

School lunch debt: Donors pay so students get more than a cheese sandwich



Students at Hickory Hills Elementary School in Marietta, Georgia, enjoy their lunch on Tuesday, Jan. 21, 2020. Many children in Georgia still cannot afford the standard lunch and either accrue lunch debt or are fed an alternate meal.

By [Ty Tagami](#)

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Georgia's strong economy has led to an unlikely outcome in Marietta, where more schools are grappling with unpaid lunch bills.

Record unemployment and higher wages have reduced the number of students who qualify for free or discounted meals in Marietta and led to the end of a program that provided free lunch for all students at some schools, but most families still don't earn enough to pay without government help.

The resulting student meal debt triggered a wave of giving that has satisfied the charges, for now.

"If your stomach is growling, the last thing you're going to worry about is what the teacher is saying," said Tre Binner, general manager of SA Recycling, explaining why his company gave over \$2,000 to help with the debt.

Student hunger is a perennial problem, made worse for some by a stronger economy. That, plus growing public awareness, is causing donors like Binner's company to step forward and pay off school meal debt across metro Atlanta.



A student at Hickory Hills Elementary School in Marietta eats lunch on Jan. 21, 2020. All students at the school used to get free meals, but declining poverty rates led the school system to exit the U.S. Department of Agriculture program. Still, about 69% of students there — 60% in the district as a whole — are entitled to a free or reduced-price meal if their parents fill out the paperwork, though that doesn't always happen. Students who accrue too much debt are fed an alternate lunch with a cheese sandwich.

In Buford last fall, [a roofing company gave \\$1,800](#) to pay balances at three schools. Around the same time, [a tattoo shop](#) on the Georgia coast helped schools in Camden County. In 2017, a couple set up a GoFundMe campaign that [raised \\$1,400](#) for the schools in Cherokee County. Late last year, a new group there, this time on Facebook, raised another \$2,500, according to the district.

The generosity is driven at least in part by social media and may be a reaction to anecdotes about high-pressure tactics schools have used to collect debt.

In northeastern Pennsylvania, a school district threatened court action against parents that [could have landed students with meal debt in foster care](#). A school board in New Jersey passed a rule prohibiting students who owed \$75 or more [from attending prom](#). Chobani, the yogurt company, paid debt in a Rhode Island school district so students wouldn't have to eat a cold sandwich. "The last thing that kids should worry about today is if there's a warm lunch for them at school," the company said at the time.

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Cheese or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches are commonly served to students with excessive meal debt. Such cheaper, "alternate" meals — Marietta serves cheese sandwiches with milk or juice — replace hot lunches. Districts do this to save money. Nutrition programs try to break even, since any debt they can't cover with donations must come out of the general fund, taking money from classrooms. Critics say some students would rather be hungry than face the shame of taking an alternate lunch, though, and some districts are rethinking such practices as public awareness grows.

1 in 5 go hungry

Hunger undermines the central mission of schools. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that](#) students in the U.S. Department of Agriculture school breakfast program tended to have better grades and test scores, fewer absences and improved memory.

"I don't think there's much dispute about the importance of good nutrition," said Jean Welsh, an associate professor of pediatrics at Emory University School of Medicine. "Problem solving goes down when people are hungry."

[More than half a million](#) Georgia children suffer from "food insecurity," according to a 2018 bulletin by the advocacy group Voices for Georgia's Children. In 2017, [about 1 in 5 children in Georgia](#) had limited or uncertain access to adequate food, according to the group Feeding America, which said [the national rate](#) was slightly lower.

The district says 41% of its students qualify for free or reduced lunches. At Pebblebrook, the principal told Jose that number is at about 80%.

Child advocates and educators say some children get their only meals at school, yet many from households poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-priced breakfasts and lunches may not be getting fed. One problem may be rising rents. Displaced families often switch schools as they bounce from one rental to the next, causing a lag in applications for subsidies. Each transfer can expose a child's records

to data entry errors and can cause overwhelmed parents, many who lack transportation or an internet connection, to fail to register in a timely manner. Also, as pay rises, some no longer qualify for free meals because they earn just a bit too much, even if it's not enough to get by. "If you have a system that doesn't offer free meals to all kids, you're going to have families that fall behind," said Crystal FitzSimons, a director with the Food Research & Action Center in Washington, D.C.



