

STRONG ANTI-SHAMING POLICIES ARE NOT RELATED TO AMOUNT OF UNPAID SCHOOL MEALS

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE/OBJECTIVES

Because of debt, due to unpaid school meal charges, some Local Education Agencies (LEAs) have used shaming tactics as an approach to collection. Several states have advanced legislation or recommended local policies prohibiting this approach. The purpose of this research was to assess the relationship between required LEA policy content about local meal charges and amount of unpaid meals.

METHODS

All food service directors in six western states (from three USDA regions) were recruited to participate in two surveys in school years 2016-2017 and 2017-2018. Food service directors were asked to include a copy of their local meal charge policy and report a range of unpaid meal debt as part of the survey. Policies were evaluated for shaming tactics by trained research assistants and each LEA was assigned a score. Two outcome measures were used in analysis—total debt from full price meals and debt from reduced price meals. Logistic regression models were run for both outcome variables.

RESULTS

The majority of LEAs had weak anti-shaming policy scores. The amount of unpaid meals varied by LEA, but most had debt under \$5,000. LEAs also reported that most of the debt came from elementary school students. There were no significant relationships between the amount of debt and policy score. There were significant relationships between LEA location (suburban, urban, rural), state, and percent of debt from secondary students and debt.

APPLICATION TO CHILD NUTRITION PROFESSIONALS

While there was no significant relationship found between the strength of policy and the amount of debt, there may be other important and unobserved effects of stronger anti-shaming policies on students, such as stigma. Universal free meals are one strategy for eliminating unpaid meals and child nutrition professionals are well-positioned to serve as advocates in support of policy solutions that result in reducing stigma toward children.

KEYWORDS: Child Nutrition Programs, Unpaid School Meals, Lunch Shaming, Universal Free Meals

INTRODUCTION

Many Local Education Agencies (LEAs), also referred to as school districts, are accumulating debt as part of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). According to a 2018 report from the School Nutrition Association (SNA), accruing unpaid meal debt is common. In the 2016-2017 school year, 75.3% of surveyed SNA's LEAs reported having unpaid student meal debt, and 40.2% of LEAs indicated an increase in the number of students with inadequate funds (SNA, 2018). School nutrition programs typically have the onus of contacting students' households to collect the debt, which may include contacting a students' household for unpaid charges or working with a debt collection agency. When debt is uncollectible, the LEA may be obligated to cover costs with funds external to the Child Nutrition Programs budget, such as using LEA's general education fund. This situation often imposes a challenge on LEAs' financial sustainability as many school nutrition departments already have "tight budgets with slim margins" (Food Research & Action Center [FRAC], 2018).

Acknowledging this complex issue, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a law in 2017 for all school food authorities (SFAs) participating in NSLP or SBP to have a local meal charge policy. This requires SFAs to have a written policy to address "situations where children participating at the reduced price or paid rate do not have money to cover the cost of a meal at the time of the meal service" (USDA, 2017). While the USDA provided resources for technical assistance and guidance with writing such a policy (USDA, 2018a), best practice criteria were not provided. Therefore, each state and LEA had the authority to create their own policy, which may have included shaming practices.

Shaming practices, such as having children with delinquent accounts sit at a different lunch table, stamping their hand, or giving them a different "alternative" meal, have developed as a result of the need to collect debt. The national media has showcased incidences from across the country that demonstrate shaming tactics utilized by schools to collect debt from children and their families (Taylor, 2019; Wolf, 2019). To advocate for anti-shaming tactics, FRAC, a non-profit, anti-hunger and undernutrition advocacy agency, established best practice guidelines in 2017 for use by LEAs and states (FRAC, 2018). These guidelines encouraged schools to focus on holding parents or guardians responsible for meal purchases funds, rather than punishing children for debt collection, encouraged schools to directly communicate with parents or guardians in a private and respectful manner, make sure that participating students are charged correctly, and assist eligible households in applying for free or reduced-price school meals (FRAC, 2018). Schools should have multiple payment methods available making tracking or contributing to account balances convenient for families (USDA, 2018b). Additionally, FRAC recommended that LEAs' costs for hiring debt collectors not exceed the debt itself. FRAC discouraged LEAs from passing this expense on to the families with unpaid meal debts, as it only exacerbates the households' financial burdens (FRAC, 2018).

