

Prevention of Unpaid Meal Charges and Lunch Shaming



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Topic Overview

- ▶ USDA Requirement
- ▶ NJ Requirement
- ▶ National School Nutrition Association Unpaid Meal Balance Report
- ▶ Survey Results from New Jersey SFAs
- ▶ Best Practices to Prevent Unpaid Meal Charges
- ▶ Best Practices to Prevent “Lunch Shaming”

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Why Does USDA Require a Local Meal Charge Policy?

- ▶ In 2010, Congress required USDA to examine and report to Congress on charge and alternate meal policies
- ▶ Rather than adopt a Federal policy, USDA determined a **local approach** would work best for schools



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USDA Requirement: Unpaid Meal Charge Policy

- ▶ All school food authorities (SFAs) operating the National School Lunch Program and/or School Breakfast Program must develop a meal charge policy
- ▶ **SFAs have discretion** in developing the specifics of their policies



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USDA Requirement: Communication

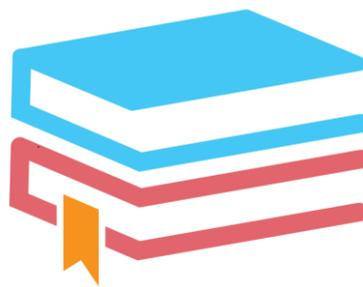
- ▶ SFAs must communicate the policy, in writing, to:
 - ▶ All families at the start of the school year
 - ▶ Families with students who transfer mid-year
- ▶ SFAs must provide the policy, in writing, to any school or district-level staff members responsible for policy enforcement



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USDA Requirement: Recordkeeping

- ▶ SFAs must provide the policy to the State agency during the Administrative Review
- ▶ SFAs must maintain documentation of policy communication methods



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USDA Recommendations

- ▶ Communicate in **multiple** ways
- ▶ Maintain the **financial integrity** of the Programs
- ▶ Provide children with **adequate nutrition** to learn
- ▶ Prevent “**lunch shaming**” of children with meal charges



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New Jersey Requirement: State Bill A-1796/S-2000

- ▶ Prohibits school districts from denying student meals because payment is owed **without prior notice**
- ▶ If a student meal account is in arrears, the district shall contact the parent or guardian to provide notice of the debt and shall provide the parent or guardian with a period of 10 school days to pay the amount due
- ▶ If the parent or guardian has not made full payment by the end of the 10 school days, then the district shall again contact the parent or guardian to provide notice that breakfast or lunch shall not be served to the student beginning one week from the date of the second notice unless the payment is made in full.
- ▶ Children who qualify for free meals may never be denied a reimbursable meal

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New Jersey Requirement: State Bill Amended No.1896

- ▶ School districts are required to report the number of students who are denied school breakfast or lunch to the New Jersey Department of Agriculture
- ▶ This information is entered in the monthly reimbursement voucher per site
 - ▶ Only report the number of students who did not receive any meal due to their unpaid meal charges

Students Not Receiving a Meal because of Unpaid Meal Charges

Number of Students

0

School Nutrition Association's 2019 School Nutrition Trends Report

UNPAID STUDENT MEAL DEBT

75%

3/4 of districts report their program had **unpaid student meal debt** at the end of the 2017/18 school year.



The median **unpaid meal debt** rose **70%** since the 2012/13 school year.

For details on SNA's 2019 School Nutrition Trends Report, visit SchoolNutrition.org.



School Nutrition Association's 2018 School Nutrition Operations Report

Tactics used to prevent or minimize unpaid student meal debt

Online payments/monitoring of account balances	89.8%
School staff notify parents directly about low balances or meal charges	83.0%
Assistance offered to families completing free and reduced-price applications	78.9%
Automated phone calls, text or emails for low balance notifications	73.7%
Online free and reduced-price applications	66.7%
Financial assistance provided through donations	53.3%
Payment plans offered to families struggling to pay for school meals	45.9%
Other	5.7%

The sample excludes districts that have all schools participating in CEP.



