



Unpaid School Meals Fees:

A Review of 50 School Districts' Policies in 2019

December 2019 ■ www.FRAC.org



Unpaid School Meals Fees:

A Review of 50 School Districts' Policies in 2019

Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by FRAC's Etienne Melcher Philbin and Crystal FitzSimons, with special assistance from Melissa Osborne. This report is an update of FRAC's 2017 report [*Unpaid School Meals Fees: A Review of 50 Large School Districts' Policies*](#), which was prepared by Qwamel Hanks, with special assistance from Andrew Garrison and Liliana Pond.

The Food Research & Action Center gratefully acknowledges Chobani for supporting our work on unpaid school meals fees policies.

About FRAC

The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) is the leading national organization working for more effective public and private policies to eradicate domestic hunger and undernutrition. For more information about FRAC, or to sign up for FRAC's *Weekly News Digest* and monthly *Meals Matter: School Breakfast Newsletter*, visit: frac.org.



Introduction

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) required all school districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program to establish and clearly communicate an unpaid school meals fees policy before the start of the 2017–2018 school year.¹ Each school district’s policy is meant to guide the district’s response when a child arrives in the cafeteria without cash in their school meals account or without cash in hand. The USDA guidance does not establish any national standards for what needs to be included in a school district’s policy, nor does it provide any baseline for protecting children and families; instead, it only requires that there be a policy.

Two years later, the issues of unpaid school meals fees and schools’ responses continue to grab headlines. News stories highlight school districts’ practices that provide partial meals of weak nutritional value; that identify and embarrass students who owe school meals debt; and that reflect the financial struggle for school districts as they contend with school meals debt and the impact it has on their budgets.

A school district’s school meals charge policy impacts two categories of students: those who are not certified for free or reduced-price school meals and are charged the meal price set by the district; and those who are certified for reduced-price school meals, and are charged 30 cents per day for breakfast and 40 cents for lunch if the district has not chosen to eliminate the reduced-price school breakfast and lunch copayments.

School meals debt remains a common issue for school districts across the country, with 75.1 percent reporting they have outstanding debt.² How school districts choose to deal with unpaid school meals fees has a big impact on students and the quality of the culture inside and

outside of the school cafeteria. It also affects whether or not students have the healthy meals they need to focus and concentrate throughout the school day. While some states and school districts have developed [policies](#) to ensure that students have access to school meals without embarrassment or humiliation, many districts do not have policies that meaningfully protect students. To ensure students have adequate nutrition, unpaid school meals fees policies should do the following:

- prohibit students from being singled out or embarrassed if they are unable to pay for their school meal;
- take steps to ensure that all children who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals are certified to receive them;
- require schools to directly communicate with the parent or guardian, not the student, about unpaid school meals debt;
- prohibit the use of debt collection services to collect school meals fees; and
- support a positive school environment.

This is an update of the Food Research & Action Center’s [2017 review](#) of the policies of 50 school districts across the nation. Of the 50 surveyed, 10 school districts offer free school meals to all students, so there is no need for an unpaid meals policy.

This report highlights the need for a national approach to address unpaid school meals fees. It provides a summary of the review’s findings and highlights the varying practices included in the 40 districts’ unpaid meals policies. The analysis of these policies also

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2016). Memo SP 46 2016: Unpaid Meal Fees: Local Meal Charge Policies. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/cn/SP46-2016os.pdf>. Accessed on November 25, 2019.

² School Nutrition Association. (2019). *School Nutrition Trends Report*. This source is available to the public for purchase at <http://schoolnutrition.org/2019-school-nutrition-trends-summary-report/>.

provides an important roadmap for Congress to develop a national policy that is good for students and the school environment, and supportive of school nutrition finances.

In addition, Congress can make effective investments in the child nutrition programs to ensure access to free school meals for children who need them and eliminate school meals debt before it happens. This can include strengthening and expanding direct certification (which automatically links children from struggling families to free school meals); investing in community eligibility (which is

an option for high-needs schools to offer free meals to all students) to allow more schools to implement the option; and ensuring that children who are being impacted by the opioid epidemic and being placed in kinship care are automatically eligible for free school meals.

A list of the 50 school districts included in this report, including a link to the available policies that are posted on each applicable school district's website, can be found in the appendix.