Limited research has examined the amount of unpaid meal debt schools accrue and assessed the strength of LEAs' local meal charge policies. Thus, the purpose of this research was to evaluate LEA policies across several Western states (e.g. Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, and Nevada), determine the strength of anti-shaming in these local meal charge policies, and determine the amount of debt from unpaid meals. Additionally, the study aimed to assess the relationship

between LEAs' strength of policy and amount of debt from unpaid meals—particularly if the amount of debt prior to the required policy led to stronger anti-shaming policies and if stronger anti-shaming policies were related to the amount of debt.

METHODS

Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design. Food service directors (FSDs) located in six Western states (N=541) were invited to complete an online survey for two academic years: 2016-2017 and 2017-2018. FSDs' name and contact information were obtained from each state department of education. LEAs that were currently operating Community Eligibility Programs or any other universal free meals programs were not recruited for the study. Study information was sent to FSDs via email with follow-up emails and phone calls made after initial recruitment by research assistants. An incentive of a \$25 gift card drawing was offered to individuals who participated. After data from the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years were collected, the FSDs who responded to the first survey but did not complete the second survey were contacted and offered a \$10 gift card to further incentivize participation. Because unpaid meal policies were only required as of July 2017, LEAs submitted only one policy for both years of data collection. Data collection happened both before and after the policy requirement. All protocols were approved by the sponsoring university's Institutional Review Board.

Instrumentation

FSDs were asked to report a range of unpaid meal debt, among multiple choice options, for the 2016-2017 school year for reduced price meal and full price meals. FSDs were also asked to report the percent of overall debt that came from secondary schools and the percent of overall debt that came from elementary schools. FSDs were also asked to provide their local meal charge policy.

A coding document was created to assess the strength of each policy based on 25 criteria from the FRAC Guidelines issued in 2017 (Table 1). Each of the items was given a score from zero to two. The scoring system and method were adopted from a previous study (Brener, Chriqui, O'Toole, Schwartz, & McManus, 2011) where researchers established a baseline tool to assess local wellness policies. A score of zero indicated the policy did not address the anti-shaming practice; a score of one indicated the policy used weak language surrounding an anti-shaming practice (e.g. "encourage"); a score of two indicated that the policy used strong language in addressing anti-shaming practices (e.g. "must"). Each policy was analyzed independently by two trained research assistants using the coding document. After independent coding, research assistants met to discuss coding results and in the event that research assistants came to different conclusions about the score, research assistants were trained to discuss and come to consensus. A summary score was created by adding all variable scores together. Each LEA was given one summary score and higher scores reflected stronger anti-shaming policies. Because policy scores were finite in nature (e.g. not a continuous variable), summary scores were divided into five-point categories ranging from 0-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, and 31-35 so categorical data analysis methods could be used.

Survey items considered for analysis included the LEA free or reduced price meal rate, LEA enrollment size, state, LEA urbanicity (ie. urban, suburban, rural), percent of debt contributed by secondary students, and percent of debt contributed by elementary students. Two outcome