School Nutrition Operations Report, 2018

School Nutrition Association's 2019 School Nutrition Trends Report

Debt Resolution

	None paid down	<25% paid down	25%-50% paid down	51%-99% paid down	Fully paid down	Average amount paid down	n=
Amount of student meal debt paid down	27.6%	15.1%	15.5%	17.8%	24.1%	46.2%	511

Responses limited to the districts that could provide the specific amount of debt that was paid down.

Charitable contributions	55.4%
School district general funds	36.2%
Parents (*)	21.9%
Individual school funds	11.7%
PTA/PTO funds	11.2%
A la carte/competitive food/catering/adult meal sales	6.6%
State or local funds (not school district funds)	1.0%
Other	2.3%
Not sure which sources were used	3.8%
n=	392

(*) = This category created from the "other" responses, and involves situations where the parents/students eventually paid off all or some of the unpaid meal debt themselves. This category may be under-represented in the data as a funding source since it was not a defined choice on the survey.



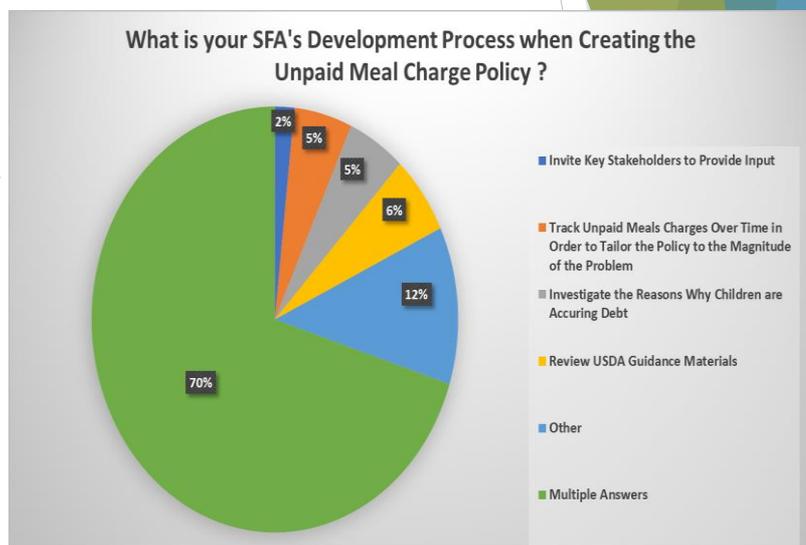
SNA 2019 School Nutrition Trends Report

Survey Results from New Jersey SFAs

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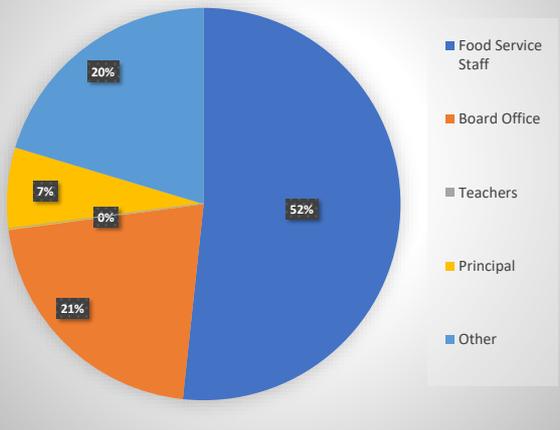
Survey Results Q1: Development Process

- ▶ 70% of Districts reported use of multiple development processes
- ▶ **Best Practice:** Use multiple development processes when creating an Unpaid Meal Charge Policy



Survey Results Q2: Tracking Unpaid Meal Charges and Notifying Households

Who is Responsible for Tracking Unpaid Meal Charges and Notifying Household within your SFA?

