

# Pennsylvania school threatens children with foster care for school lunch debt

**Our reporter**  
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A school district in northeastern Pennsylvania has threatened to put in foster care the children of parents who fail to pay school lunch debt.

This month letters went out to about 40 families of the Wyoming Valley West School District, located in the Scranton and Wilkes-Barre metropolitan area, an economically depressed region that was once the center of the anthracite coal industry. The district, which includes 5,000 students at seven schools, is among the poorest in the state on a per-student funding basis.

Some of the families threatened by the district with break-up owe as little as \$10, and, in total, the school district is owed about \$22,000. By way of comparison, it costs the US Air Force about \$22,000 to operate one F-16 fighter jet for one hour, and Jeff Bezos, the world's richest man, pockets about the same amount every 8 seconds.

The letter, signed by Joseph Muth, director of the district's federal programs stated: "Your child has been sent to school every day without money and without a breakfast and/or lunch. This is a failure to provide your child with proper nutrition and you can be sent to Dependency Court for neglecting your child's right to food. If you are taken to Dependency court, the result may be your child being removed from your home and placed in foster care."

There has been a strong reaction against the letter. Thousands of comments on national media reports express outrage at the threat to take children from parents for petty debts owed for feeding hungry children. "Reminds me of the story of 'Les Misérables' where thieves of loafs of bread are arrested and debtors are thrown in debtors' prison," read one comment on a *Washington Post* article. "Is this how American is made great again?"

The threat was also rejected out of hand by Luzerne

County child protective services authorities after parents called to express their anger. "Taking a kid out of a house is one of the most extreme things that a foster care system has ever tried to do," said county official C. David Pedri. "So you don't do it lightly. We would never take a kid out of a house for failing to pay a school lunch bill."

The menacing letter sent to families in the Wyoming Valley West School District is part of a disturbing trend in which children of working-class families are threatened and shamed on orders of school district officials.

In recent years, children in Arizona have been marked with ink stamps for school lunch debt. Other students are denied hot lunches, and instead are offered separate lunches of cheap sandwiches. Some children have even had their lunches taken from them and dumped in trash bins.

Last year in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, seventh grader Caitlin Dolan had her tray of pizza removed from her hands and dumped in the trash in front of her peers. "I was so embarrassed," Caitlin said. "It's really weird being denied food in front of everyone. They all talk about you."

For many American children, school lunch is the only square meal they may get in the course of a day. Some 30 million US public school students qualify for reduced price or free school lunches, and another 14 million have assistance for breakfast. According to the charity NoKidHungry, one in six American children suffers from hunger.



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