Students at Hickory Hills Elementary School in Marietta, Georgia, enjoy their lunch on Tuesday, Jan. 21, 2020. Many children in Georgia still cannot afford the standard lunch and either accrue lunch debt or are fed an alternate meal. (Universal meal programs like the one Marietta just exited were intended to avoid such problems, by allowing all students no matter their family income or poverty level to receive free meals. But they become harder for schools to afford when fewer households are documented as low-income. The federal government reimburses schools based on the proportion of students who qualify for a meal subsidy; when the rate drops, schools get less money yet must somehow feed the same number of students.

Until last fall, five of Marietta's dozen schools were in a universal free meal program. The USDA program, which dates to 1980, requires districts to check on parental income every four years instead of requiring each parent to apply when enrolling their child in school.

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In recent checks, the percentage of qualifying students at those five elementary schools had fallen below 60%, though, and the district calculated that it was no longer going to get enough of a subsidy to feed all the students. "It means that we're still going to have to cover 40% of those meals while not receiving any money back," district nutrition director Cindy Culver said. "We're not going to make money, but I really have to cover my costs."

The students among the 60% can still get a subsidized meal if their parents fill out the paperwork through the USDA's regular full- and reduced-price program. The rest must now pay full price.



A student punches in their student ID before getting lunch at Hickory Hills Elementary School in Marietta, Georgia, enjoy their lunch on Tuesday, Jan. 21, 2020. Many children in Georgia still cannot afford the standard lunch and either accrue lunch debt or are fed an alternate meal.

Changing demographics are not the only problem for lunch programs.

“I think part of the challenge is the cost of food,” said Linette Dodson, the nutrition director for the Georgia Department of Education. “Food costs and labor costs continue to increase.”

It now costs schools in Georgia an average of \$3.81 to cook a lunch, she said. That is 40 cents above the federal subsidy for a free lunch.

Free meals or the alternative

Despite the financial challenge, Georgia in the last school year registered [80% of eligible schools](#) in another universal free meal program known as "[Community Eligibility](#)," according to the Food Research & Action Center; that was above the national average of 65%. This newer USDA program, like the older one that was used in Marietta, helps with the cost of feeding all students in participating schools, with the amount of the subsidy tied to the number of students from low-income households.

Clayton County was among the earliest adopters when the program reached Georgia a few years after it was established in 2010. As the Great Recession tore through the county, meal debt rose, from about \$40,000 in 2011 to more than \$90,000 in 2013, said Audrey Hamilton, the district nutritionist. Back then, the district was giving children who couldn't pay for lunch a cheese or peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a salad, she said. “It didn't meet the requirement for a reimbursable meal, but it did get the students through the day.”



Students line up for lunch in the cafeteria at Elite Scholars Academy in Jonesboro on Jan. 17, 2020. Meals are free for all students in the Clayton County schools. High poverty made the decision to enroll in that universal free lunch program an easy one, Hamilton said. With 93% of students still qualified for reimbursable meals this year, it remains a financially attractive program for Clayton. School districts can enroll all or some of their schools, and those with the highest poverty are most likely to go districtwide. Atlanta Public Schools just got [all of its schools enrolled](#) last year, including those in wealthier areas such as Buckhead. Districts with smaller percentages of eligible students, such as DeKalb and Fulton counties, provide universal free meals at only some schools. Those with even less poverty, such as Gwinnett and Cobb counties — and now Marietta — do not participate in universal free meal programs. Some wealthier districts are rethinking how they handle meal debt. In May, City Schools of Decatur sent an email to parents saying students who owed more than \$10 would get [a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with milk](#) until the balance was paid, according to local news website Decaturish, but Superintendent David Dude quickly reversed direction, saying he didn't believe the alternative lunch practice was "consistent with the values" of Decatur.

