

Parents fear district is setting up scapegoats in lunch fiasco

Education • Parents are skeptical about employees placed on leave, want personal apologies to kids.

BY LISA SCHENCKER AND KIRSTEN STEWART | THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

PUBLISHED: JANUARY 31, 2014 10:00PM

UPDATED: JANUARY 31, 2014 10:37PM

Salt Lake City School District officials have publicly apologized and put two employees on paid leave as they investigate what led to dozens of children having their lunches taken away at school earlier this week.

But parents question the district's response, fearing employees are being made scapegoats for a practice promoted by the district.

"Our kids deserve the truth and an apology, a personal apology from the district employee responsible," said Kevin Conway, whose daughter, a third-grader, was among those denied lunch Tuesday.

Uintah mother Vanessa May, whose daughter's food was also confiscated, said the school shouldn't have been allowed to "humiliate the children like that."

"The children who got their lunches taken away deserve an apology from the school," May said Friday, "not just in the media."

Up to 40 kids at Uintah Elementary on the city's east bench picked up their lunches only to have them taken and thrown away because of past-due balances on their meal accounts. Instead, they were given snacks of milk and fruit. The seizures have sparked parent outrage, a social media storm and reactions ranging from death threats to donation offers.

On Wednesday, district spokesman Jason Olsen said a district child-nutrition manager decided to take the lunches away from the kids. The lunches then had to be thrown away because they couldn't be given to other pupils once they had been served. He has since said the district is investigating exactly who made that decision. The district is also investigating whether the practice — requiring children to pick up lunches, then publicly lose them when a debt is revealed by a computer at checkout — has been occurring at any other district schools. District Superintendent McKell Withers said Thursday the children's lunches should never have been confiscated.

Neighboring districts say they identify students with debts before kids enter the lunchroom and provide them alternative snacks when they arrive.

The Uintah school cafeteria manager, a school-level employee, and her supervisor, a district-level employee, are now on paid leave, Olsen said. He said Friday he could not comment on whether the workers being placed on leave was any indication of wrongdoing or not on their parts because that's a personnel issue.

"It feels like a cover-your-a--kind of thing," Conway said. "We're adults. When our kids make a mistake, we expect them to say sorry. Here these authority figures have an opportunity to learn from their mistake, to teach by example, and they're not."

Conway defended Uintah's lunch manager, an hourly worker who some say was ordered to take the lunches.

"She was crying. She didn't want to do this. Someone was standing at the cash register ordering it," he said, sharing his daughter's account.

Uintah mother Jennifer Pia also defended the cafeteria manager, saying it seems like she's "just been a scapegoat." Pia's kids brought their lunches Tuesday, but Pia later discovered their accounts were in the negative, and they could have easily have been among those whose lunches were taken.

"I don't think she should be put on leave," Pia said, "but I think whoever ordered that to happen should be fired."

Parents are being told she was suspended for her safety, Conway said, "but I think that's a little suspect."

Uintah's PTA president, Kim Van Wagoner, also said she stands behind the school's cafeteria workers.

"This was a horrible mistake, and it was made by the district and not Uintah," Van Wagoner said. "It wasn't our school



Al Hartmann | The Salt Lake Tribune Jason Olsen, Salt Lake City School District spokesman, talks to reporters outside Uintah Elementary School. Olsen

administrators that did it or our school-lunch workers. The whole incident was as much of a surprise to them as our students.”

To piece together exactly what happened Tuesday, parents have had to rely on accounts from young children and teachers.

“I got a call from my daughter during the lunch hour. She was crying and saying, ‘They won’t let me eat lunch,’ ” said Conway, who was nowhere near school or a computer to load her lunch card with money.

“I asked her to put her teacher on the phone. [The teacher] told me, ‘This is happening to a lot of kids today,’ and said she would go to the lunchroom and take care of it,” Conway said. “But when my daughter came home, she said she was given an orange and milk and that a friend had given her some potato chips.”

Conway acknowledges, “I should have been checking my daughter’s balance.” But he said he had never received a past-due notice from school.

“The school has three phone numbers for me and three email addresses. But how did I hear I had a negative \$4 balance? From my daughter calling me and crying,” he said. “Everyone is culpable here except the kids.”

The district moved this year to a new online-payment system. Conway wants to know why and who might have benefited from the switch.

“Last year I’d get an alert every time my account had less than \$20 in it,” he said. “This year we’ve received no notices, no notes home.”

Pia said she realized her account was in the negative only after she checked it this week in the wake of the uproar. She said the old system sent emails when her balance was low, and she didn’t realize a new system was in place until now.

May said she did receive a call Monday, notifying her that her daughter’s account was negative. But then her daughter’s food was taken Tuesday, leaving her little time to put more money in the account.

Olsen has said the district is now investigating its notification procedures.

Denise Capek, who has children at the school in second grade and kindergarten, said those who made the decision should be held accountable. Her daughter was absent Tuesday and her son packs a lunch.

Parents said they sympathize with all that public schools have to manage, but say the district’s payment system is inadequate and its policy of denying kids full lunches is reprehensible.

“Hopefully something will change,” said Claire Francis, noting her now-teenage son was once denied lunch while at Ensign Elementary. “But I’m concerned that Uintah is getting all this attention when there are kids in other parts of the district who have serious food security issues. It’s frustrating it takes that kind of privilege and power for the district to finally wake up to something that other schools have dealt with for years.”

People nationwide have been offering to donate money to the school and the parents affected. Van Wagoner said Friday she appreciates the outpouring of support. But she urged people to give to their local schools instead. The PTA at Uintah, which is not in a low-income area, has put money into an account to prevent kids being denied lunches in the future, she said.

She also wants everyone to know that Uintah is a great school, and hopes the threats and anger toward school workers stops. “None of this is being directed at the right party,” she said, arguing that the district is responsible, not the school.

Van Wagoner said she’s been surprised at the huge reaction. At least, she said, it will ensure nothing similar ever happens again.

“It will definitely make a change,” she said.