

CENTER FOR CREATIVITY, INNOVATION, AND DISCOVERY

Meal Charges and Negative Lunch Balances Policy

Purpose

The Board of Directors of the Center for Creativity, Innovation, and Discovery is committed to a school environment that enhances student learning and encourages parents and guardians to assist students in receiving the nutrition needed to stay focused during the school day. As an integral part of this effort, the school participates in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP).

The board has established this policy for unpaid meal charges in order to allow students to receive nutritious meals, prevent over-identification of students with insufficient funds to pay for school meals, and maintain the financial integrity of the nonprofit school nutrition program. This policy also complies with United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Memo Code: SP-46-2016, which requires all school food authorities to have a clear policy for unpaid meal charges.

Philosophy

The board expects administrators, staff, and school nutrition employees to treat students with dignity and respect in order to minimize the identification of children with insufficient funds to pay for school meals. Although the board acknowledges the need to maintain the financial integrity of school food service accounts, the school's unpaid meal practices will be consistent and transparent, and will at all times preserve the dignity and confidentiality of the students associated with delinquent accounts.

Definitions

Bad Debt: means unrecovered or delinquent debt that, after all reasonable steps have been taken, has been determined uncollectable and written off. Federal funds cannot be used to pay off bad debt.

Lunch Shaming: means practices that overtly identify, stigmatize, or embarrass children who are unable to pay for a meal or who have outstanding debt. Federal guidance and state laws strongly discourage or prohibit such practices.

Meal Charge: means the practice of allowing a student to receive a reimbursable meal when they do not have sufficient funds in their account to pay for it at the moment. The cost of the meal is recorded as a debt against the student's account.

Negative Account Balance: means the status of a meal account when the accrued meal charges exceed the funds available in the account. This circumstance is considered a 'delinquent debt' owed to the non-profit school food service account.

Reimbursable Meal: means a meal that meets specific federal nutrition standards set by the USDA and is eligible for federal reimbursement under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) or School Breakfast Program (SBP).

Unpaid Meal Charges or Delinquent Debt: means money owed to the school's food program for meals that have been charged to a student's account but not yet paid by the parent/guardian. The debt is classified as delinquent as long as collection efforts are being made.

Meal Program

The school provides a school meal program available to students. The cost of the program is determined by the administration, business office, and nutrition manager so as to make the program as nearly self-supporting as possible. The school will notify the families of children attending school of the current guidelines for free or reduced-price school meals. Information about the regulations and procedures regarding reduced-price and free meals will be available in the Front Office and on the school's website.

Free and Reduced-Lunch Applications

Free and Reduced-Lunch Applications are available at the Front Office and may also be accessed through the school's Aspire system.

Payment

Parents and guardians have the responsibility to ensure that their child has sufficient in their meal account.

- Parents or guardians can pay for meals electronically through tools and portals provided by the school;
- Parents or guardians may also make payments by cash, check, or credit card in the Front Office.
- The school does not accept payment in the lunch line. Payments into lunch accounts must be made in advance or during lunch in the Front Office.
- The school may choose not to accept personal checks from parents who have previously provided a check that was returned from their bank for any reason, including insufficient funds.
- If a student qualifies for free meals, no payments are due for the reimbursable meal.
- Parents or guardians must pay for any meals charged to their child's account prior to qualifying for free/reduced meals.
- Parents or guardians who qualify for free/reduced meals are responsible to pay for any seconds, extra milk and/or juice, and ala carte charges to their student's meal account.

- If a student qualifies for reduced-price meals, no payments beyond the reduced price are due for the reimbursable meal.

Students with negative account balances may not purchase additional food, other than the normal amount given in a regular school lunch (reimbursable meal).

Meal Charges

The school recognizes that on occasion, students may not have enough funds in their accounts for a meal. To ensure that students do not go hungry, but also to promote responsible student behavior and minimize the fiscal burden to the school, the school will allow students who do not have enough funds to “charge” the cost of meals to be paid back at a later date subject to the terms in this policy. To comply with state guidelines and maintain a system for accounting for charged meals, regarding both full and reduced-price meals, the school shall:

Notification

The district will notify students and their families of the policy for Charged Meals, meaning meals received by a student when the student does not have money in hand or in his or her food account. This policy applies to students who receive meals at the free, reduced, or full rates.

- Notice of this policy will be provided at registration and through the online portal used to access student accounts.
- Notice of this policy will also be provided to all school staff responsible for the enforcement of it, including the school’s Child Nutrition Manager, other food service professionals responsible for collecting payment for meals at the point of service, staff involved in notifying families of low or negative balances, and other staff involved in enforcing any aspect of this policy.

Communication about Meal Charges

- All payment and balance-related communication will be directed to parents or guardians and not the student.
- No student will be targeted or subject to lunch shaming because their account has a negative balance or the school has attempted to collect fees through a collection agency.
- The school will typically send an email to parents or guardians for negative balances.
- A final notice will be sent to parents or guardians before an account is sent to collections, giving them a last chance to pay or set up a payment plan.
- Parents or guardians will be responsible for fees associated with unpaid debt that has been turned over to a collection agency.

- The school will make at least two attempts, including a minimum of two emails to all known email addresses and two phone calls to all known phone numbers, prior to sending an account to collections.

Unpaid Meal Charges

- Students who qualify for free meals will not be denied a reimbursable meal, even if they have accrued a negative balance from previous purchases.
- Students with outstanding debt for meal charges will be allowed to receive a meal.
- The school will make reasonable, discrete efforts to notify parents or guardians when meal account balances are low.
- Parents or guardians will be notified of an outstanding negative balance once the negative balance reaches \$25.00.
- Negative balances of more than \$50.00 not paid prior to the end of the school year will be considered delinquent debt and will be sent to a collection agency.
- The school will make reasonable, discrete efforts to collect delinquent (overdue) unpaid meal charges, which is an allowable use of National School Food Service Account (NSFSA) funds, and will coordinate communications with families to resolve the charges.
- Options for collecting charges may include the use of a collection agency, small claims court, or any other collection method permitted by law and consistent with the Fair Debt Collections Practices Act.

Unpaid Meal Charges for Employees

School employees may use a charge account for meals, but may charge no more than \$25.00 to their account. When an account reaches this limit, the employee will not be allowed to charge additional meals or a la carte items until the negative account balance is paid.

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