Findings

Only About Half Have a Universal Policy That Applies Equally to All Students

Only 18 of the 40 school districts that have an unpaid meals policy have one policy for all students. Most school districts have developed two unpaid meals policies: one for younger students (generally elementary schools) and one for older students (generally middle and high schools).

In the school districts with two-tiered guidance, policies typically are more generous for elementary school students, allowing them to receive school meals, regardless of their ability to pay, or permitting them to charge additional meals on their school meals accounts. The two-tiered approach does not acknowledge that older students need access to nutritious meals just as much as younger students do.

Provision of Meals to Students

Districts may choose to provide meals to students, regardless of whether students can pay, even if they have unpaid school meals debt. Because students require good nutrition in order to focus and excel in school, it is important for schools to ensure that students have access to good nutrition regardless of unpaid school meals fees.

Ten of the 50 districts offer meals at no charge to all students. Out of the 40 surveyed school districts that have an unpaid school meals fees policy,

- 16 districts provide meals to all students for all meals, regardless of whether they can pay;
- eight districts do not provide any meals or grace period to secondary students who cannot pay; and
- 17 school districts place a cap, or maximum amount, on the provision of meals to either secondary school

Throwing Meals Away

When a school's policy limits children's access to school meals, one of the consequences that has been highlighted in numerous news articles is that some schools will throw away food that has been served to a child. The meal cannot be served to another child due to health and safety rules, and the approach creates public embarrassment while sending a strong message to the child that the school would rather have the food in the trash than let the child eat it. The upcoming Congressional child nutrition reauthorization should clearly state that when food has been served to a child, it can not be taken away from them.

students or to all students with debt. Out of these 17 school districts, six always provide a meal to elementary students, but establish caps for secondary students.

Meal Types

For schools that provide meals to students who cannot pay, the meal can be the regular school lunch or breakfast that is being served to students, or an alternate meal. School districts can choose to provide alternate meals that meet the federal nutrition standards and qualify for reimbursement. An example of an alternate meal is a peanut butter or cheese sandwich, a fruit or vegetable, and milk. Some districts will simply serve milk and fruit, which do not meet the federal standards for reimbursement. In addition, some school districts charge the student's school meals account for an alternate meal. The best practice is to always serve the regular school meal, regardless of the school meals account balance or the student's ability to pay.

When schools provide an alternate meal, it is important for schools to do it in a way that does not stigmatize students. For example, the alternate meal can be offered as an option to all students. Out of the 40 surveyed school districts with unpaid school meals fees policies,

- the regular meal is offered to students who cannot pay in 12 of the school districts;
 - an alternate meal is immediately served to all students in 10 school districts; and
 - the type of meal provided for students who cannot pay is not described in 11 school districts' policies.
-

Prevention of Stigma and Shaming

Numerous news stories have reported school districts stamping the hands or placing stickers on students who have unpaid school meals debt. The stamps and stickers say phrases such as "I need school lunch money." Such practices can cause embarrassment and shame for affected students and also negatively impact the culture of the cafeteria the school.

While most school districts do not mention shaming acts in their policy, only a few have explicit language that prohibits the stigmatizing of children who cannot pay for their meals. Unpaid meals policies should affirm a commitment to not embarrass students, clearly define what immediate actions to take, and what should be prohibited when a student cannot pay for a meal. Out of the 40 school districts surveyed that have unpaid school meals fees policies,

- 13 of the unpaid school meals fees policies do not mention or define what immediate actions, if any, are taken when a student cannot pay for their meal;
 - 14 of the unpaid school meals fees policies do not notify or take any action at the student level to address school meals debt;
 - three school districts instruct schools to hand an envelope to students describing the amount of unpaid meals debt owed;
 - five school districts instruct schools to remind students verbally that they owe money or have a low balance;
 - two school districts instruct schools to give a colored slip to students describing the amount of unpaid meals debt owed; and
 - one school district requires students who have accumulated three meal charges to be escorted to the nearest telephone to remind their parent or guardian that they owe money and need to send funds the next day. This procedure will continue, daily, until the account debit has been satisfied.
-

Certifying Students to be Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price School Meals

When a family accrues school meals debt, it often is a sign that the family is struggling to make ends meet and the student may be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. There are many possible reasons why an eligible student may not be certified for free or reduced-price school meals. The student may have been eligible at the start of the school year, but missed being directly certified

