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School Meal Debt and Student Privacy

Educators and support professionals feed students' minds and bodies every day, through high quality teaching and learning as well as by assuring students receive at least one well-balanced, nutritious, hot meal daily. Schools have provided subsidized lunches to students since the enactment of the National School Lunch Act in 1946, and in 1966 federal student meal programs expanded to include breakfast. In 2016, more than 30 million children participated in the National School Lunch Program, and 14.5 million children participated in the School Breakfast Program.

Families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for free meals at school, and families with incomes that are above 130 percent but not above 185 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals. In 2017 the federal government invested about \$17.9 billion in school breakfast and lunch programs.¹

Despite significant public investment in school meal programs, some families who purchase reduced-price or full-price lunches struggle to cover the costs associated with these meals. In some districts, annual student meal debt is tens of thousands of dollars. These debts can make it very challenging to operate a school food program, since programs run on very tight budgets.

To collect meal debt from families, some districts engaged in practices that publicly disclosed individual students' meal debt status. For example, some schools issued a "bare-bones" meal to students with meal debt that differed from all other school meals. Other schools marked students with visible stamps or stickers affirming meal debt. In some cases, students' meals were taken and discarded because of unpaid debt, and other students were denied meals entirely. These practices have been termed *lunch shaming*.

State and federal policymakers have been debating how to eradicate lunch shaming practices while also reducing high levels of meal debt. **In 2017, Pennsylvania lawmakers enacted new requirements for districts to communicate directly with parents and guardians about meal debt and to serve a regular meal to every student who requests one.**

Pennsylvania's New Law Banning Lunch Shaming Practices

In Pennsylvania, a 2017 law prohibits singling out children who do not have funds to pay for their school meal. Specifically, school districts must adopt policies that include the following:

- A school must provide a school food program meal to a student who requests one, unless the student's parent or guardian has specifically provided a written directive to the school to withhold a school meal.
- When a student owes money for five or more student meals, the school must make at least two attempts to reach the student's parent or guardian and have the parent or guardian apply for participation in the school food program.

¹ From USDA FNS Preliminary Data, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/cncost.pdf>.

- All schools must direct communications regarding student meal debt to the parent or guardian, not to the student. This may include sending a letter home with the student.
- All schools are prohibited from publicly identifying or stigmatizing a student who cannot pay for a school meal or who owes money for school meals.
- A school cannot require a student who cannot pay for a school meal to perform chores or other work to pay for the school meal (unless chores or other work are required of all students regardless of the student's inability to pay for the school meal).
- A school cannot require a student to discard a school meal after it was served to the student due to the student's inability to pay for the school meal or the amount of money owed by the student for earlier school meals.

Strategies to Reduce Student Meal Debt

Pennsylvania's new requirements regarding lunch shaming practices is an important step forward to develop appropriate and consistent meal debt policies across the Commonwealth. The Pennsylvania Department of Education has issued a [Frequently Asked Questions](#) document to help districts meet the requirements of this new law. Still, concerns about the budgetary impact of unpaid student meal debt remain. To help schools and districts address the challenge of unpaid meal debt, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Program issued a guide, [Overcoming the Unpaid Meal Challenge: Proven Strategies from Our Nation's Schools](#). Strategies outlined in this guide include the following:

- Provide all households with a school meal application prior to the start of the school year and offer assistance for all households to complete the form.
- If a school is aware of a student's eligibility for free- or reduced-price meals, certify the child for services through the application process outlined in USDA Guidance.²
- Inform parents and guardians when school meal balances are low and include information about applying for free- or reduced-price meals.
- Proactively work with families to certify all eligible students for free- or reduced-price meals.
- Use confidential communication channels with parents and guardians including calls to a home or cell phone or letters in plain, unmarked envelopes.
- Develop flexible payment plans for families who incur meal debt.
- Communicate the meal fee policy clearly and frequently to all parents, guardians, and staff.
- Seek alternative funding sources to offset costs of unpaid meal debt. Alternative funding sources may include state and local public funds (if allowable in funding requirements), local charities, and school fund raisers.

For more information

PSEA members with questions about district-specific policies and practices should contact their UniServ Representative. For general information, PSEA members may contact Carla Claycomb in the PSEA Education Services Department at cclaycomb@psea.org.

² Students living in households that qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or other federal poverty programs automatically are eligible for free school meals. In addition, students who are homeless, migrant, or in foster care can be certified without completing an application.

