



United States Department of Agriculture
Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Chief State School Officer:

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs play a critical role in ensuring that America's children have access to the nutritious food they need to learn and succeed in the classroom. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) is deeply troubled by a recent incident where meals were taken away from several elementary school children, allegedly due to outstanding balances on their school meal accounts. Fortunately, we believe this was an isolated incident. However, we believe that such an issue, should it arise again in the future, should be handled in a way that first and foremost respects and protects students from undue embarrassment and stigma.

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is concerned whenever circumstances beyond a child's control, such as not having money on hand or in their lunch account, prevent the child from receiving a regular school meal. Denying or taking food away from children is a form of punishment and stigmatizes children whose parents are behind on payments. While addressing unpaid meal charges is ultimately a local policy, States and local educational agencies (LEAs) can take positive steps to prevent potential issues:

- Schools should ensure that charges are not being applied to children who are eligible for free meals. A child's eligibility status can change, so families not eligible at the beginning of the school year may become eligible later in the year. Eligible children may also not be receiving free meals due to perceived paperwork burden or language barriers.
- State and local officials are responsible for setting clear policies on collecting payment for school meals and might consider a more robust notification system for households with low balances. A variety of strategies for collecting debts can be used, including sending requests to parents for repayment via phone, email, or letter; or working with school principals or other school officials to enforce repayment.
- Schools in areas with high percentages of free and reduced price children should also consider options such as eliminating the reduced-price category or providing free meals to all children. One such option is the new Community Eligibility Provision, currently in place in 11 states and available nationwide beginning July 1st of this year. Schools should be advised that they will likely still incur costs that must be paid from non-Federal funds under this option. In lieu of collecting individual applications, eligible schools are required to pay the difference between the level of financial resources allowed by the

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law, and the total cost of operating the program. This provision reduces administrative burdens for schools and allows them to offer free meals to all children.

Above all, USDA is committed to working with States, LEAs, and advocacy groups to carry out Federal, State and local policies that protect the integrity of the child nutrition programs while helping to ensure that families and children are treated fairly and respectfully. A provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 requires USDA to conduct a study of the policies and practices of schools and districts for serving meals to students who are unable to pay. As a result, we will soon be issuing data from a national survey of about 1,500 school food authority directors. This information will provide us with a better understanding of the range of school policies in existence, including offering alternate meals; as well as the extent of lost revenues from unpaid meals. In addition, we will be convening a multidisciplinary working group in the near future to solicit best practices and other recommendations in this area.

Thank you for your assistance in sharing this information with the LEAs in your State. We know you share our concerns about ensuring that school children have access to healthful meals during the school day and that maintaining both program integrity and student dignity is a goal we all support.

Sincerely,

Original Signed

Kevin Concannon
Under Secretary