Table 1. Scoring Sheet for Anti-Shaming Unpaid Meal Policies

Anti-Shaming Policy Statement	Score 0^a n (%)	Score 1^a n (%)	Score 2^a n (%)
Alternative Meal			
Policy states that they ^b will serve a regular meal rather than serve an alternative meal	44 (61.97)	12 (16.90)	15 (21.13)
Policy clearly gives consideration about how alternative meal is served	65 (91.55)	3 (4.23)	3 (4.23)
Policy advises that alternative meal should be significant enough to avoid hunger	49 (69.01)	14 (19.72)	8 (11.27)
Policy states that alternative meal includes food allergy consideration	63 (88.73)	1 (1.41)	7 (9.86)
Policy states if there is no charge for alternative meal	49 (69.01)	14 (19.72)	8 (11.27)
Avoiding Stigma			
Policy clearly states all communication is directed to parents	33 (46.48)	18 (25.35)	20 (20.17)
Policy states that no stickers are to be used	57 (80.28)	6 (8.45)	8 (11.27)
Policy states that no wristbands are to be used	57 (80.28)	7 (9.86)	7 (9.86)
Policy states that meal will not be withheld from student	32 (45.01)	16 (22.54)	23 (32.39)
Policy states that the children will not be made to call parents during mealtime to request money	68 (95.77)	2 (2.82)	1 (1.41)
Policy states that food is not to be thrown away or taken from the child	57 (80.28)	4 (5.63)	10 (14.08)
Policy states that students will not be pulled from meal line	58 (81.69)	6 (8.45)	7 (9.86)
Preventing Meal Debt			
Policy outlines procedure to make multiple attempts to engage households to apply for free and reduced price meals	51 (71.83)	11 (15.49)	9 (12.68)
Policy states that staff should assist households with applying for free and reduced price meals, if needed	59 (83.10)	4 (5.63)	8 (11.27)
Policy outlines procedure for multiple attempts to directly certify students for free and reduced price meals	60 (84.51)	5 (7.04)	6 (8.45)
Policy clearly states new student protocol is in place	50 (70.42)	14 (19.72)	7 (9.86)
Communication of policy with parents, faculty, and staff			
Sending letters to parent with a copy of policy enclosed	37 (52.11)	23 (32.39)	11 (15.49)
Making letters and policy available in multiple languages for parents	64 (90.14)	0 (0.00)	7 (9.86)
Including the policy in the school newsletter	47 (66.20)	20 (28.17)	4 (5.63)
Posting the policy on the school's website and social media pages	54 (76.06)	9 (12.68)	8 (11.27)
Describing the policy during robo-calls to parents and letting them know where they can obtain a copy	55 (77.46)	14 (19.72)	2 (2.82)
Sending a press release to local media regarding the new policy	62 (87.32)	0 (0.00)	9 (12.68)
Communicating the policy to all principals, teachers, and other staff at meetings and through email	57 (80.28)	7 (9.86)	7 (9.86)
Training cafeteria managers & staff to prevent stigma, overt identification, & embarrassment for kids	60 (84.51)	9 (12.68)	2 (2.82)
Creating a Q&A resource for all school nutrition staff to cover any situation that might arise in the cafeteria	71 (100.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)

Note: ^a 0 indicates the policy did not address this issues, 1 indicates that the policy had a weak statement about this issue, 2 indicates that the policy had a strong statement about this issue; scoring was based on Brener, Chiqui, O'Toole, Schwartz, & McManus (2011). ^b "they" indicates the Local Education Agency (LEA) or school district.

measures were used for the analysis—total self-reported debt from full price meals and the total self-reported debt from reduced price meals for both academic years.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using SAS 9.4 (SAS Institute, Inc., Cary, NC, USA). Frequencies and percentages were calculated for all variables for both the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years. Separate analyses were conducted for both academic years. Due to the small sample size, Fischer's exact tests were performed to identify any associations between amount of debt and each LEA level variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Results

A total of 541 surveys were sent to FSDs. Data for the 2016-2017 academic year were collected in the fall of 2017 and data for the 2017-2018 academic year were collected in fall of 2018. For the 2016-2017 school year, 95 surveys were used in the analysis for a response rate of 17.5%; for the 2017-2018 school year, 52 surveys were used in the analysis for a response rate of 9.6%.