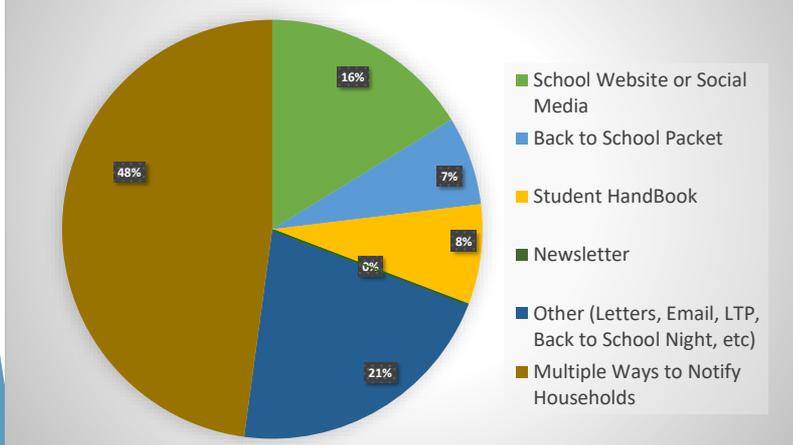


- ▶ 52% of SFAs reported that the notification of unpaid charges to the households is the responsibility of Food Service
- ▶ **Best Practice:** Designate an individual(s) who has direct access to students' meals account and access to notify households

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Survey Results Q3: Notification of Policy

How will Families be Notified of the Unpaid Meal Charge Policy?

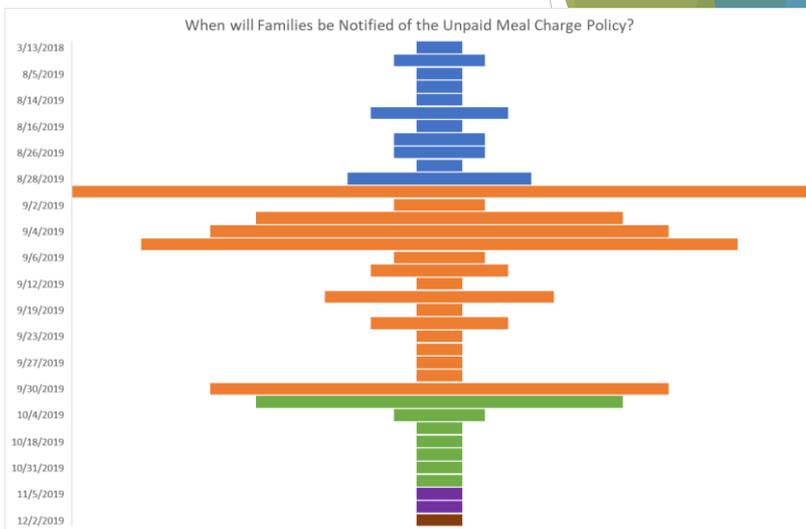


- ▶ 48% of SFAs surveyed reported using multiple ways to notify households
- ▶ **Best Practice:** Provide multiple methods to communicate the policy

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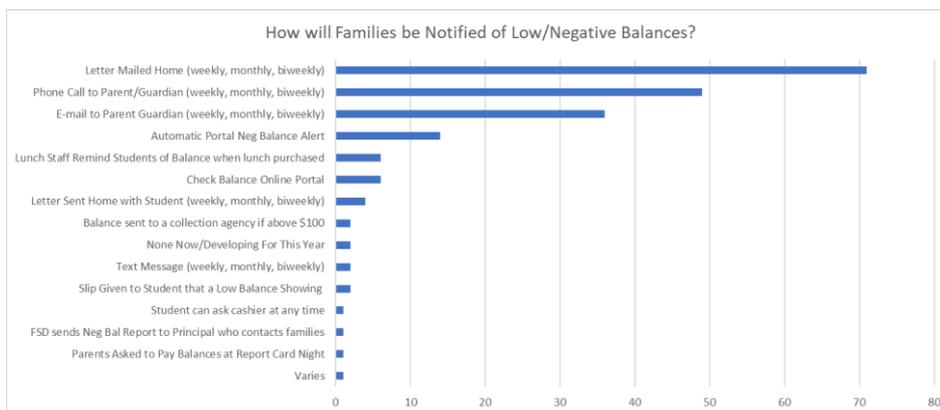
Survey Results Q4: When are Families Notified

