

School Meals Debt

Addressing Unpaid School Meals Fees

The upcoming Child Nutrition Reauthorization offers Congress the opportunity to address school meals debt, which is a common problem for school districts across the country.¹ School meals debt can occur when students who are not certified to receive free school meals arrive in the cafeteria without cash in hand or in their school meals account to pay for their meals or for the “reduced-price” copayment. Numerous news stories have covered the issue, highlighting 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 school budgets.

This is not a new challenge. The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 specifically directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to examine the issue of unpaid school meals fees and determine if there should be a national policy.² In response to that directive, USDA did not adopt a policy; it only required school districts to set their own policy for unpaid school meals fees, and allowed states to develop statewide policies.³ USDA did not, however, establish any national standards for what districts need to include in their policies, nor did it provide any minimal protections for children and families.

To address school meals debt, Congress should take a multifaceted approach that protects students and families and supports school nutrition finances.

- **Prohibit stigma and shaming.** While many school districts do not take actions that single out or overtly identify a child, such as placing stamps or stickers on the child, taking away a meal from a child that has already been served, withholding educational opportunities from a child, or requiring them to do chores if they are unable to pay for their school meals, too many school districts do. These practices can cause embarrassment for affected students and negatively impact the culture of the cafeteria and the school. The practice of throwing away food that a child already has been served is particularly humiliating as it sends a very strong message to the child about their status, and it does not save the district any money as that food cannot be reused. Congress should prohibit all of these practices.
- **Ensure that children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals are certified to receive them.** When a family accrues school meals debt, it often is a sign that it is struggling to make ends meet and may be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Children who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals are sometimes missed in the application process. This may be the result of a change in household income during the school year, or the student may have been missed by the direct certification systems (automatic eligibility for free meals because of enrollment in some other means-tested program) at the beginning of the school year. To ensure that all eligible students are being certified for free or reduced-price school meals and not accruing school meals debt, Congress can require school districts to certify for free school meals students who are categorically eligible (such as students who are

¹ School Nutrition Association. (2018). *School Nutrition Operations Report*. This source is available to the public for purchase at <http://schoolnutrition.org/Publications/Bookstore/>.

² Section 143 of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. Public Law 111-296; December 13, 2010 entitled “Review of Local Policies on Meal Charges and Provision of Alternate Meals.” Available at: https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/PL_111-296.pdf. Accessed on May 7, 2019.

³ 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 May 7, 2019.

homeless or in foster care), instead of giving districts the option of doing so, and can direct school districts to conduct direct certification and to contact families about filling out a school meals application when they start accruing school meals debt.

- **Allow districts to claim free and reduced-price school meals retroactively for students who are certified to receive them during the school year.** This, combined with the additional efforts to certify eligible families, as described above, will reduce significantly school meals debt for school districts and families. Currently, school districts can certify students for free or reduced-price school meals as of the date that the application has been processed. By not allowing retroactive reimbursement, the struggling family still carries the debt, even if it is certified for free or reduced-price school meals, and the district still must cover the debt if the family cannot pay.

- **Require school districts to direct communications about unpaid school meals fees to the parents or guardians, not the students.** Any written communications to the parent or guardian about debt should be distributed discreetly through normal school communication channels and in a way that does not stigmatize the student.
- **Prohibit the use of debt collection services to collect school meals fees.** Using debt collection firms often passes additional fees onto the family, greatly increasing the amount an already struggling household owes. School districts should not shift the burden of collecting fees to a debt collector, especially if those fees or any other charges meet or exceed the amount that is owed for school meals.

By enacting these provisions in the upcoming Child Nutrition Reauthorization, Congress can assure that the school cafeteria is a positive and supportive environment for all students, more students who are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals will be certified to receive them, and school finances will improve.