More than one-third of the responding LEAs' unpaid meal charge policies had weak scores (n=31, 34.4% in 2016-2017; n=20, 38.4% in 2017-2018). Very few of the LEAs had strong policies (n=1 in 2016-2017; n=0 in 2017-2018). These policy scores gave insight to the shaming practices that may be used in schools. Table 1 highlights the frequency of various strategies indicated in the policies evaluated. Typically, the policies analyzed did not have language specific to the types of shaming strategies LEAs would or would not use. For example, slightly more than 80% of the policies did not have language relative to throwing away food, using stickers or wristbands, or that students would be pulled from the line. Thus, these policies could be strengthened to clearly indicate the utilization of non-shaming strategies. Often times policies (88.7%) did not indicate if food allergies would be considered if there was an alternative meal. Because these policies were considered weak in the analyses, they did not provide clarity and thus, missed an opportunity to distinctly outline anti-shaming strategies that would be used or considered. Policies had strongest scores relative to communications being directed to parents (20.2% of policies), meals not being withheld from the student (32.4% of policies), and that a regular meal would be served rather than an alternative meal (21.1% of policies).

In 2016-2017, the majority of LEAs that participated in the study (n=74, 71.2%) were in rural areas. In 2017-2018, 75% (n=39) of responding LEAs were classified rural or town using the National Center of Education Statistics classifications (2014) (Table 2). During the 2016-2017 school year, the majority of LEAs reported debt of \$1,000 or less from both reduced priced (n=78, 83.9%) and full price meals.(n=50, 52.6%).

In 2017-2018, similar findings were shown with a majority of respondents reporting debt of \$1,000 or less from full price meals (n=28; 53.9%) and reduced price meals (n=44, 84.6%) The percentage of LEAs with debt of \$1 to \$500 from unpaid full price meals increased from 2016-2017 to 2017-2018 (23.2% to 32.7%). The proportion of LEAs with debt of \$1 to \$500 from reduced price meals also increased from 2016-2017 to 2017-2018 (40.9% to 46.2%) (Table 2). There was no significant change in total debt from 2016-2017 to 2017-2018 for reduced price (p=0.97) or full price meals (p=0.95) (data not shown).

Table 2. *Characteristics of Study Sample*

	LEA Characteristics (2016-17) n= 95		LEA Characteristics (2017-2018) n= 52	
<i>Variable</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Debt From Unpaid Full Price Meals				
No Debt From Unpaid Full Price Meals	17	17.89	6	11.54
\$1-\$500	22	23.16	17	32.69
\$501-\$1,000	11	11.58	5	9.62
\$1,001-\$5,000	23	23.21	12	23.08
\$5,001-\$10,000	4	4.21	2	3.85
\$10,001-\$15,000	2	2.11	2	3.85
\$15,001-\$20,000	1	1.05	1	1.92
\$20,001-\$25,000	3	3.16	2	3.85
\$25,001-\$30,000	4	4.21	1	1.92
More than \$30,000	8	8.42	4	7.69
Debt From Unpaid Reduced Price Meals				
No Debt From Unpaid Reduced Price Meals	24	25.81	11	21.15
\$1-\$500	38	40.86	24	46.15
\$501-\$1,000	16	17.2	9	17.31
\$1,001-\$5,000	8	8.60	3	5.77
\$5,001-\$10,000	3	3.23	2	3.85
\$10,001-\$15,000	2	2.15	2	3.85
\$15,001-\$20,000	0	0	0	0.00
\$20,001-\$25,000	0	0	0	0.00
\$25,001-\$30,000	0	0	0	0.00
More than \$30,000	2	2.15	1	1.92
LEA Free or Reduced Price				
0-25%	11	10.58	5	9.26
26-50%	46	44.23	22	40.74
51-75%	35	33.65	21	38.89
76-100%	12	11.54	6	11.11
LEA Size Category				
1 to 299 students	13	12.5	5	9.09
300 to 599 students	11	10.58	4	7.27
600 to 999 students	5	4.81	4	7.27
1,000 to 2,499 students	22	21.15	12	21.82
2,500 to 4,999 students	15	14.42	10	18.18
5,000 to 9,999 students	16	15.38	9	16.36

