

**SENATE EDUCATION**Exhibit No. 2Date 3-25-19Bill No. HB 414

Mr. Chairmen and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Patricia Spencer and I am here today to urge you to pass HB414 "AN ACT GENERALLY REVISING LAWS RELATED TO SCHOOL MEALS; PROHIBITING A SCHOOL DISTRICT FROM STIGMATIZING A STUDENT WHO CANNOT PAY FOR A SCHOOL MEAL OR HAS A NEGATIVE SCHOOL MEAL ACCOUNT BALANCE"

Holding children publicly accountable for unpaid school lunch bills — by throwing away their food, providing a less desirable alternative lunch or branding them with markers — is often referred to as "lunch shaming." According to a 2014 Department of Agriculture report, nearly half of all school districts used some form of shaming to compel parents to pay bills. About 45 percent of school districts withheld the hot meal and gave a cold sandwich, while 3 percent denied food entirely.

Prior to February of 2017, I had read of schools in other states that singled kids out whose parents had not paid for past due lunch accounts. I found the stories to be heartbreaking and infuriating but I never guessed it was happening in my own state, let alone my own community. Imagine my surprise when in late February 2017, I read the weekly newsletter from my children's school announcing a proposed change to the lunch policy that included giving students with "delinquent accounts" an alternative lunch.

I was not the only upset parent as concerned parents reached out to the media regarding this proposed policy and the embarrassment it would cause the students who would be singled out under this proposed policy change. Local media ran a story on the proposed policy change on March 2, 2017 with state wide media picking up the story.

One newspaper reported that: "The Board of Trustees for Montana City School is considering adopting a policy that will give students an 'alternative meal' when their lunch balance has accrued more than \$100. For breakfast, the 'alternative meal' will consist of toast, peanut butter and either milk or juice. For lunch, students will be given a cheese sandwich, veggie sticks, fruit and milk as the 'alternative meal.'"

The Superintendent's response was to insist this proposed policy wasn't lunch shaming, but rather a way for the school district to receive payment on debt owed to the school by parents: "Kloker insisted the policy wouldn't 'lunch shame' any student, as the school plans to give students the cheese sandwich discretely. 'It won't be in the lunch room in front of everyone, where shaming can happen.'"

Ultimately, our school board revised the policy to eliminate the alternative lunch portion of the policy. The final policy passed by our school board was much "friendlier" and focused more on improving communication than stigmatizing the student.

It is never a good idea to say the students have ownership in what their parents owe to the school or any other creditor. They are kids, leave them be. Also, why would "shaming" young people ever be a viable solution? This can do nothing but make them feel less than and opens them up to be judged or bullied by peers. This problem is between the school and parents and the kids should be left out of the equation.

