

# Report exposes denial of school lunches to children in Minnesota

Mike Stapleton  
28 February 2014

More than half of the school districts in Minnesota either deny or limit access to hot lunches for children with insufficient funds, according to a recent report from Mid Minnesota Legal Aid.

The report, “It’s Not Just Utah: Minnesota Lunchrooms Also Refuse Hot Lunch to Children,” refers to a nationally publicized news story last month exposing the snatching away of lunches from dozens of children at a Utah elementary school because of negative account balances. The Minnesota report demonstrates how widespread the practice exposed in Utah is.

Of the 340 public school districts in Minnesota, 309 responded to Legal Aid’s request in 2013 for data about their school lunch policies for children who cannot pay. Forty six, or 15 percent of the districts responding, reported that they immediately or eventually refuse to serve hot lunch or any alternative meal to a child who cannot pay.

Some districts turn away kids of all ages, while others only turn away middle or high school students. Some admitted to pulling the trays from students and dumping the food into the trash in front of them. One of the districts stated that its tray-pulling policy was a way of teaching accountability and responsibility.

One-hundred sixty-five districts, or 53 percent of those responding, offered an alternative meal, which was typically a cheese or peanut butter sandwich and milk. Some of the districts served butter sandwiches. The Legal Aid report noted, “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.”

Ninety eight districts, or 32 percent of those responding, always provide a hot lunch, even if the

child cannot pay. One school district told Legal Aid that “providing alternative meals and turning away children [was] ‘unconscionable bullying’,” and several others noted “that a healthy school lunch may be the only meal the child eats for the remainder of the day.” The latter point carries all the more significance since President Obama signed a bill on February 7 cutting \$8.7 billion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps.

Legal Aid also revealed some disturbing collection methods. Schools districts reported using a variety of methods to get lunch money from parents, some of which involved contacting social workers and threatening legal action. The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* reported that at the Marshall Public Schools students with negative accounts will continue to receive cheese sandwiches, “but their parents may be referred to a collection agency and social services ‘for possible neglect’.”

School officials across the state have been put on the defensive by the Legal Aid report. After Willmar Public School officials denied taking food away from students in the local newspaper, a high school student responded with a letter to the *West Central Tribune* stating that, just the day before the story, she had paid for a fellow student’s lunch that had been taken away. Maddie Stenglein wrote, “It was unfair for [the school] to do that to him. It embarrassed him in front of our class. I have seen this happen many times, but I had to stand up this time because I felt embarrassed for him.”

The real responsibility for such incidents lies not with lunch workers, but with the ruling class and the political establishment, which has ruthlessly slashed education and social spending. Since 2008, an estimated 294,000 jobs have been lost in education. More cuts are expected. Schools across the nation have

cut programs, implemented fees for extra-curricular activities and/or reduced the number of school days. Many schools have closed, including 50 in Chicago alone last year.

In Minnesota, both legislative houses are controlled by the Democratic Farmer Labor Party, and the governor, Mark Dayton, is also a member of the DFL. During its last session, the legislature considered expanding the free lunch program to all students who now receive a reduced-price lunch based on their family's income. The estimated cost of the proposal was \$3.35 million, but the move was rejected on the basis of the lie that there is no money to provide food to hungry working class youth.

In contrast, in 2012, the legislature allocated \$348 million of the state's resources, and an additional \$678 million over a 30 year period of the City of Minneapolis' resources, to build a football stadium for the Minnesota Vikings. The owner of the Vikings, Zygi Wilf, has an estimated net worth of \$1.3 billion.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**