



# Going Cashless and Making Life Easier with a Flexible Payment Solution

## CHALLENGES

- Wanted to go cashless, but needed to accommodate students who still brought cash
- Difficulty processing high volume of meal applications with 23% of students qualifying
- Struggled to engage with families via crowded email inboxes

## SOLUTIONS

### [LINQ Connect](#)

## RESULTS

- Enabled digital meal accounts students can fund with cash in the cafeteria
- Increased meal program participation with digital meal applications and documents
- Improved communication with families through the LINQ Connect app

Cash transactions and paper meal applications bogged down payments and reimbursements at California's Culver City Unified School District (CCUSD), as they do for many districts. With around 7,000 students in 8 schools handling cash in cafeteria lines, making trips to the bank, and relying on paper-based free and reduced-price meal applications took too much time. Additionally, email consistently proved an unreliable means of communicating directly with families.

Director of Food Services Julie Garcia knew digital payments could help breakfast and lunch lines move faster. She also knew that their payment system—included with [LINQ Nutrition](#), called LINQ Connect—offered a way to go cashless. Her team also quickly learned that families could access and submit digital meal applications through LINQ Connect, and schools could send important communications directly through the app.

She recently shared her story with us. We learned how LINQ Connect's flexibility as a payment, document sharing, and communication tool helped her district achieve their cashless goal and solve long-standing challenges.

## Going 100% cashless and making it work for everyone

CCUSD primarily conducted cashless transactions as part of their COVID-19 response procedures. However, returning to more traditional operations brought increased demand for cash transactions to pay for a la carte purchases. Some students and their families weren't ready to move to a completely cashless system.

**“Moving from cash to a digital meal payments solution makes the entire payments process less stressful. Digital meal accounts were much easier, and the lines could move faster.”**

**Julie Garcia**  
Director of Food Services

That presented a challenge because the district had benefited from the convenience, security, and reduced cost of processing digital meal payments. “We realized during COVID that the digital meal accounts were much easier, and the lines could move faster,” Garcia says. She also points out that with less cash on hand, they didn’t have to make as many visits to the bank or spend 20 minutes or more counting money and reconciling drawers after each service. “It’s less stress all around,” Garcia reports.

The district knew cashless transactions represented their future, but getting there meant creating a solution for students still dependent on paying with cash. “During COVID, we served universally free meals,” Garcia explains, “so we had to figure out a solution for cash payments when we went back to charging students for their a la carte purchases. But we didn’t want to get back into the practice of taking cash and counting change at the lunch line register.” They found an answer to their problem in their payment solution, LINQ Connect.

LINQ Connect enables real-time meal account funding, meaning families can reload a student’s account from the mobile app. The student can use those funds within seconds. Garcia and her team realized this unique feature could also enable students to fund their own accounts in the school cafeteria and then use the funds for their meal purchases. “We opened a separate window where students could deposit cash funds into their own meal account,” says Garcia. Now, students who arrive with cash in hand simply deposit their funds into their meal account, and then purchase their meal. “We call it the ‘Pay the Lady Window,’” says Garcia. Students can fund their accounts for a single purchase or as much as they wish. The funds stay in their digital account for as long as needed and they can use them at any time.

Garcia says all meal sales are now cashless, and that’s helped lines move faster and staff members eliminate several hours of work each week in counting cash and making bank deposits.

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**Julie Garcia**  
Director of Food Services

## **Families access and submit free and reduced-price meal applications digitally from anywhere**

23% of students at CCUSD qualify for free and reduced-price meals, and Garcia says LINQ Connect makes life easier for them. In addition to funding students’ accounts from anywhere in real time, they can access and submit important documents like meal applications. Submitting the applications in a PDF via the online portal and mobile app helps more families complete the process easier. They don’t have to make a visit to the school to pick up a form or mail any documents.

Garcia says meal application submissions are one of her favorite features of LINQ Connect. “Processing the meal applications online is amazing,” she says, “and I can easily save the PDF documents, so they’re available for audits or anyone else who might need them.” It makes the whole experience much more painless for the families submitting meal applications and the staff responsible for processing, approving, and maintaining the records.

## **Important updates and alerts stand out in LINQ Connect**

Communication through LINQ Connect lets Garcia and her nutrition team keep families in the loop, drive engagement, and promote participation in the nutrition program. The online portal and mobile app provide a direct connection with families, whether at home or on the go. For Garcia and her team, that means a single channel for deploying messages and more opportunities for families to take any necessary actions. Automatic notifications can alert families about low student meal account balances, helping to ensure students have the funds they need at mealtimes.

Garcia says she commonly needs to reach families when a student graduates. Those students often still have money remaining in their digital meal accounts, and families must decide what to do with those funds. They can choose to liquidate the funds, use them for digital school store purchases, or transfer them to

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another student’s account. However, graduation can be a busy time, and it’s easy for an email to get missed. LINQ Connect gives her an additional channel to reach families and inform them about actions needed before graduation day arrives. “We just discovered that we can use LINQ Connect to reach families about leftover funds in student accounts,” she says, “and that’s really helpful because we need to get in touch with them however we can.” In the LINQ Connect app, her messages aren’t competing with countless others in a crowded email inbox.

## **Payment solution flexibility makes life easier for K-12 staff and families**

For Garcia, the flexibility of LINQ Connect is a key factor to its successful implementation. Real-time meal account funding means they can accommodate students who bring cash to school. Families can access and submit digital meal applications at their own convenience, helping to increase meal program participation. Plus, schools can more reliably connect with families about important notifications and alerts through the LINQ Connect app. Instead of trying to retrofit LINQ Connect to work for their needs, it offers features and flexibility that automatically adapt to the district’s requirements.

Using LINQ Connect, CCUSD met their goal of going cashless, made meal applications easier and faster for families to submit, and improved communication between schools and homes. Garcia says it’s clearly the right solution for her district, and she can’t imagine going backward.

See how LINQ Payments supports districts like Culver City School District

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