Table 2. Characteristics of Study Sample

10,000 to 24,999 students	11	10.58	6	10.91
25,000+ students	11	10.58	5	9.09
State				
Arizona	15	14.42	7	11.67
Colorado	27	25.96	21	35.00
Idaho	18	17.31	15	25.00
Nevada	2	1.92	2	3.33
Wyoming	9	8.65	8	13.33
Utah	33	31.73	7	11.67
LEA Urbanicity				
Suburban	20	19.23	12	23.08
Urban	10	9.62	1	1.92
Rural	74	71.15	39	75.00
Unpaid Meal Policy Score				
0-5	31	34.44	20	33.90
6-10	19	21.11	15	25.42
11-15	22	24.44	16	27.12
16-20	7	7.78	2	3.39
21-25	4	4.44	3	5.08
26-30	6	6.67	3	5.08
31-35	1	1.11	0	0.00
Debt From Secondary Students				
No Debt	7	18.42	6	13.95
1 to 25%	6	15.79	5	11.63
26 to 50%	16	42.11	19	44.19
51 to 75%	2	5.26	4	9.3
76 to 100%	7	18.42	9	20.93
Debt From Elementary Students				
No Debt	5	14.29	4	10
1 to 25%	2	5.71	4	10
26 to 50%	2	5.71	4	10
51 to 75%	16	45.71	19	47.5
76 to 100%	10	28.57	9	22.5

Data from the present study indicate that in both years, less than 20% of respondents reported they had no unpaid meal debt. Data from the School Nutrition Association (SNA) 2019 School Nutrition Trends Report indicates that 75% of LEAs reported between \$2,000-\$2,500 for the time period from 2014 to 2018. Our findings are consistent with the SNA report. More recently, the SNA Operations Surveys identified that the median debt carried by an LEA increased to \$3,400 (2019). In the present study, calculating an average debt was not possible due to categorical reporting of total debt in the survey. Almost 25% of LEAs reported having debt

within the \$1,000-\$5,000 range, suggesting the results may mirror national data collected by SNA. SNA's report also suggests that unpaid meal debt may be rising (SNA, 2019).

In 2016-2017, 42.1% of LEAs (n=16) reported having 26-50% of their debt coming from secondary students. In 2017-2018, 44.2% (n=19) reported having 26-50% of their debt coming from secondary students (Table 2). Higher debt was reported from elementary school students, particularly in year 2016-2017. Because more elementary students participate in the NSLP and SBP compared to secondary students (USDA, 2019), these students likely contribute more to unpaid meals. Elementary school students also tend to skip meals less frequently, thus adding a higher number of students who participate in the NSLP. For example, Mathias, Jacquier, and Eldridge (2016) found that only 7% of children ages 4-8 years old skipped lunch, compared to 17% of children ages 14-18 years old. Additionally, lower unpaid meals may be attributed to secondary students because of policies allowing them to leave campus and purchase lunch elsewhere (Lichtman-Sadot, 2016).

Bivariate Results

In 2016-2017, school meal debt from full price meals was significantly associated with LEA urbanicity ($p=0.02$). School meal debt from reduced price meals was significantly associated with LEA urbanicity ($p=0.02$), state ($p=0.03$), and percent of debt from secondary students ($p=0.02$). In 2016-17, rural LEAs were 0.13, 95% CI [0.05, 0.34] times as likely to have debt from full price meals compared to suburban LEAs. Rural LEAs were 0.14, 95% CI [0.05, 0.39] times as likely to have debt from reduced price meals compared to suburban LEAs for the same year. In 2016-17, LEAs in Utah were 9.83, 95% CI [2.87, 33.69] times as likely to have debt from reduced price meals compared to LEAs in Idaho. In 2016-17, school LEAs in Nevada were 15.28, 95% CI [1.07, 217.57] times as likely to have debt from unpaid reduced price meals compared to school LEAs in Idaho (Table 3).