All children now get the same lunch, regardless of debt. The district, which has one of the lowest poverty rates in the state and has no school that would qualify for universal free meals, appealed to donors and tried harder to reach parents who hadn't filed applications for a subsidized meal, said Noel Maloof, the district operations chief. Remaining debt gets paid out of the district's general fund. Cobb officials said none of their schools have enough poverty to qualify either, but said all students who want a hot meal get one. They said debt accrues because many parents, including those transferring children into the district, fail to immediately apply for free meals. Donations covered only a small percentage of the debt last year. The [district meal policy](#) says students with too much debt will be given a "Student Success Meal." Cobb nutrition director Emily Hanlin said that is not a cold sandwich.



Eighth graders Madison Tetteh, 13, and Destiny Hill, 14, eat lunch in the cafeteria at Elite Scholars Academy in Jonesboro, 2020.

"There are some districts in the United States and Georgia who limit how many times students can charge before they get things called alternate meals, we do not do that," she said in a written statement. "We continue to give our kids hot meals

so we can take care of them.” The district said the decision was a “value statement.”

Marietta’s recent debt has been erased by generous donors who’ve given in amounts ranging from \$5 to more than \$3,000.

Binner’s recycling company was among the biggest donors. He doesn’t live in Marietta but his employees do and his wife is a kindergarten teacher there. He was moved to help with the lunch debt when she told him that the universal meal program had ended and that kids who owed money would be served the alternate meal.

“If they don’t have money, they eat a piece of bread with some cheese on it, and that just kills me,” Binner said. “I feel like our prisoners eat better than our kids.”

Federally subsidized meals

The [Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act](#) was established in 1946. Named after a former Georgia governor and U.S. senator, it provides for free or reduced-price school meals for students from low-income households.

Households earning up to 130% of the federal poverty line (\$33,475 for a family of four) are eligible for free meals. Those earning up to 185% (\$47,638 for four) can get reduced-price meals.

Here are the rates of students eligible for free and discounted meals for select metro Atlanta districts:

Clayton County: 92.98%

Atlanta Public Schools: 78.2%

DeKalb County: 73.1%

Marietta City: 60.1%

Gwinnett County: 52.2%

Fulton County: 44.4%

Cobb County: 40.7%

Buford City: 34.2%

Cherokee County: 29.5%

City Schools of Decatur: 10.8%

Source: [Federal Register](#) (income levels) and [Georgia Department of Education](#) (eligibility rates).

Meal debt policies

Atlanta Public Schools: free for all students

Clayton County: free for all students

Cobb County: students served a "success meal" after accruing an unpaid balance of \$7.05 (elementary school), \$5.20 (middle school) or \$2 (high school)

DeKalb County: elementary school students can charge up to three breakfasts and three lunches, but middle and high school students cannot; however, all students at 60 of the district's schools get free meals

Fulton County: students served a "designated menu alternate" if they cannot pay, except for elementary school students, who can charge breakfast and lunch up to three days; however, all students at 27 of the district's schools get free meals

Gwinnett County: students served a "designated alternate meal" after accruing an unpaid balance of \$11.25 (elementary school), \$12 (middle school) or \$4 (high school)

Marietta City: high school students served an "alternate meal" if they cannot pay; younger students served that meal after accruing an unpaid balance of \$7.35 (preschool and elementary school) or \$7.65 (middle school)

Lunch prices

(Students qualifying for reduced-price meals pay 40 cents, and breakfast prices are typically lower.)

Atlanta Public Schools: free for all students

Clayton County: free for all students

Cobb County: \$2.35 (elementary school), \$2.60 (middle and high schools)

DeKalb County: \$2.70 (elementary school), \$2.85 (middle school and high schools); free for all at 60 schools

Fulton County: \$2.45 (elementary school), \$2.70 (middle and high schools); free for all at 27 schools

Gwinnett County: \$2.25 (elementary school), \$2.50 (middle and high schools)

Marietta City: \$2.45 (elementary school), \$2.55 (sixth grade academy and middle school) and \$2.65 (high school)