

At Utah school, there really was no such thing as a free lunch

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(CNN) -- Dozens of children at a Utah elementary school had their lunch trays snatched away from them before they could take a bite this week.

Salt Lake City School District officials say the trays were taken away at Uintah Elementary School Tuesday because some students had negative balances in the accounts used to pay for lunches. But they admit the situation should have been handled differently.

Instead of regular lunches, the students were given fruit and milk.

"We don't ever let kids go without any food entirely," Salt Lake City School District spokesman Jason Olsen told [CNN affiliate KSL](#).

Mother Erica Lukes told KSL she was "blindsided" when her daughter, a fifth grader, described what a school district official told her: "You don't have any money in your account, so you can't get lunch."

"There were a lot of tears," Lukes said, "and it was pretty upsetting for them."

The district said it started notifying parents about negative account balances Monday. But Lukes said she and other parents were never told about the problem.

"Even if they did try to send the word out, you still don't do that to a child," she told KSL. "You don't take a lunch out of their hands."

School officials admit they made a mistake.

"This situation could have and should have been handled in a different manner. We apologize," the Salt Lake City School District [said on its Facebook page](#).

Officials are investigating whether guidelines about notifying parents were followed, the district said.

"We understand the feelings of upset parents and students who say this was an embarrassing and humiliating situation," the district said. "We again apologize and commit to working with parents in rectifying this situation and to ensuring students are never treated in this manner again."

Another post on the school district's Facebook page talks about the importance of ending child hunger.

CNN's Mayra Cuevas contributed to this report.

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