- ▶ Survey results:
 - ▶ Before first day of school (August/September)
 - ▶ On the first day of school (August/September)
 - ▶ After first day of school (October/November/December)
- ▶ Best Practice: Notify households before the first day of school



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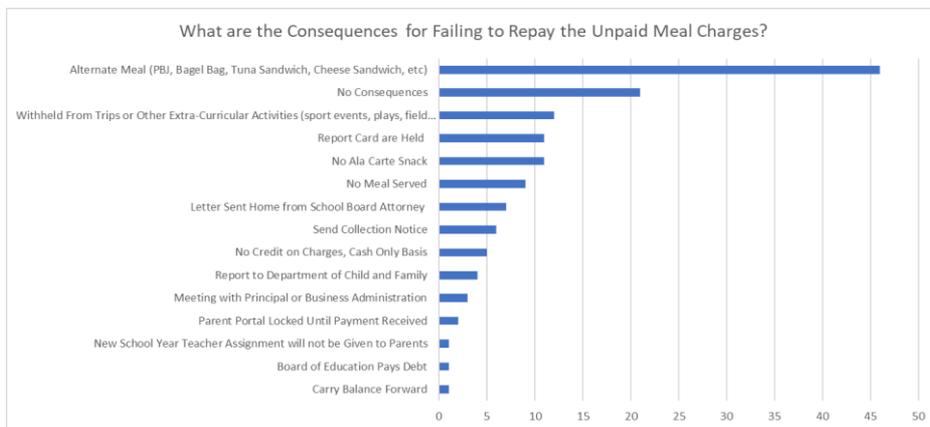
Survey Results Q5: Balance Notification



- ▶ Best Practice: Directly notify the parents/guardians when the unpaid meal charge is low, not negative and use multiple methods of the payment reminders
 - ▶ Creating a courtesy account balance alert to notify households before the account is negative will help prevent unpaid meal charges

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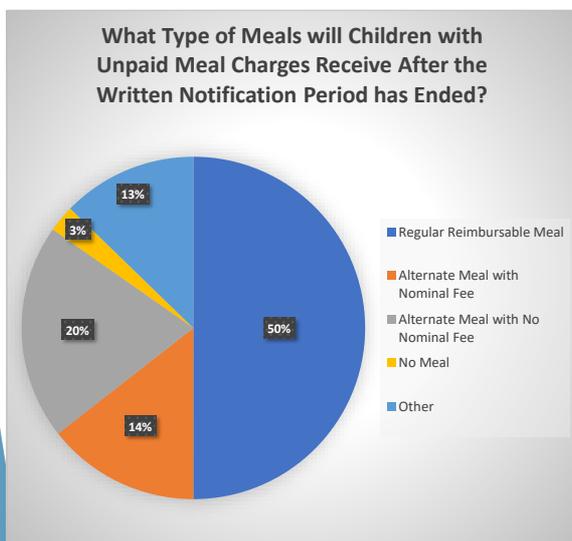
Survey Results Q6: Consequences



- ▶ Majority of SFA’s served an alternate meal as a consequence
- ▶ **Best Practice:** When enforcing a consequence, stay away from threats and methods that may distress or embarrass students

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Survey Results Q7: Type of Meals

