



Office for Prekindergarten through Grade 12 Education
Child Nutrition Program Administration
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To: School Food Service Directors/Managers

From: Paula Tyner-Doyle, Coordinator

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Subject: Charge Policies

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs play a critical role in ensuring that New York's children have access to the nutritious food they need to learn and succeed in the classroom.

It is important that schools make decisions regarding the charging of student meals and the potential denial of meals to students who have reached the charge limit. Decisions regarding collection of unpaid funds from students should protect students from undue embarrassment and stigma. Recent events in the media regarding student meal charges and denial of meals have brought this issue to the foreground.

Denying or taking food away from children is a form of punishment and stigmatizes children whose parents are behind on payments. LEAs can take positive preventive steps to curtail potential issues from arising. These include ensuring that eligibility certifications are current and that all changes as a result of continued direct certification are provided to families immediately. Schools in areas with high percentages of free and reduced price children should also consider options such as eliminating the reduced price category, or providing meals at no charge to all children through participation in the Community Eligibility Provision or Provision 2, if appropriate.

The United States Department of Agriculture is in the process of developing guidance for schools to use when considering student meal charge policies. The guidance document is expected to be released to the states in Spring, 2014.

Child Nutrition Program regulations allow LEAs to establish student meal charge policies. It is highly recommended that LEAs develop meal charge policies that are approved by the local board of education and that are tailored to the different ages of students within the LEA. If left unregulated, charge meals can accumulate and cause a financial burden on the school lunch account. Please note that adults should never be allowed to charge meals.

It is also important that once developed, policies should be communicated to all school food service staff, students, parents, teachers and the entire school community so that the policies are implemented consistently and appropriately. If you do not have an official policy, staff may develop policies within each building that may be subject to criticism or discrimination.

LEAs are responsible for setting clear policies on collecting payment for school meals and should consider a more robust notification system for households with low balances. A variety of strategies for collecting debt can be used, including phone, email or letter notifications, and working with school principals or other school officials to enforce repayment.

We would like to remind you of the following items to consider when establishing meal charge policies:

- What can be charged?
 - It is recommended that if you are going to allow charges, that they be limited to reimbursable meals
- The limit (if any) on the number of charges allowed per student
 - You may decide to allow no meal charging
 - This option is not recommended for very young students or students with disabilities
 - Per current USDA guidance, if you are going to allow charging, it is recommended that you allow a minimum of three charges
- The system you will use to identify and record meal charges
 - Charges must be recorded on the day the student receives the meal, in the appropriate category of eligibility (i.e., reduced or paid)
- The system you will use to collect repayments
 - A section on the daily cash report or deposit summary must identify ‘charges paid’
 - An audit trail should be established that identifies the monies for charges paid as ‘Sale of Meals to Children’ for ST-3 or Analysis of Cash Resources reporting purposes
- How you are going to communicate the policy to parents, students and school staff
 - The policy must be provided to all families in writing
 - The policy must include provisions to inform families in writing of outstanding charges before meals are denied
- Whether you will have another fund within the school, i.e., PTA, for students to ‘borrow’ from
- Whether an alternate meal will be made available to a student who has exceeded the charge maximum
 - The policy should specifically spell out the alternate meal offering, i.e., peanut butter and jelly sandwich, vegetable, fruit and milk, or cheese sandwich and milk
 - The policy should spell out whether the alternate meal offered will be claimed for reimbursement in Child Nutrition Programs
 - Meals being claimed for reimbursement **MUST** meet all meal pattern requirements, including whole grain rich and vegetable subgroup requirements
 - The policy should specifically spell out whether the student will incur another charge should they accept the alternate meal, and the amount of that charge

When the decision is made to deny a meal to a student who has abused the established charge policy, the process of the denial should be clearly spelled out to all parties - student, parent and school staff. The LEA should carefully consider the negative consequences that may arise from the denial of a meal to students.

Again, the denial of meals to very young students or students with disabilities is not recommended. In addition, it is never appropriate to take a meal from a student at the end of the line and throw it in the trash.

Additional questions regarding the establishment of charge policies should be directed to your Child Nutrition Program representative. As soon as the updated USDA guidance is available, we will post it to the website for your use.

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