

## **Durbin queries USDA about school lunch abuses**

**Tribune analysis prompts letter on how department plans to balance accountability and students' access to meals**

By **Monica Eng**, Chicago Tribune reporters

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Responding to a Tribune article on fraud risks in the federal free-lunch program, Sen. **Dick Durbin** on Friday sent a letter to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack asking what his department will do to "bolster eligibility verification measures" in the program.

**Chicago Public Schools** Inspector General James Sullivan recently found more than a dozen instances of falsified lunch applications among city and school employees at one West Side high school.

Such problems could exist districtwide, Sullivan suggested, because of the financial incentives for schools to boost participation in the free- and reduced-price meal program and because of the lack of verification.

Paper applications to the program are based on self-reported income figures, but by federal mandate, CPS is not allowed to check more than a fraction of the qualifying applications.

"We have tried to figure out a way, since this program is so big and serves so many needy kids, to keep the book work and the red tape at a minimum," Durbin said in an interview. "When you do that, you run the risk of abuse.

"I've asked the **USDA** to try to find some way to make sure the school system has the information it needs and still maintain the integrity of this program."

In his letter, the senator noted the importance of the National School Lunch Program, which "provides more than 31 million children with low-cost or free meals." But he added that "some adults abuse (it) by intentionally submitting false information."

Durbin stressed that "strained local, state and federal budgets" made it important to identify and address possible fraud in the program while also ensuring that eligible children were enrolled.

The letter noted that CPS and other districts have asked the department for help in bolstering their verification processes, and Durbin asked Vilsack how his department is working with them, "particularly Chicago Public Schools, to develop improved measures for fraud detection and enforcement."

Still, the senator said he believes the policy should balance thorough verification with accessibility.

"I don't want to push so hard that people say, 'Oh, let's forget that program.' It's a critically important program for kids from poor families," Durbin said. "Schools, many of them in the city, serve more than lunch because these kids don't have much to turn to, particularly in this tough economy."

The USDA did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Earlier this school year, CPS rejected an offer to enroll in a new program, the Community Eligibility Option, that would do away with lunch applications at eligible schools. It would free the schools from processing tens of thousands of paper applications and remove the potential for fraud. The USDA would pay for most of the meals, which would be offered free to all students who wanted them.

But CPS said adopting the program would limit its collection of important data on individual poverty rates that are key in determining a broad range of federal, state and local funding.

Durbin urged the USDA to "work with CPS to ensure that the school districts, which rely on individual data acquired through school lunch applications, are able to participate in an innovative program like" this one.

"We want every kid who is eligible to receive a school lunch. I think it's an important part of their being ready to learn," Durbin said. "But we don't want to have anybody who is ineligible trying to take advantage of the program."

Finding the right process will be a challenge, he said.

"When we run into cases like this, the reaction is, 'Oh, we need a longer form; we need more people checking the forms,'" Durbin said. "That's a natural and rational reaction, but it's one that leads to more red tape, more bureaucracy and more delay."

"Trying to find that right balance of providing care for those who are eligible and discouraging or stopping those who are ineligible from taking advantage of it has always been a tough assignment."