




STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Sponsors of the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs

FROM: John Frassinelli, Chief 
Bureau of Health/Nutrition, Family Services and Adult Education

DATE: February 27, 2014

SUBJECT: **Operational Memorandum #15-14**
Student Debt and Unpaid Meal Charges

Attached is a letter from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services Kevin Concannon regarding student debt and unpaid meal charges in the National School Lunch Program. This letter reinforces the Food and Nutrition Services’ belief that such issues must be handled in a way that first and foremost respects and maintains student dignity. The letter also details positive steps that local educational agencies can take to prevent potential issues. Note that the USDA has mailed this letter to all State superintendents with a request for them to send it on to their district superintendents and school principals as soon as possible.

Please make sure that sponsors of the school Child Nutrition Programs have an updated policy on file that addresses the charging of meals and a child’s inability to pay. This policy must be in writing and shared with the students, staff, parents and the community. For more information, refer to [Operational Memorandum 19-10](#).

Questions may be directed to:

COUNTY ASSIGNMENTS	CONSULTANT	E-MAIL AND PHONE
Fairfield County	Fionnuala Brown	fionnuala.brown@ct.gov 860-807-2129
Hartford County (towns/cities beginning with A-R)	Teri Dandeneau	teri.dandeneau@ct.gov 860-807-2079
Hartford County (towns/cities beginning with S-W) Windham County	Susan Alston	susan.alston@ct.gov 860-807-2081
Litchfield County	Allison Calhoun-White	allison.calhoun-white@ct.gov 860-807-2008
Middlesex County Tolland County	Andy Paul	andrew.paul@ct.gov 860-807-2048
New Haven County	Jackie Schipke	jackie.schipke@ct.gov 860-807-2123
New London County	Monica Pacheco	monica.pacheco@ct.gov 860-807-2073

JF:tdd

Attachment



United States Department of Agriculture
Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Chief State School Officer:

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs play a critical role in ensuring that America's children have access to the nutritious food they need to learn and succeed in the classroom. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) is deeply troubled by a recent incident where meals were taken away from several elementary school children, allegedly due to outstanding balances on their school meal accounts. Fortunately, we believe this was an isolated incident. However, we believe that such an issue, should it arise again in the future, should be handled in a way that first and foremost respects and protects students from undue embarrassment and stigma.

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is concerned whenever circumstances beyond a child's control, such as not having money on hand or in their lunch account, prevent the child from receiving a regular school meal. Denying or taking food away from children is a form of punishment and stigmatizes children whose parents are behind on payments. While addressing unpaid meal charges is ultimately a local policy, States and local educational agencies (LEAs) can take positive steps to prevent potential issues:

- Schools should ensure that charges are not being applied to children who are eligible for free meals. A child's eligibility status can change, so families not eligible at the beginning of the school year may become eligible later in the year. Eligible children may also not be receiving free meals due to perceived paperwork burden or language barriers.
- State and local officials are responsible for setting clear policies on collecting payment for school meals and might consider a more robust notification system for households with low balances. A variety of strategies for collecting debts can be used, including sending requests to parents for repayment via phone, email, or letter; or working with school principals or other school officials to enforce repayment.
- 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 free meals to all children. One such option is the new Community Eligibility Provision, currently in place in 11 states and available nationwide beginning July 1st of this year. Schools should be advised that they will likely still incur costs that must be paid from non-Federal funds under this option. In lieu of collecting individual applications, eligible schools are required to pay the difference between the level of financial resources allowed by the

law, and the total cost of operating the program. This provision reduces administrative burdens for schools and allows them to offer free meals to all children.

Above all, USDA is committed to working with States, LEAs, and advocacy groups to carry out Federal, State and local policies that protect the integrity of the child nutrition programs while helping to ensure that families and children are treated fairly and respectfully. A provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 requires USDA to conduct a study of the policies and practices of schools and districts for serving meals to students who are unable to pay. As a result, we will soon be issuing data from a national survey of about 1,500 school food authority directors. This information will provide us with a better understanding of the range of school policies in existence, including offering alternate meals; as well as the extent of lost revenues from unpaid meals. In addition, we will be convening a multidisciplinary working group in the near future to solicit best practices and other recommendations in this area.

Thank you for your assistance in sharing this information with the LEAs in your State. We know you share our concerns about ensuring that school children have access to healthful meals during the school day and that maintaining both program integrity and student dignity is a goal we all support.

Sincerely,

Original Signed

Kevin Concannon
Under Secretary



United States Department of Agriculture
Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

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