necessary paperwork in a timely manner in order to receive those services. Once again, creativity is essential in fabricating action plans for making parents aware of existing programs. Beyond the school district's initiatives, community social service agencies and faith-based organizations can be valuable centers of information and assistance to members of the community.

It's also important for a district staff member to regularly monitor and share with district leaders what is being posted on social and news media outlets regarding the school district. The ramblings and ranting of naysayers who may have no relationship with a school district may well have the power to destroy or disturb a school district's educational programs and to create an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion with a few inflammatory, nonfactual keystrokes.

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