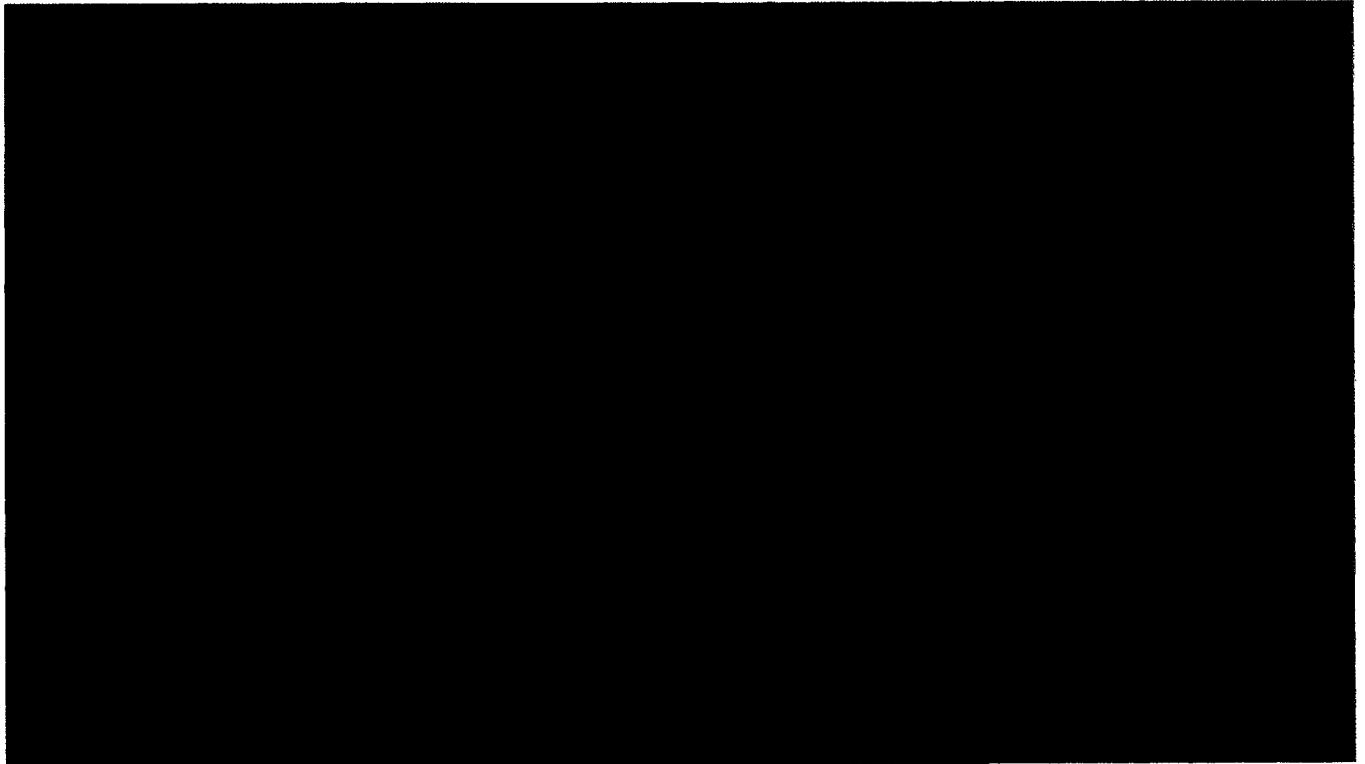
Montana has the distinction of having the highest suicide rate in the nation. Much of that problem starts with what happens to our children in our schools. This is not a partisan issue. This

is about protecting our most precious resource, our children, and allowing them to be free of worry and stigma at school. I urge you to pass HB414.

Thank you.

# Montana City School Board, Superintendent Propose Shaming Families (through their kids)

March 3, 2017 People's Voice Staff Education 37



**This post has been updated.**

Montana City is the most affluent school district in Montana. Maybe that's what makes this news especially alarming.

The affluent, small town of Montana City situated just south of Helena is proposing a new school lunch policy that has some parents outraged.

The Board of Trustees for the K-8 district is considering adopting a policy that will give students an 'alternative meal' when their lunch balance has accrued more than \$100. For breakfast, the 'alternative meal' will consist of toast, peanut butter and either milk or juice. For lunch, students will be given a cheese sandwich, veggie sticks, fruit and milk as the 'alternative meal.'

How horrifying. The purpose of this disturbing policy is to shame students and their parents into paying delinquent bills. Something all struggling families need [sarcasm]. What's more is that students will continue to accrue debt while being served sub-par meals during the school day.

The proposed new policy would eliminate any sort of notification to parents through email, phone call or letter sent home explaining an outstanding balance for their child's meals. The only way parents will be able to see if they owe anything is by going online. [See update]

So, now a child is being held responsible for their family's financial situation. A concerned Montana City School parent drove the point home:

For parents like Lenik, the issue at hand is not about the money, or the amount that can accrue from students buying things while in school; it's the embarrassment that can come from students getting the 'alternative meal.'

"If they are going to serve an alternate lunch that's a cheese sandwich, students are going to know that kid, their parents didn't pay their bills," Lenik said.

And here's Montana City School Superintendent Tony Kloker's response to those concerns:

Kloker insisted the policy wouldn't 'lunch shame' any student, as the school plans to give students the cheese sandwich discretely.

