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The Record: A free lunch

THE RECORD

THERE ARE irresponsible people everywhere. If you're looking, you'll soon find adults who fail to fulfill the basic duties that the civilized among us take for granted, who refuse to consider their actions or the consequences borne by their fellow man.

These sorts of reckless folks are few and far between. In a horrific stroke of bad luck for the children of Passaic, there's a quorum serving on the local Board of Education. And they have voted to do the unthinkable: withhold food from children whose parents have neglected to keep up with cafeteria bills.

Starting this month, a punishing new policy prohibits cafeteria workers from serving food to children whose parents owe \$50 or more, Staff Writer Alex MacInnes reported. The policy replaces a two-year-old practice of providing children with a so-called "humanitarian meal" if their credit runs out. Typically, schools provide a modest brown bag lunch with a cold sandwich, carton of milk and piece of fruit when students are unable to pay.

Those among us who are skeptical of public assistance may be quick to blame families for failing to keep up with the bills. What kind of a person lets \$50 in unpaid school meals go by without paying up? Scofflaws. That's who, some might say.

There may be some who fit that description, who have failed in their responsibility to pay for their child's lunch. And maybe in some warped, literal universe of you-get-what-you-pay-for, it's not fair to ask taxpayers to cover the cost.

But life isn't fair. And it is far easier in this economy to imagine families upended by a sudden, drastic change in fortunes, or reduced to pennies after months of under-employment and dwindling social support from the state. Passaic is not a city of high incomes — some 86 percent of students receive free or reduced school lunch, compared to 81 percent before the recession. Lunch money for the 14 percent living above the poverty line may be fleeting.

And so it is far easier to imagine these families as down on their luck. The bills pile up, paid one at a time, long after they are due. In addition, there are many families in Passaic who have limited language skills and are new to this country, who may not have the ability to buy school lunches and don't know how to sign their children up for subsidized meals.

But it doesn't really matter why the bills have gone unpaid. It is abusive for anyone, much less a publicly funded institution dedicated to child development, to let children go hungry just because they can.

The reckless, so-called leaders of this district must know that. Maybe that's why Board President Ronald Van Rensalier refused to tell MacInnes the truth: that he voted to approve the policy. Or why longtime board member Vincent Capuana, who also approved it, said he hadn't bothered to read it and didn't know about the new, no-feeding rule. We're more than disappointed to hear longtime Schools Superintendent Robert Holster, usually a dependably feisty advocate for Passaic children, express his take-it-or-leave-it approval of the policy.

His and the board's sole justification: budget woes. Unpaid cafeteria bills and humanitarian meals cost \$130,856 last year.

That's less than one-tenth of 1 percent of a \$250 million budget. Letting go of one of the 24 district workers who earned more than that last year would cover it.

Shame. Reverse the policy. Feed the students.



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