

The Anti-Lunch Shaming Act of 2017

The Anti-Lunch Shaming Act, [S. 1064](#) and [H.R. 2401](#), would end practices that single out children who do not have money in their school lunch account or in hand to pay for their meal. The bill was introduced by Senators Tom Udall (D-NM), Robert Casey (D-PA), and Martin Heinrich (D-NM) and Representatives Michelle Lujan Grisham (D-NM), Rodney Davis (R-IL), Bobby Scott (D-VA), Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), and Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM), and addresses “lunch shaming” practices that can embarrass children in the cafeteria.

Why do school districts have school meal debt?

School meal debt is a challenge for most school districts, with more than three-quarters reporting some amount of school meal debt, according to the School Nutrition Association. Policies for how school districts deal with this issue at the local level vary significantly:

- Some school districts will allow students to “charge” a meal if they cannot pay, but many limit this to a certain number of meals or a strict dollar amount.
- Some districts may offer a child a standard meal from the menu regardless of their ability to pay.
- Some districts may serve an alternate meal such as a cheese sandwich when meal debt accrues.
- Some allow younger students to charge meals, but not older students.

What is Lunch Shaming?

Often, if a student has been served a meal but does not have money in their lunch account or in hand, the meal is taken away, sometimes thrown out in front of the child because the food cannot be re-served, causing humiliation in front of their peers. After students have accrued school meal debt or when a student’s balance is low in their school lunch account, some school districts utilize tactics to remind parents or guardians to put money in the student’s account, such as stamping a child’s hand or making them wear a sticker or wristband that says, “I need lunch money.” However, these practices inevitably cause embarrassment for the student, who should not feel as though they are being punished for their parents’ financial difficulties.

How will the Anti-Lunch Shaming Act help?

The Anti-Lunch Shaming Act would protect children who owe school meal debt from these practices by:

- Prohibiting public identification or stigmatization, such as marking children with handstamps or stickers, or making them do chores;
- Barring schools from disposing of a meal after it has been served to a child; and
- Requiring school districts to direct any communication about outstanding debt to parents and guardians and not the child.

In addition, because many students who accrue debt are often from low-income households struggling with finances, the bill encourages school districts to take steps to ensure that eligible children are certified for free and reduced-price school meals.

Additional Information and Resources:

- FRAC’s Guide [Establishing Unpaid Meal Fee Policies: Best Practices to Ensure Access and Prevent Stigma](#)
- New York Times Article, [New Mexico Outlaws School Lunch Shaming](#)
- FRAC’s Op-Ed in The Hill, [How to stop school lunch shaming? Leave kids out of it](#)