



ePOS – our electronic lunchtime till system

In September 2008, the nutrient-based standards for school lunches become law in primary schools. To ensure that we meet these standards, our school lunch menu has to be nutritionally analysed. Every child taking a school lunch should have the option to have a balanced diet, including certain levels of fish, red meat, vegetables, etc. (having regard to dietary needs, of course). Within a few years, we will be required to report on the take up of the food. Without recording what a child has taken, we have no way of knowing whether certain food types have been taken. You will note that I am using the term 'taken' and not 'eaten'!

Another benefit for the school is that we are able to monitor the catering contract to give us accurate information about the popularity of certain meals, as well as being able to count portions served. I am now able to ask questions of our caterers such as why only 12 portions of a particular choice were served and challenge some of the menu choices.

What is exciting about the project is that Atwood was the first school in Croydon to implement this system. We were the 'proof of concept' school. There were difficulties and challenges that had to be overcome, but our caterers and admin staff worked hard to resolve any issues. The project was managed by a team from Croydon Council, and we were working closely with Nationwide Retail Systems Ltd and ParentPay. Following our successful implementation, the project is now being rolled out to other schools across the borough.

What is different about this system is that in real time, data is exchanged with ParentPay. In the past, parents have paid for school lunches. Manual dinner registers were kept. If a school lunch child was in school, this was marked on the dinner register. The number of meals to be served was given to the cook in the morning, and these meals were prepared. It seems a simple system, which has been in place for many years (certainly the system when I was at school!). The main drawbacks were the time taken to do the task (about an hour a day), children who arrived late to school or perhaps went home ill during the morning and, quite commonly, a number of children who took a meal who shouldn't, simply because it looked good! 'Fish and chips' was always 'over'!

The new system gives you more flexibility than before, and should be accurate. We are no longer insisting on a child being school dinners for the whole week or not at all. No numbers are given to the cook, so she has to ensure that enough food is prepared for fluctuating numbers. This isn't as difficult as it might appear. She knows which food is popular and can predict days that might have larger numbers, and she also knows 'trends' in uptake during the year (we're up to 205 daily meals in December).

There is no need to pre-book a meal. If your child is normally packed lunch but wants a school lunch on a particular day, all they have to do is to go and get their meal with the other school lunch children. You should go into your ParentPay account and credit the school lunch field with the cost of the meal (currently £1.60, £1.65 in January).

Dinner money for Atwood Primary School
The cost of a school meal is £1.60 - £8.00 per week

Atwood Primary School - caterer

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£0.00

If you do not do this, a 'debt' reminder will be sent to you at the end of the week!

Please don't be offended if you receive such a letter! Other occasions might be that your child forgot their packed lunch and so had a school dinner, or they just fancied what was on offer! You need to make it very clear to your own child whether they should take a meal when they are not supposed to do so. In most cases the system will be accurate and if you are charged, it is because a meal was taken.

However, no system is 100% accurate, especially if a human is involved! It is possible that the wrong child might be recorded for the meal, or the wrong items selected. Please be patient while the system becomes embedded and please do contact our office if you think we have made a mistake. We can always rectify a problem.

If you have explored the upgraded ParentPay site lately, you may have noticed the additions that have been made.

Firstly, you are now able to see your school meal balance easily. This is on the main page once you have logged in.

My children	Year	Reg group	Service	Account balance (£)	Quick links
	R	Red	Atwood Primary School - caterer:Dinner money for Atwood Primary School	32.00	>Account statement >Meal choices

Your 'Account statement' will list all the individual daily meal transactions. Clicking on 'Meal Choices' will provide you with the menu selections that were logged for your child. These are normally on the ParentPay website within 10 minutes of your child taking their meal. This might help you plan for the rest of the day's meals!

However, as I have already mentioned, mistakes can be made. There have been 'teething problems', but they should now be minimal. One of the most concerning issues for a parent might be concerning a dietary need – such as a 'no pork' or 'no milk' requirement for instance. Seeing such an item in the child's selection would cause concern. Please contact the office, and we will check the situation for you. It is most likely to be an incorrectly entered meal, but I would want to investigate and ensure that such occurrences are highly unlikely.

Another feature of the till is that it can display messages to the catering staff. If you are concerned that your child seems to be selecting a filled roll every day, for example, you are able to put a message on the till that will 'pop up' when your child is being served.

This is available in the 'Send Message' tab.

- Please select category...
- Question about payment item
- Question about payment made
- Request a refund
- Other (school related)
- Allergy or medical condition
- Special dietary requirement
- Change daily spend limit
- Other (meal related)

The 'general' box that would be displayed on the till is the last one – 'Other (meal related)'. Some of the other options do not go to the till (eg 'Question about payment item' would go to our office).

Please use such a feature wisely – if the catering staff are constantly bombarded with pop up messages, they will begin to take little notice, which would defeat the object.

You are also able to see the status of your message – whether it has been received by the system, and when it was read.

It is also important that the responsibility for selecting food lies with your child and not with the catering staff. It is far better for a parent to tell their child to avoid particular foods and for the child to take that responsibility. Now you are able to log into ParentPay and check!

The till is positioned at the end of the line where the puddings are served. The screen is touch sensitive and the member of staff selects the class for the group of pupils (at the bottom of this screen). She is then presented with a photo and name of the 30 children in the class (blacked out here to protect identity). The child confirms their name and this child is selected. With the name and photo, it is unlikely that the wrong child will be selected (except for twins!).



All the items available on that day's menu are presented to the till operator, who presses each item they see on the child's tray. At the same time, the till operator is also serving the puddings, although we are encouraging children to help themselves more to speed this up. It takes just seconds for this process before the next child is selected.

Obviously there are other processes involved in preparing the system with the menu items, etc. but it is not necessary for me to go into any detail

here. We have emergency procedures in place should the system fail, or we have no power. Indeed we have emergency plans for providing lunch even if our kitchen is out of action. Special meals like Christmas Lunch will still be recorded, but in a slightly different way (as we operate a ticket system for Christmas lunch). In the summer, when we take the hall out of use for a few days during the production, meals are still served but, again, the recording may be different.

Parents are always welcome to visit during lunchtime to see how the process works and to reassure themselves of the care and attention the children receive during lunchtime.

