

WHAT'S UP WITH THAT?

Kids pay for school lunches with the scan of a finger

It's lunch at the push of a finger.

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It's biometrics, baby.

The same finger scanning technology that's on smartphones is in the lunchroom.

Students put their index finger on a small scanner at the checkout and it links to their account. The system, used by schools nationwide, was recently implemented at Challenger Elementary School and some others in Mukilteo School District.

The main perks?

It speeds up the lunch line clog and it gives students more time to eat.

Don't panic. The finger scan is for lunch, not for law enforcement. It doesn't store fingerprints nor can the scan be re-created into a fingerprint image.

"We do not fingerprint children," said Anne Marie Dunphy, CFO and co-founder of IdentiMetrics, maker of the scanner.

Her Pennsylvania company specializes in biometric products for schools in areas such as class attendance and library checkout.

"We have a school district that even uses it for student elections so the kids don't vote twice," Dunphy said.

Biometrics is nothing new, but its use and uses are expanding. In the adult world, biometrics is used by fitness centers in place of cards and workplaces instead of time cards.

It basically works like this: Each finger has hundreds of unique swirls, ridges and points. The device scans then translates those features into a binary number. The unique binary number is linked to an identification number.

At Challenger, with a quick tap of a finger, the computer debits a student's account or bills for a reduced or free lunch. If their account is empty, no problem, they still get lunch, which costs \$3.

"It's nice. It's accurate," said Sherri Bennett, a Challenger para-educator and lunch cashier.

"It gives our staff more time to make sure kids are eating nutritious meals and have all the balancing components," said Tara Jeffries, Challenger dean of students. "We have about 830 kids, so getting them through the lunchroom is a challenge."

Been in a school cafeteria lately?

It's excitement, hunger and organized chaos on overdrive. More like a cattle drive.

Students form a more-or-less orderly line after choosing their entree. On a recent day at Challenger, they had five choices, such as chili, chicken burger and deli sandwich. No fair. Back when I was in school we had one choice, and some days it was liver and onions.

No wonder they are excited.



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