An Analysis of Lunch Shaming in Indiana and Proposed Solutions

This report provides an analysis of lunch shaming—its causes and prevalence in Indiana—and proposes solutions at the local and state level. We used publicly available data from the Indiana Department of Education (“IDOE”) website and questionnaire feedback from 197 of the 290 Indiana public school corporations. Additionally, we analyzed 61 unpaid meal charge policies for compliance with the United States Department of Agriculture (“USDA”) and IDOE guidelines. Further, analysis presents a clearer picture of the wider scope of school corporations’ administrative responses when a child cannot pay for a meal.

Data provided throughout the report and illustrated in graphs and tables included shows that the balance of school lunch funds ranges from millions of dollars in debt to millions of dollars in surplus. However, the overall financial health of the school lunch funds did not correlate to the amount of unpaid meal charges. Further, analysis of the unpaid meal charge policies shows that: many were challenging to find; some were nonpublic; several attempt to provide alternative meals; and younger students are treated differently than older students. Last, the policies leave unclear what happens to a student once he or she exhausts the number of allotted alternative meals.

The report suggests many schools use lunch shaming of students as a tactic to pressure parents to quickly respond and pay a meal charge debt. This technique seems to be a cheap, thoughtless, and ineffective solution crafted by school corporations to comply with strict restrictions and regulations imposed by Indiana statutes and federal rules. Further, while we know—from newspapers and social media—lunch shaming occurs in Indiana, the scope of the problem is difficult to measure because the IDOE does not collect information about unpaid meal charge debt. Finally, while unpaid meal charge policies are a good idea, in practice it is unclear how these published policies have reduced incidents of lunch shaming. Many of the policies are identical, and it does not appear that parents provided input into the drafting of these policies, as suggested by the USDA.

The report contains the following recommendations:

- Proposed legislation to prohibit lunch shaming and eradicate incentives to lunch shame;
- Proposed direct action campaign for parents to address the problem at their local schools;
- Improved data collection by the IDOE to fully understand the scope of lunch shaming; and
- Improved unpaid meal charge policies for each school by improving the accessibility and clarity of each policy.

The report is not without limitations. These include: availability of data, other academic and professional responsibilities, and our relatively new engagement in this area of law. However, we are enthusiastic about this issue and appreciate the collective effort goal: to cease lunch shaming. School corporations are invested in the health, safety, and wellness of each student they serve. Many school corporations achieve this
mission on a shoestring budget. Additionally, most parents desire to protect their children. Together, we can reduce or eliminate lunch shaming of Hoosier kids.