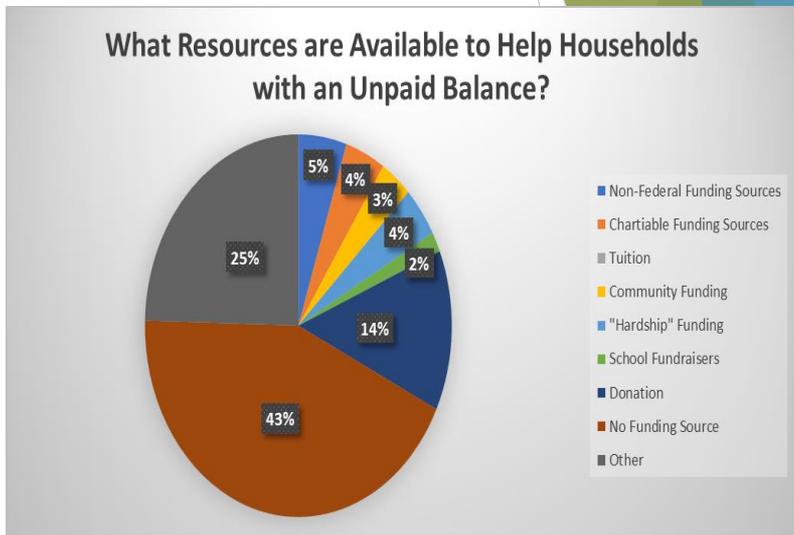


- ▶ 50% of Districts surveyed serve a Regular Reimbursable Meal
- ▶ **Best Practice:** If alternate meals are served, they should be healthy and should not single out children with unpaid meal charges.
- ▶ When distributing the Unpaid Meal Charge Policy to households, highlight if alternate meals will be served and identify the components of the alternate meal served to students with unpaid meal charges.

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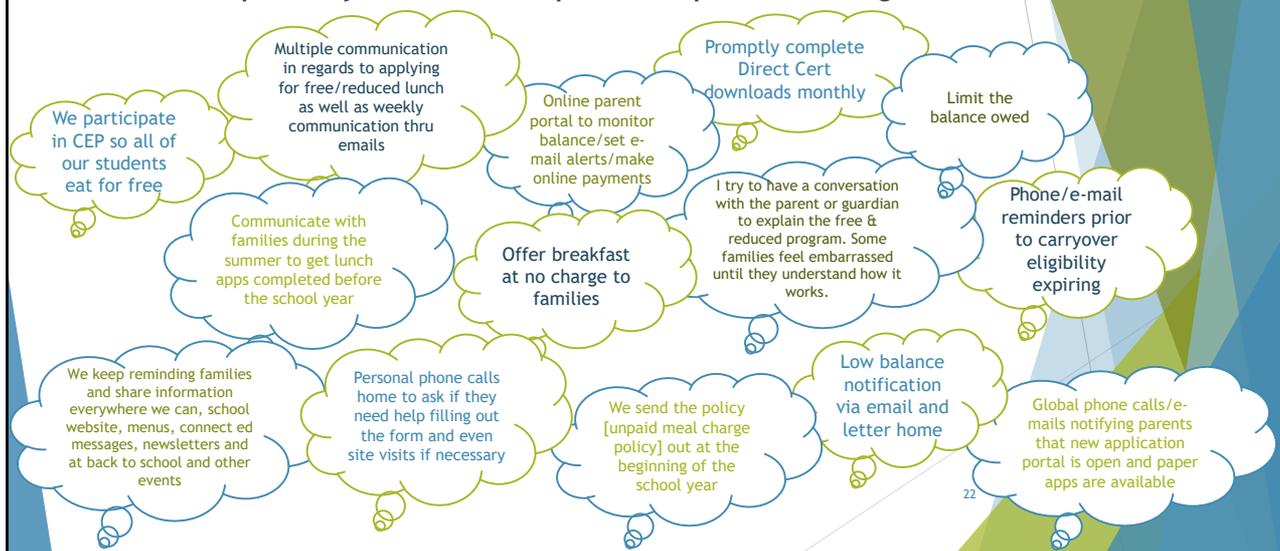
Survey Results Q8: Available Resources

- 43% of SFAs Surveyed had no alternate funding source
- **Best Practice: Use Funds from Alternative Funding Sources**
 - ▶ Not a long term solution
 - ▶ Staff should never be expected to pay for children's meals



