Online tools let parents peer into their kids' school day

By Alana Semuels, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
September 5, 2008

It's tough sending little Bobby or Suzy back to school. Parents may worry what kinds of teachers their children will encounter, whether they'll be as smart as their classmates and whether bullies will steal their lunch money. But technology is helping eliminate some of the guesswork about what happens after kids climb onto the bus. Increasingly common Web programs let parents track lunch-money spending, schoolwork habits and tardiness.

"There's this black box -- a child goes away and comes home, what happened during this time?" said Shelley Pasnik, director of the nonprofit Center for Children and Technology in New York. "Now, new information and communications technology allows for the mystery of what transpires on any given day to unravel." The programs, from companies such as Pearson School Systems, Aries Technology Inc. and Horizon Software International, are gaining popularity as more parents demand transparency in schools, Pasnik said.

This year the Los Angeles Unified School District signed a $9.9-million contract with Horizon, a Duluth, Ga., company that offers a program called MealpayPlus to let parents see what their children are eating for lunch. A district spokesman said the system would be ready to use at the beginning of the 2009-10 school year.

Under the program, children would pay for their lunches in different ways, depending on the district, including through scan cards, personal identification numbers or even fingerprint scanners. Parents could go online and add money to their child's account through MealpayPlus. They could also flag foods that their child is allergic to and elect whether their child could buy only meals or could buy items not in the meal plan.

"If parents don't understand how their student goes through $30 in 3 days, they can view their student's current account balance," said Ashley Steele, senior product manager at MealpayPlus.

The Los Angeles Unified School District plans to set up an Internet program that will enable parents to monitor and manage children's lunch-money spending. Above, mealtime at Cesar Chavez Elementary.
coordinator for MealpayPlus.

Vera Iosua, whose teenage children attended the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District last school year, used MealpayPlus to keep track of their lunches. Her son Howard, a football player who graduated in the spring, loved candy and chips, so she wanted to make sure he was eating healthful food.

“I didn't want to give him money and have him use it on vending machines,” she said.

MealpayPlus helped Iosua see that her children knew how to take care of themselves.

“He was mainly eating pizza,” she said. “But on the days he had football, he had salads too.”

Other programs, such as Pearson's PowerSchool, apply a similar idea to grading and attendance. Teachers across the country, including in El Segundo and Alhambra, keep track of students' test scores and how often they show up for class, and parents go online and see how their child is doing. Aries Technology of Tempe, Ariz., recently launched a service that allows parents to check their child's progress online as well.

Some programs allow parents to see what subjects their child needs to improve in, as well as disciplinary records, lunch menus and personalized information from teachers.

Parents can become intimately involved. A promotional video on Pearson's PowerSchool website boasts that "Most Power parents know what tonight's homework is before their children even arrive home from school."

Sound like a lot of pressure?

"Transparency creates pressure," said Paul Curtis, chief academic officer of the New Technology Foundation, an organization based in Napa, Calif., that is creating schools that use technology to teach. "But overall it's very healthy for the students."

Critics say some programs give parents too much control. After all, children have to learn to become more independent as they grow up, and such programs let parents keep a close watch on what their kids are doing.

But Brent Bingham, vice president of product marketing at Pearson School Systems, said the programs let parents nip problems in the bud. They can see whether their child is struggling and can intervene before the bad report card arrives.

"This isn't surveillance software," he said. "Parents are really interested in the benefits that come with timely communication."

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