

Support the No Shame at School Act of 2022

The No Shame at School Act of 2022 (S. 4602/H.R. 8477), introduced by Senator Tina Smith (D-MN) and Representative Ilhan Omar (D-MN), would create a multifaceted approach to address school meals debt that would provide protections for students and families, support school nutrition finances, and help ensure that children who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals are certified to receive them. School meals debt is a common challenge for school districts across the country, with 75 percent of school districts reporting that they are struggling with unpaid school meals fees.¹

The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to examine the issue of school meals debt and determine if there should be a national policy. In response, USDA required all school districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program to set their own policy for unpaid school meals fees and gave states the authority to develop statewide policies. USDA did not set any requirements for what the state policy must include, nor did it set minimum protections for children and their families.

What Causes School Meals Debt?

School meals debt can occur when students who are not certified to receive free school meals arrive in the school cafeteria without cash in hand or in their school meals account to pay for their meals. The issue 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 eliminated the reduced-price school breakfast and lunch copayments. Numerous news stories have covered the issue, highlighting school district practices that provide partial meals of weak nutritional value, identify and embarrass students who owe school meals debt, or both. The stories often reflect the financial struggle for school districts as they contend with unpaid school meals fees and the impact it has on their school budgets.

What Does the No Shame at School Act of 2022 Propose?

Prohibit stigma and shaming of students with school meals fees. Practices, such as placing stamps or stickers on a child, taking away a meal from a child who has already been served, withholding educational opportunities, or requiring a child to perform chores if they are unable to pay for their school meals, can cause embarrassment for affected students and negatively impact the culture of the cafeteria and 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 does not save the district any money as the food cannot be reused.

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, which may be a result of a change in household income status during the school year or the student may have been missed by the direct certification systems. Currently, school districts have discretion in certifying for free school meals without further application students who are “categorically eligible.” If enacted, the No Shame at School Act of 2019 would take a step further by requiring school districts to certify students who are categorically eligible for free school meals, such as children who are homeless or in foster care, and take steps to determine if children whose households are accruing school meals debt are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

Allow school districts to receive free or reduced-price reimbursements for meals served to low-income students prior to their certification for free or reduced-price school meals. Currently, school districts can only receive free or reduced-price reimbursement for meals that are served after the school meal application has been processed. This means that a struggling family who is certified for free or reduced-price school meals later in the school year still carries any debt that was accrued before being certified. Allowing retroactive reimbursement for meals served after the start of the school

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

year, but before the date that the application was processed, would reduce significantly school meals debt for school districts and families.

Require school districts to direct all communications about school meals debt to the parents or guardians, not the students. Any communications about debt should be distributed discreetly to the parent/guardian 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 frequently unloads additional fees onto the family, greatly increasing the dollar amount a struggling household already owes.

How Will the No Shame at School Act of 2022 Benefit Communities?

This Act would ensure that schools and school cafeterias

- are positive and supportive environments for all students while providing important protections for children and their families;
- increase the number of eligible students who are certified to receive free and reduced-price school meals; and
- would no longer be left in the difficult position of choosing between absorbing school meals debt or trying to collect it from a struggling family by providing retroactive free or reduced-price school meals reimbursements for eligible students.