(i.e., deemed automatically eligible) for free school meals without further application (such as a child who lives in a household participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, or who is experiencing homelessness). The eligible student may not have submitted a school meals application perhaps due to

Direct Certification

School districts are required to directly certify students who live in households that participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and have the option to directly certify students who live in households that participate in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. Additionally, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 created a Medicaid direct certification pilot that now operates in 19 states. The upcoming child nutrition reauthorization can take steps to strengthen direct certification to ensure that more children from low-income families are automatically linked to free school meals and never accrue school meals debt. This includes strengthening SNAP direct certification (24 states do not meet the required national benchmark to directly certify 95 percent of children in SNAP households) and expanding Medicaid direct certification to all states. It also requires Congress to identify additional children who should be automatically eligible for free school meals, such as children who are being impacted by the opioid epidemic, and are being placed with grandparents and other relatives outside of the foster care system. These children would be placed in foster care and automatically eligible for free school meals if their family members did not take on the tremendous financial and emotional responsibility to raise them.

language or other barriers. There are also instances when the student may have become eligible during the school year due to changes in the household income. A strong unpaid school meals fees policy includes clearly defined steps that school administrators will take to certify students with unpaid meals debt for free or reduced-price school meals when they are eligible.

- Of the 40 school district policies, 34 do not include any language about certifying eligible students for free or reduced-price school meals.
- The six school districts that include some language about certifying students do not elaborate or describe the steps the school district will take to certify the students.

Collecting Debt

Under USDA's policy, School Food Authorities cannot charge unpaid school meals debt to the school district's school nutrition account, but they do have the discretion to write off debt as uncollectable at the end of the school year, or carry the debt and collection efforts over to the next academic year. For students who are not certified for free and reduced-price meals after additional efforts by the school district, working with households to develop long-term payment plans is a much better practice than using outside debt collection agencies. Such agencies often charge fees and increase the debt for a family that is already struggling. Among the 40 surveyed school districts with unpaid school meals fees policies,

- households are notified about unpaid meals debt via telephone, written letters, or during in-person meetings in 19 of the school districts;
- an outside debt-collecting agency is hired for unpaid school meals debt in four of the school districts; and
- one district's policy mentions working with households to create a long-term repayment plan.

Preventing School Meals Debt

School districts are taking a number of steps to prevent school meals debt from occurring or to reduce it. One of the easiest ways to eliminate school meals debt is to offer free meals to all students, which is what happens in nine of the 50 districts that were reviewed. In addition to the nine

Retroactive Federal Reimbursement

When students are certified for free or reduced-price school meals after accruing school meals debt, schools are left in a challenging position: either collect the money from a family they know is struggling or absorb the debt. The upcoming reauthorization could provide financial support to schools and help struggling families by providing retroactive reimbursement for school meals served to children who are certified for free or reduced-price school meals later in the school year.

Penalties for Accumulated Debt

Unpaid school meals fees policies should explicitly prohibit schools from withholding documents, such as report cards, and excluding students with debt from school organizations and activities.

- The majority of district policies do not define what measures are permitted or prohibited for students and households that fail to pay school meals debt.
- Two school districts say they withhold documents, such as report cards or diplomas, from the students with uncollectable school meals debt.

that serve free meals to all students in the school district, 16 school districts offer free meals to all students in some of their schools.

Federal school meals policy options, such as the Community Eligibility Provision and Provision 2, allow high-needs schools to offer free meals to all students. These provisions offer numerous benefits beyond eliminating school meals debt, including increased school meals participation, elimination of stigma for students, and reduced paperwork for parents or guardians and school staff. The reduced administrative costs and increased reimbursements resulting from the growth in participation also generate economies of scale and can make offering free meals financially viable for many districts.

Districts that are unable to offer free meals to all students can consider eliminating the reduced-price copay for school breakfast and lunch. It is unknown how many students certified for reduced-price meals are accruing meal debt, but this is the population most likely to be struggling to pay for meals. The fee, therefore, can be a barrier to participation as well as a driver of debt.

School districts also can establish a prepaid meal system that allows parents or guardians to add money to the account at any point during the school year, or waive school meals debt if a student is certified for free or reduced-price school meals midyear.