"It won't be in the lunch room in front of everyone, where shaming can happen," he explained.

Are you kidding us? Seriously?

Montana City School Superintendent Tony Kloker and the School Board are shrugging their responsibility to engage with the families they serve. Instead, they are stigmatizing children, embarrassing them in front of their peers, and denying them nutritious meals necessary for school performance. It's barbaric.

Action will be taken on the proposed policy on March 8th.

If you'd like to let the school district know what you think about this misguided (and offensive) proposed policy, call 406-442-6779.

**UPDATE:** after some much deserved criticism, it looks like the Superintendent and School Board might be backing off (a bit) and launching a public relations campaign to counter the bad press.

Superintendent Kloker writes:

Additional solutions have already been brought to my attention that will be part of my recommendation to the school board. For example:

- Eliminate the alternate meal language from the draft policy.
- Add language to the draft policy to ensure every child has access to the same meal every day.
- Add language to the draft policy to make sure no fines are assessed to any family demonstrating a financial need.
- Add language to the draft policy to assess a fine after the \$100 limit has been reached to parents that have the financial ability to pay.

You have to wonder if any of these "solutions" would have been incorporated if the Montana City School Board's proposed policy hadn't come under such intense scrutiny.

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Who can see this?



James Conner

March 2 at 4:13pm · KXLH Comments

A mean spirited school board wants to hang a scarlet letter on children who made the mistake of choosing parents who are poor, deadbeats, or both. Providing meals for schoolchildren should be part of the budget and paid for through taxation. A just society does not punish children for the sins or circumstances of their parents.



Montana City school lunch policy proposal has some parents upset

The small town of Montana City just south of Helena is proposing a new school lunch policy that has some parents outraged. The Board of Trustees for the K-8...

KXLH.COM

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Eve Morris Dixon I agree with you, James Conner

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**\*Montana City School Response to KTVH news story that aired March 2017**

School Lunch Policy

There's more to the story

from Mr. Kloker

Important point of clarification: The following quote that was recently reported by KTVH as news is not accurate: "The proposed new policy would eliminate any sort of notification to parents through email, phone call or letter sent home explaining an outstanding balance for their child's meals. The only way parents will be able to see if they owe anything is by going online." This is not true.

Policy is a guiding principle to set direction for our organization. A procedure is a series of steps to be followed as a consistent and repetitive approach to accomplish an end result.

If the proposed policy is adopted, the school's procedure would be to continue to send notes home, email parents and/or make phone calls to inform parents of the balance on their child's school food account. Although it's not the only option, parents may access EZSchoolPay.com to monitor and pay for lunches. Please visit our website or contact the school if you would like assistance in setting this up. The school will continue to work with the parents/guardians to make them aware of the status of their account.

We are ALL responsible for making sure our children eat lunch. To know Montana City School is to know that our kids are at the forefront of our decision-making and will continue to be so.

The alternate lunch in the proposed policy had the example of a cheese sandwich. However, just because the policy gives an example of a cheese sandwich, it doesn't mean our procedure will be to serve that as the only option. If the Board keeps the option to provide an alternate meal, it will be a meal that meets the USDA nutrition guidelines, looks like it was prepared as a cold lunch coming from home, and will include a sandwich such as meat and cheese on whole grain bread, fresh veggie sticks, fruit and milk. The key factor is that it will be a meal that costs the district less than the typical meal being served and, more importantly, will be provided to the student as a last resort and given to them in a very discreet, "student friendly" manner.

We must be fiscally responsible to our taxpayers, but not at the expense of our children's pride and confidence. The district was \$13,000 in debt in our lunch fund at the end of last year. The money we collect is truly used to purchase the groceries to make the meals and feed the students. There needs to be a balance of responsibility, as well as an understanding of individual family needs. That is why other language in the proposed policy provides opportunities for the school to work with families who have a financial need.

There have already been additional solutions that have been brought to my attention for the Board to consider.

If you have solutions you would like the Board to consider, please bring them to my attention to share with the Board or attend the meeting on March 8. As always, we welcome the input!