



UNPAID MEAL CHARGES

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs provide children with nutritious meals during the school day. Families participating at the reduced or paid rate are expected to pay for their children's meals. When a child does not have the funds needed to pay for their meal, it is a difficult situation for both the child and the school. USDA is committed to working with local officials to minimize the impact of unpaid meal charges on participating children and on their bottom line.

WHAT DOES USDA REQUIRE?

USDA does not impose a "one-size-fits-all" policy for handling unpaid meals. We believe local communities are best positioned to determine how to manage the problem based on their unique needs and available resources. We require school food authorities to develop and communicate a policy for handling unpaid meal charges, but allow local officials to define how the policy works. Developing and clearly communicating a meal charge policy prevents confusion for families and gives local officials leverage to address the issue.

CAN STATES DEVELOP A MEAL CHARGE POLICY?

Yes. While USDA's requirement applies to the school food authority, we give States discretion to develop an unpaid meal charge policy to be implemented by all school food authorities throughout the State.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO ABOUT "LUNCH SHAMING"?

USDA is aware of rare instances of "lunch shaming," or practices that embarrass children who are unable to pay for a meal. USDA strongly discourages "lunch shaming" tactics, such as denying children meals, requiring children to work for meals, or using hand stamps or stickers to identify children with meal charges.

Instead, USDA promotes best practices including:

- Ensuring eligible children are certified for free or reduced price meals
- Offering families multiple payment options, including online payment
- Reminding families of low account balances through discreet methods such as calls, texts, and emails sent directly to the parent/guardian

WHERE CAN I GO TO LEARN MORE?

USDA is working hard to provide State and local officials with all the support and resources they need to ensure they succeed in developing fair, sustainable, and transparent policies to navigate situations where children do not have funds to pay for their meal. Visit <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/unpaid-meal-charges> to find policy guidance, webinars, handbooks, trainings, checklists, and more!