- All of the 40 school districts with an unpaid school meals fees policy have prepayment systems for school meals.
- Sixteen school districts prevent school meals debt by providing free school meals to all students in some of their schools that have a high number of free and reduced-price eligible students.
- Seven districts offer breakfast, but not lunch, free of charge to all students.

Conclusion

FRAC's review of 50 school districts' unpaid school meals fees policies found a significant variation among the school districts' policies. Some districts have established very strong and clear policies that ensure students are able to access nutritious meals at school, despite a balance on a student's school meals account or lacking the means to pay for the meal at the point-of-sale. These school districts' policies also discourage stigma and embarrassment from occurring in the cafeteria. Many school districts, however, have policies that omit language concerning important procedures and practices. Policies that are too vague leave room for school personnel to act independently, which may or may not be conducive to creating a safe and healthy environment for students. The differences in policies across districts lead children to have very different experiences in the cafeteria, underscoring the need for a national solution to school meals debt.

The upcoming Congressional child nutrition reauthorization provides an important opportunity to ensure that the cafeteria is a positive experience for all children by prohibiting any embarrassing or stigmatizing practices; requiring that communications about unpaid school meals debt are directed to parents or guardians so that children are left out of the conversation; and emphasizing access to school meals for struggling families through school meals application outreach, direct certification improvements, permission for retroactive reimbursements, and community eligibility expansions. By supporting access to free school meals and expanding community eligibility, Congress can proactively address school meals debt and minimize the extent to which schools are grappling with it.

Appendix

Below are the 50 school districts included in this report (with links to the policies that are posted on the school district's website).

[Albuquerque Public Schools, New Mexico](#)

[Aldine Independent School District, Texas](#)

[Alpine School District, Utah](#)

[Anderson Community Schools, Indiana](#)

[Anne Arundel County Public Schools, Maryland](#)

[Austin Independent School District, Texas](#)

[Central Community School System, Louisiana](#)

[Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina](#)

[Chicago Public Schools, Illinois](#)

[Clark County School District, Nevada](#)

[Cobb County School District, Georgia](#)

[Columbus City Schools, Ohio](#)

[Davis School District, Utah](#)

[DeKalb County School District, Georgia](#)

[Denver Public Schools, Colorado](#)

[Detroit Public Schools Community District, Michigan](#)

[Duval County Public Schools, Florida](#)

[East Jordan Public Schools, Michigan](#)

[Enid Public Schools, Oklahoma](#)

[Fort Worth Independent School District, Texas](#)

[Fresno Unified School District, California](#)

[Fulton County Public Schools, Georgia](#)

[Granite School District, Utah](#)

[Greenville County Schools, South Carolina](#)

[Guilford County Schools, North Carolina](#)

[Gwinnett County Public Schools, Georgia](#)

[Hillsborough County Public Schools, Florida](#)

[Houston Independent School District, Texas](#)

[Hutchinson Public Schools, Minnesota](#)

[Jefferson County Public Schools, Colorado](#)

[Long Beach Unified School District, California](#)

[Los Angeles Unified School District, California](#)

[Loudoun County Public Schools, Virginia](#)

[Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, Tennessee](#)

[Milwaukee Public Schools, Wisconsin](#)

[Mount Ayr Community Schools, Iowa](#)

[Northside Independent School District, Texas](#)

[Oldham County Schools, Kentucky](#)

[Orange County Public Schools, Florida](#)

[Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland](#)

[Regional School Unit #3 School District, Maine](#)

[Saint Mary's County Public Schools, Maryland](#)

[San Diego Unified School District, California](#)

[School District of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania](#)

[Shelby County Schools, Alabama](#)

[The School District of Lee County, Florida](#)

[Wake County Public School System, North Carolina](#)

[Washoe County School District, Nevada](#)

[Wayne Highlands School District, Pennsylvania](#)

[West Bonner County School District, Idaho](#)



Food Research & Action Center
1200 18th Street, NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

202.986.2200
www.frac.org

Copyright © 2019 Food Research & Action Center



[@fractweets](https://twitter.com/fractweets)



[@fracgram](https://www.instagram.com/fracgram)



[facebook.com/
foodresearchandactioncenter](https://www.facebook.com/foodresearchandactioncenter)



[linkedin.com/company/
food-research-and-action-center](https://www.linkedin.com/company/food-research-and-action-center)