



Best Practices for Engaging With Households About School Meal Debt

School meals programs provide children with the opportunity to receive the nutrition they need throughout the school day. Many households participate in school meals programs to ensure that their children are fed when they are away from home. There are various instances, however, when a household that is not certified for free or reduced-price school meals may not be able to pay for school meals. Reasons for the lack of money on the school lunch account can vary from a change in household income status, a misunderstanding of school meal procedures, or simply forgetting to refill the account. When this occurs, school districts should ensure that communication about the debt is held with the households and not the students. There are several effective strategies for outreach and engagement with households that have school meal debt.

Use Automated Alert Systems to Notify Households About School Meal Debt

Households may not realize that their school meal account is low or at a negative balance. Parents are busy, and situations, such as stressful changes in the household, or even a change of credit cards can cause parents or guardians to not focus on their school lunch accounts. An automated alert system that notifies households when the balance is low, and again when it is negative, is an easy way to keep households updated with their account balance. It also is an administratively efficient and often cost-effective method that removes the need for school staff to personally contact households for less severe situations. Automated alert systems can contact households through phone calls or authorized text messages.

Encourage and Provide Assistance With the Completion of a School Meal Application

If a student is accruing school meal debt, it may be a sign that the family is struggling, and the student is eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. In addition, household income often can fluctuate throughout the school year, so a student can become eligible over the course of the school year. Families who have had a change in income may not know that they can complete a school meal application at any point during the school year. School administration should remind households that school meal debt is accumulating and they can apply for free or reduced-price school meals. To further increase the collection of school meal applications, school districts also should provide assistance with completing the application for households that may have language or literacy barriers.

Engage Trusted School Officials and Partners in the Collection of School Meal Applications

Trusted school officials, such as the school guidance counselor or social worker, can contact households with recurring school meal debt to assess any challenges in the household and to request payment. School meal applications also can be provided and completed outside of the schools. For example, school districts can work with community partners, such as food banks, nonprofit organizations, churches, and other local entities that are trusted by families. In addition to the convenience, some households may already have a strong and trusted relationship with staff members at these sites, which allows households that are financially struggling to feel more comfortable with applying for school meal

benefits. To protect the confidentiality of households, school administration must ensure that households consent to completing an application outside of the school environment.

Refrain From Using Harsh Tactics With Households

Certain practices, such as charging households the fees that are collected from a collection agency or withholding school records, can exacerbate an already difficult financial situation for families. Tactics that cause households to become defensive, nonresponsive, or discouraged, are not conducive to building understanding and compliance. School districts' efforts can ensure the integrity of school meals programs without taking intimidating actions towards households.

Explain Relevant Policies to Households With School Meal Debt

Often, households may not know or remember all of the school meals policies. When a household falls into a negative balance, the school administration should explain the policy for unpaid school meal fees and remind households that school meal applications can be completed at any point during the school year. Some households do not apply because they do not believe they are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. When communicating the policies to households, school districts can inform households that many families are unknowingly eligible for free and reduced-price school meals and should submit an application to confirm their status. It also can be helpful to express to households with school meal debt the importance of school meals programs and the need for the program to operate in the black.

Negotiate Long-Term Repayment Plans With Households

A best practice for collecting debt from households includes establishing a long-term repayment plan with each household. While some households may be able to quickly pay off the debt, other households may need more time. School districts can develop a tailored repayment plan that is reasonable for both the school administration and the household. Such a method allows school districts to receive the unpaid school lunch fees while not harming students or households in the process.

Additional information about unpaid school meal fees can be found at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Unpaid School Meal Charge [website](#).

For best practices at the state and local levels to establish unpaid meal fee policies that protect children from stigma, ensure that eligible children are certified for free and reduced-price school meals, and make certain that children get the nutrition necessary to learn at school, refer to the Food Research & Action Center's resource [Establishing Unpaid Meal Fee Policies: Best Practices to Ensure Access and Prevent Stigma](#).