

Surging school meal prices a strain on families

By Aimee Picci, MoneyWatch

School meals are designed to be both nutritious for students and easy on their families' pocketbooks. Yet while some school lunches might get an "A" on providing essential nutrients, they appear to be receiving a flunking grade for affordability.

The issue of school meal prices came to the forefront when a school kitchen manager in a Denver suburb said she lost her job after giving lunches to students who didn't have the money to pay. While the school district later said the employee was let go for other reasons, the incident raised questions about how children from families earning at least \$31,000 per year – the threshold for a family of four to receive free lunches – could fail to afford the seemingly modest cost of school breakfasts and lunches. Reduced-price lunches are available for families earning 185 percent above the poverty rate, or about \$44,000 for a family of four.

At the heart of the issue is a tough economic squeeze for families considered the "working poor," or those who are scraping by just above the poverty threshold. The average price of an elementary school lunch has surged 52 percent in just 11 years, according to a study from the Food Research and Action Center, a nonprofit that focuses on anti-hunger initiatives. During the same period, the median income of U.S. households has declined 5.4 percent.

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