

North Adams schools to implement biometric ID at cafeterias

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Greylock Elementary School cafeteria worker Jean Ziter cashes out students as they come through the lunch line. However, on Wednesday, the school will adopt a new technology to both speed up the process and increase its accuracy -- a biometric scanner. School officials stress the technology is secure and that students' privacy will be protected. (Gillian Jones / Berkshire Eagle Staff / photos.berkshireeagle.com)

NORTH ADAMS -- It seems like science fiction, but officials say a new biometric identification system at school cafeterias really will save time and money.

And they want to assure parents the high-tech system will protect student privacy.

North Adams Public Schools are implementing a new tool, from the company identiMetrics, to the lunch line this school year. Greylock Elementary will

go live with the system Wednesday, Sullivan on Sept. 29, and Drury High School and Brayton Elementary in mid- to late October.

North Adams will be the first district in Berkshire County to try the system, which costs about \$10,000.

Rather than swipe a card or enter a PIN number, students will press a finger on a pad to purchase a meal. The system

recognizes the student by a series, or grid, of points on his or her fingerprint and deducts the cost of lunch from the student's account.

"It will develop efficiencies with getting kids through the line and make the transactions more accurate," said Corbett Nicholas, the director of food services at North Adams Public Schools.

It all starts with a scan of a student's finger. From that scan, a computer program takes a grid of points from the student's fingerprint -- but never an image of the fingerprint itself. That grid of points -- unique to each student -- is then converted into binary code, encrypted, saved and paired with his or her account. Then when the student scans his or her finger in the lunch line, the system automatically matches the student to the account.

Officials have stressed that the system is secure, and at no point is a scan of the student's fingerprint ever saved.

"The [cafeteria] manager doesn't even see anything happening," Nicholas said. "You can't open a file and see a bunch of fingerprints or unique points."

The current system relies on the cafeteria manager to debit a student's account based on recognizing the child or asking for his/her name -- often resulting in errors.

"It's pretty difficult to hear a second-grader or kindergartener," Nicholas said.

In addition to sometimes being inaccurate, the process could be slow, Nicholas said.

Drury High School used a PIN system, but Nicholas said some students were sharing information.

"All of a sudden I get a call from a parent where there are five or six extra charges," he said.

The district then has to respond to those complaints and correct any incorrect charges. Some districts use identification cards, but Nicholas said the cost of replacing lost cards outweighs the benefits.

Just in time saved, Nicholas said, the system will pay for itself.

According to identiMetrics' CEO and cofounder Jay Fry, a former school principal, it has instituted its system in nearly 1,000 school districts across the country.

"I used to be a school principal and this company was born out of my pain," Fry said.

Though the company has expanded throughout the country, its systems are still uncommon in Western Massachusetts. But he expects it to quickly grow.

"You'll see more of this coming into your area," Fry said. "Once people have a better understanding of how the technology works, they're more comfortable with it."

Mayor Richard Alcombright, who serves as chairman of the School Committee, said it wouldn't have approved the system unless security concerns were properly addressed.

"My biggest concern was 'Does it store a fingerprint,' " Alcombright said. "We would not have adopted it if it did that."

Alcombright also noted the time it's projected to save for students in line.

"There's so little time, and kids for the most part are interested in getting through that line, getting lunch, and getting into recess," Alcombright said.

So far, Nicholas said he's received a handful of complaints about the system.

"I've received little pushback from the parents," Nicholas said. "My ears are all open to having conversations with parents who may need more information."

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