

Low pay, midday hours, lots of hungry kids: Is this job for you?

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Lunch aides hard to come by at your kid's school



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(Photo: Romain Blanquart, Detroit Free Press)

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Students may say lunch is the best part of their school day but administrators across metro Detroit are calling it the most challenging as a shortage of lunch monitors has them getting creative and aggressive to fill the positions.

School districts in [Oakland](#), [Wayne](#) and [Macomb](#) counties constantly have online job postings recruiting lunch aides, jobs that can be difficult to fill because of short shifts, low pay, midday hours and the ability to happily work with hundreds of children.

But the search is necessary because it's one of the school's most crucial positions, said Katie Jeffrey, principal at Ferndale Upper Elementary in the Ferndale school district.

"Monitors help kids problem-solve and they make for a much safer, enjoyable recess and lunch hour," said Jeffrey, whose school has 8-9 lunch aides on a daily basis.

While no Michigan laws dictate the ratio of adults to kids in lunchrooms or on the playground, according to Bill DiSessa, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Education, districts recognize that safety is paramount. Because the lunch aide is a position with regular turnover, schools recruit talent year-round to have someone waiting to step into a vacancy, districts said.

Lunch aides, responsible for monitoring students while they eat and during recess, typically work 1.5-3 hours in the middle of a day with pay ranging from \$9.40-\$10.50 per hour, according to some job postings. Applicants also pay for fingerprinting at an offsite location and complete hours of training that may include properly administering an EpiPen or handling a concussion, for example.

Stay-at-home parents once were the biggest source of lunch aide applicants, but with more working families, the talent pool has dropped significantly, said school officials.

Patience is a virtue

At Ferndale Upper Elementary, Jeffrey said she has had some luck hiring recent high school graduates who have an interest in education as a profession. The Royal Oak school district has done the same, said Superintendent Mary Beth Fitzpatrick.

"It gives them an opportunity to see if they like working with kids," Fitzpatrick said.

Retired teachers are another good source of potential lunch aides, she adds, because they like being around children.

At Angell Elementary in the Berkley school district, Principal Vince Gigliotti said he is currently short one lunch monitor but has a candidate going through the hiring process.



Until then, he is asking his building's intervention specialist to fill in.

Gigliotti said he has found that reaching out to the masses attracts applicants unfamiliar with the patience needed with children during the most unstructured time of the day: lunch.

"It takes a special person and that's why I prefer word of mouth," he said.

Similarly, Vicki Wilson, principal at James Monroe Elementary in the Wyandotte school district, targets current parents as "lunch or recess coaches" as her building calls them.

When she ran into roadblocks a few years ago finding parents who could work all five days, she introduced job sharing to the school. The school typically uses eight lunch aides a day and calls in a substitute when needed.

"One was open (to working) four days and I found someone to work the other one," Wilson said. "I made the position more attractive to them by job sharing."

Parent Nicole Bennett took advantage of the job sharing opportunity at the school three years ago. Now, she works daily at the school as both a lunch monitor and parent coordinator, overseeing the fundraising and parent volunteer efforts.

During lunch, Bennett said she is a recess coach, playing different games with the students and helping them interact.

"The kids are crazy sometimes," Bennett said, but she is able to be near her fourth grader, help the school and earn some money while doing so.

Recruiting at job fairs, bus loops

All support jobs, not just lunch monitors, have a shortage of applicants, said Adam Blanchard, assistant superintendent for human resources at Chippewa Valley Schools in Macomb County. The hours and pay contribute to the problem, he said.

Because candidates for crossing guards, custodians, bus drivers and lunch monitors are difficult to come by, his district hosted a support staff job fair in the spring that attracted 150 people.

"We were expecting about 30 people, so we were happy to have 150 candidates," he said.

He hired 17 of them for various positions, including lunch monitors. He hasn't needed to host a second one because of the success.

At Birmingham Covington School, which serves grades 3-8 in the Birmingham school district, Jason Hill heads to the bus drop-off loop for future lunch monitor employees.

“We find a lot of talent from our bus drivers,” said Hill, assistant principal and athletic director at BCS. “I go right up to the buses in the loops and invite them to apply. I know they are good with kids. They work in the morning and the end of the day, but they’re idle in the middle, so they might like the extra income.”

About 50 percent of his lunch monitors are bus drivers, he said. He lost one of his team over summer break, but because he keeps the want ad running all the time, he had a candidate on deck, he said.

“I think they are the most joyous part of a child’s day,” Hill said of lunch monitors. “I remember hauling outside, smiling and having a ball while waiting for (our noon aide) to blow the whistle and I see the same joy today with our students.”



Gabe, left high fives assistant principal Jason Hill during lunch in the school cafeteria at Birmingham Covington School in Bloomfield Township on Thursday, October 4, 2018 (Photo: Romain Blanquart, Detroit Free Press)

Lunch monitors play, too

Recess plays so crucial a role in a child's development that districts now take extra steps to train lunch monitors to learn how to be better at their jobs.

[Playworks Michigan](#), a nonprofit organization that provides districts and youth organizations with professional development training, introducing them to inclusive games, has helped schools in Wyandotte, Novi, Dearborn, Detroit, Clinton Township and more.

“They did our training and one of the lessons they taught us is to get in there and play with the students,” James Monroe Principal Wilson said.

An added bonus is Playworks staff can be an extra set of hands as a lunch aide.

That has helped Ferndale Upper Elementary when it has been down a monitor because a Playworks representative is at the school daily, Jeffrey said.

“It’s nice when you have a full staff and you can station people throughout the playground,” she said.