

Unpaid School Meals FAQ

Are schools required to have a charge procedure?

Yes, USDA has determined children and families must be informed about how children who pay the full-price (paid rate) or reduced price for a reimbursable meal are impacted by having insufficient funds on hand or in their account to purchase a meal.

Therefore, no later than July 1, 2017, all districts operating the National School Lunch Program and/or School Breakfast Program must have in place a written procedure to address situations where students that qualify for reduced-price or paid meals do not have money to cover the cost of the meal at the time of the meal service.

Can districts establish their own charge procedure?

Districts have discretion in developing the specifics of their procedures. The procedure should address charging limits, alternate meals and debt collection.

How is this procedure communicated to families?

The meal charge procedure must be communicated in writing to all households at the start of each school year and to households transferring to the school during the school year. Districts are also encouraged to redistribute the procedure to the family the first time the procedure is applied to a specific child and mention the charge procedure on reminder calls or in written notices of low and negative account balances. The procedure must also be communicated to any school staff responsible for procedure enforcement.

What guidance is offered to the school from the Department of Education?

The School and Community Nutrition Division has always enforced that a charging procedure should be communicated and followed by school districts. We review charging procedures during our Administrative Reviews. We provided training and technical assistance on this topic for over a year before the USDA deadline of July 1, 2017. USDA has a webpage on Unpaid School Meals, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/unpaid-meal-charges>, and a manual to guide schools, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/2017-edition-overcoming-unpaid-meal-challenge-proven-strategies-our-nations-schools>. We also have template procedures and policies posted on our website which were developed in collaboration with the Indiana State Board of Accounts and the Indiana School Board Association.

How are lunch shaming complaints handled?

We investigate all complaints that we receive. Our field consultants may make unannounced visits to schools.

Can schools give alternate meals to students unable to pay for a meal?

USDA encourages districts to provide regular reimbursable meals to all children who want one. Districts are allowed to provide a lower cost alternate meal at no cost to the student, or they may charge for the alternate meal if it meets the meal requirements. The district's procedure on alternate meals must be spelled out in their charging procedure.

What happens if a student's balance remains unpaid at the end of the school year?

Districts must make reasonable efforts to collect meal charges. It is up to the district to determine at what point the debt will be considered uncollectable and reclassified as bad debt. All districts are required to have a Bad Debt Policy.

How does the Department ensure students are not being singled out when they have school meal debt or receive free or reduced-price school meals?

The regulations preventing the overt identification of students receiving free or reduced-price meals are not new regulations (7 CFR 235.8) and we would recommend these procedures be followed for all students.

Does the charge procedure apply to students receiving free benefits?

While a district may still pursue debt from a household that is receiving free meal benefits, the meal charge procedure does not apply to free students. Students receiving free benefits must still be offered all the same meal options for a reimbursable meal. However, districts may enforce a procedure against charging a la carte items, items sold outside of the reimbursable meal. This procedure can be applied to all students (free, reduced, and paid) that have unpaid meal charges.

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