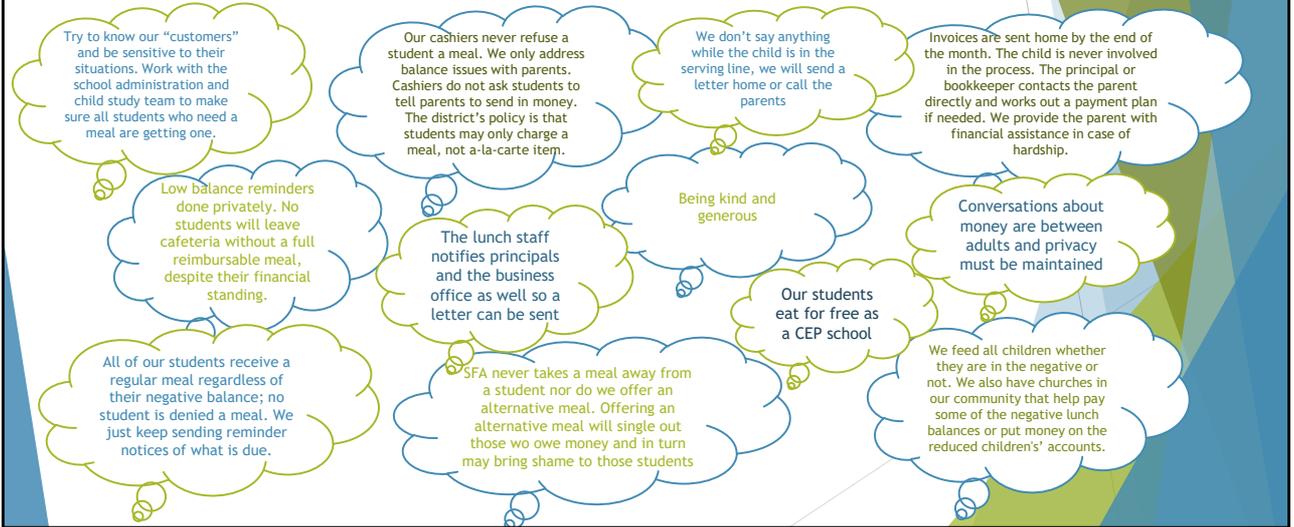
Prevention of Unpaid Meal Charges and Lunch Shaming Survey Monkey Q9 Results from SFAs

What steps does your SFA take to prevent unpaid meal charges?



Prevention of Unpaid Meal Charges and Lunch Shaming Survey Monkey Q10 Results from SFAs

Please share any best practices that your SFA utilizes to prevent lunch shaming.



Preventing Unpaid Meal Charges Best Practices

Reach All Eligible Children

- ▶ Provide application assistance, especially for families with language or literacy barriers
- ▶ Improve direct certification process



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Flexibility on the Effective Date of Eligibility

- ▶ Flexibility - establish the **date of submission** of a complete application as the **effective date of eligibility**
- ▶ If utilized, application flexibility **MUST** be used in all schools throughout the district
- ▶ Must have a process in place to document the date the application was received (date stamp)
- ▶ Must **discharge debt or refund** any paid by or on behalf of the child in the time period between submission and processing of the application in order to claim meals at the new eligibility status during that time.
- ▶ Update meal counting and claiming procedures to reflect flexibility being used in the district
- ▶ Requires prior approval by the State Agency
- ▶ E-mail Jackie Bricker (Jacqueline.Bricker@ag.nj.gov)

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Reach Children Mid-Year

- ▶ Remind families they may submit an application at any time
- ▶ Accept prior eligibility status for transfer students



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Provide Payment Options

- ▶ Pre-payment systems
- ▶ Online payment
- ▶ Automatic payment
- ▶ Repayment plans



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Provide Payment Reminders

- ▶ Encourage families to track spending
- ▶ Remind families of a low balance **BEFORE** the account goes negative
- ▶ Make sure contact information is current



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Offset Costs from Unpaid Meals

- ▶ Community donations
- ▶ “Angel funds”
- ▶ School fundraisers
- ▶ End of year donations
 - ▶ *Leftover School Lunch Account Funds Donation Letter Template* (Source: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/unpaid-meal-charges>)



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Preventing “Lunch Shaming” Best Practices

