Charging School Meals

Schools are not required to provide meals to non-paying full price or reduced price students. It is a local decision whether or not to allow meal charges, but it is highly recommended that schools have a written policy for their families if they are going to allow it along with the procedures that will be followed. In setting charge policies, note that program requirements prohibit schools from denying meals for:

- ✓ disciplinary reasons
- ✓ past unpaid charges if the child has money in hand for today's meal
- ✓ free students regardless of any other charges at school

Other points:

- Schools are not required to allow a child to charge any extra items.
- Schools may not deny a meal to free approved children for meal charges incurred before their meal benefit application.
- The school/food service must advise ALL households of the policy to ensure that if a student fails to comply with the policy they understand the consequences. It is strongly recommended that all schools have a charging policy that has broad input from the school community and is board/administrator approved.
- Whatever policy the school or food service establishes, the school must assure that the policy does not discriminate against or single out any group of students.

A charging policy should consider and include:

- Number of meals or dollars, if any, that may be charged
- Procedure for parent notification (written notice, phone call)
- Whether charges must be paid in full prior to additional charges
- If an alternate menu will be provided
- Method of payment recovery (small claims court, collection agency)
- Ages of the children – primary students may be unable to take full responsibility for payment of meals and therefore, might be allowed to charge. Secondary students should be fully responsible with money and might not be allowed any charge privileges.

In these cases, there are some options available to schools:

- o Provide an alternative meal such as a cheese or peanut butter sandwich at no charge or at a low cost to the student. Since the student is **not** being offered the required menu items/food items this type of meal is not reimbursable. Therefore, the meal is not regulated by USDA and the cost will be incurred by the district/school.
- o Provide a basic reimbursable meal to the child (all five food items must be offered for Traditional or Enhanced Food Based Menu Planning or entree plus two other items for Nutrient Standard Menu Planning) for free or at a low cost, so that reimbursement can help pay for the food and labor cost incurred.
- o Setup a PTA or school fund that deals with student charged meals.
- o Create a policy that provides privacy and courtesy to the student/family involved in the situation. This is strongly encouraged when schools choose not to provide alternative options.
- o Strive toward not embarrassing a child if the parent is at fault. Taking the tray from the child after service and throwing it out means the meal cost has still been incurred and the child does not eat.
- o Work to prevent charges from building up in the first place. For instance, the first time, the parent should be reminded in writing of the policy. At the second occurrence, make a phone call to the parent in case the written notice was not received. Offering a F&R application may be helpful to the family. If parents refuse to provide lunch money and also do not qualify for benefits, then the principal and counselor should be informed to determine the next course of action – perhaps Child Protective Services.

The following are examples of school charging policies from Indiana schools.

#1 School District
Elementary School – A student is allowed to charge no more than three meals. After the third meal is charged, you must send money to pay the charges or send meals from home with your child. If there are financial problems, please contact the school cafeteria and we will implement a payment program. A la carte items may not be charged.

Jr-Sr High School – We do not allow meal charging.

#2 School District
Elementary School – The cafeteria will maintain a daily outstanding lunch charges printout. There will be a $5.00 lunch charge limit for each student. We will not allow the child to charge more meals when the limit is reached. We will give the child a peanut butter sandwich and juice at no cost. There will be no charges the last week of school.

#3 School District
Elementary School – We strongly discourage meal charges, but we understand that an occasional emergency makes it necessary at the elementary level. The school policy is as follows:

- all charges must be paid in 10 days
- students may not charge more than 5 meals
- parents will be notified and asked for prompt payment after 3 charges
- students will not be allowed to charge a 6th meal

The school will provide a minimal lunch consisting of peanut butter sandwich and milk to any student that exceeds the charge limit. It is strongly encouraged that parents/guardians make meal payments in advance. Money should be sent to school in a sealed envelope. A check is the best form of payment. A printout of your student's account status is available with a two-day notice. Breakfast cannot be charged without notice from parents.

#4 School District
Elementary School – We will serve any student who has a negative balance of $10.00, a lunch consisting of peanut butter sandwich and milk until the balance is paid. The student will not be served breakfast.

Middle School – One lunch may be charged. We will provide peanut butter sandwich and milk until the charge is paid.

High School – No charges allowed.

#5 School District
So that a student does not miss a meal, for the first two days that a student has no payment for breakfast or lunch, the regular breakfast and lunch will be furnished. The next three days a breakfast will be served consisting of graham crackers and milk at a cost of $.30. The student will receive a peanut butter sandwich and milk for lunch at a cost of $.40. The alternate meal costs will be added to the student's debt. Daily, the student will be given a notice to be taken home that payment is due. After the second day, the food service manager will make a courtesy call to notify the parents, making certain that they are aware payment is due. After five days of non-payment, the student's breakfast/lunch privileges will be stopped. The food service manager will monitor the student at meal periods to make certain the student is receiving a breakfast/lunch provided by the parent. The building principal will notify the "Child Protective Services" in the event any student is not being provided a breakfast/lunch by a parent.

#6 School District
What if my child forgets his money?
If there are no funds available in your child's account, he/she will be given a breakfast or lunch on account. A letter will be sent home with your child requesting payment the following school day. A peanut butter sandwich will be served until the account is balanced or if they have money in hand for the current meal.