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Communication Strategies

- ▶ Communicate privately with families about a child’s outstanding balance
- ▶ Communicate payment reminders directly and discreetly to adults in the household
- ▶ Send payment reminders in a plain, white envelope



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Avoid Singling Out Students

- ▶ **Do not** identify children with meal charges using hand stamps, stickers, or other visual markers
- ▶ **Do not** embarrass a child in the meal service line



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Always Aim for High Quality Alternate Meals

- ▶ Notify households if and what alternate meals will be served to students with unpaid meal charges
- ▶ Consider offering a low-cost reimbursable alternate meal as a regular menu item
- ▶ If an SFA wants to claim an alternate meal, it must contain all of the require components/items.



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Preventing Students Distress

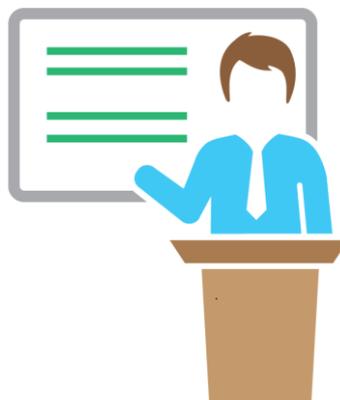
Discouraged Actions	Encouraged Actions
Announcing or publicizing the names of children with unpaid meal charges	Communicating privately with families about a child's outstanding balance ★
Using hand stamps, stickers, or other physical markers to identify children with unpaid meal charges	Communicating payment reminders directly and discreetly to adults in the household ★
Sending clearly marked notices home when children have an outstanding balance	Sending discrete reminders in a plain, white envelope ★
Throwing a child's meal in the trash if they are unable to pay	Serving children the regular reimbursable meal while working with the family ★

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Source: USDA FNS *Overcoming the Unpaid Meal Challenge 2017 Guidance*

Other Considerations

- ▶ Consider **costs vs. benefits** of debt collection efforts
- ▶ Determine whether children **may be eligible** for free meals



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Resources

- ▶ **USDA's Unpaid Meal Charges Website** <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/unpaid-meal-charges>
 - ▶ Report to Congress
 - ▶ Policy Guidance/Memos
 - ▶ Best Practice Fact Sheets
 - ▶ Guidance Manual
 - ▶ Webinars
 - ▶ Charge Policy Development Checklists
 - ▶ Adaptable Talking Points for SFAs
 - ▶ Adaptable Excess Balance Letter and Donation Form
- ▶ **SNEARS Resources- Unpaid Meal Charges category**
 - ▶ USDA FNS *Overcoming the Unpaid Meal Challenge* 2017 Guidance
 - ▶ NJ Memo- Parent Notification of Payment Owed for School Breakfast and School Lunch Meals- 4/15/2015
 - ▶ USDA Memo SP 46-2016- Unpaid Meal Charges: Local Meal Charge Policies - 7/8/2016
 - ▶ USDA Memo SP 47-2016- Clarification on Collection of Delinquent Meal Payments - 7/8/2016
 - ▶ USDA Memo SP 23-2017- Unpaid Meal Charges: Guidance and Q & A - 3/23/2017
- ▶ **SNA's 2019 School Nutrition Trends Report**
 - ▶ Press Release: <https://schoolnutrition.org/news-publications/press-releases/2019/90-of-districts-to-exceed-school-meal-whole-grain-mandates/>
 - ▶ Report: http://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/6_News_Publications_and_Research/8_SNA_Research/2019_school-nutrition-trends-summary.pdf
- ▶ **NJ Legislation- NJ State S-1896** https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2018/Bills/PL18/27_.HTM

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Thank You for Watching the Prevention of Unpaid Meal Charges and Lunch Shaming! Webinar

This webinar will count toward 2 hours of professional standards training:

Key Area: Administration
Learning Topic: Program Management
Topic Code: 3230 – Evaluate and Utilize Resources to Promote a Healthy School Environment

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Questions?

Contact the School Nutrition Programs Staff at
609-984-0692 with program related questions

OR

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