In 2017-2018, reported school meal debt from full price meals was significantly associated with LEA urbanicity ($p=0.01$). School meal debt from reduced price meals was significantly associated with LEA urbanicity ($p=0.03$), state ($p=0.05$), and percent of debt from secondary students ($p=0.05$). In 2017-18, rural LEAs were 4.96, 95% CI [1.45, 16.98] times as likely to have more debt from full price meals compared to suburban LEAs. In 2017-18, rural LEAs were 5.18, 95% CI [1.45, 18.56] times as likely to have debt from reduced price meals compared to suburban LEAs. There were several states that had higher debt compared to the reference state, Idaho (Table 3).

When analyzing data from LEAs who had complete data (n=52) for both 2016-2017 and 2017-2018, several variables remained significantly related to debt. For reduced price meals, LEA urbanicity, state, and percent of debt from secondary students were significantly related to reduced price meal debt. Rural LEAs were 5.11, 95% CI [1.30, 20.70] times as likely to have debt from reduced price meals compared to suburban LEAs. LEAs in Arizona were 0.05, 95% CI: [0.00, 0.60] times as likely to have debt from reduced price meals compared to LEAs in Idaho. LEAs in Utah were 0.05, 95% CI [0.00, 0.60] times as likely to have debt from reduced price meals compared to LEAs in Idaho. LEAs with no debt from secondary student meals were 20.00, 95% CI [2.70, 100.00] times as likely to have debt from reduced price meals compared to LEAs with 26-50% of debt from secondary student meals. LEA urbanicity was also associated

with full price meal debt; rural LEAs were 4.25, 95% CI [1.15, 15.62] times as likely to have debt from full price meals compared to suburban LEAs (data not shown).

Table 3. Bivariate Relationship Between Debt and Independent Variables

2016-2017 Data		
Variable	Reduced Price Meal Debt N= 95 Odds Ratio (Confidence Interval)	Full Price Meal Debt N= 95 Odds Ratio (Confidence Interval)
LEA Urbanicity		
Suburban	Ref.	Ref.
Urban	0.32 (0.08, 1.29)	0.73 (0.18, 2.91)
Rural	0.13 (0.05, 0.34)*	0.14 (0.05, 0.39)*
State		
Idaho	Ref.	---
Arizona	3.05 (0.83, 11.20)	
Colorado	2.67 (0.86, 8.32)	
Nevada	15.28 (1.07, 217.57)	
Wyoming	2.11 (0.47, 9.51)	
Utah	9.87 (2.87, 33.69)*	
2017-2018 Data		
	Reduced Price Meal Debt N= 52 Odds Ratio (Confidence Interval)	Full Price Meal Debt N= 52 Odds Ratio (Confidence Interval)
LEA urbanicity		
Suburban	Ref.	Ref.
Urban	4.53 (0.10, 212.99)	1.51 (0.04, 55.43)
Rural	5.18 (1.45, 18.56)*	4.96 (1.45, 16.98)*
State		
Idaho	Ref.	--
Arizona	0.15 (0.02, 0.93)*	
Colorado	0.59 (0.15, 2.40)	
Nevada	0.10 (0.01, 1.74)	
Wyoming	0.88 (0.15, 5.31)	
Utah	0.11 (0.02, 0.84)*	
% of Debt From Secondary Student Debt		
No Debt	Ref.	--
1-25%	0.17 (0.02, 1.93)	
26-50%	0.03 (0.00, 0.25)*	
51-75%	0.05 (0.00, 0.64)	
76-100%	0.40 (0.05, 3.14)	

*indicated a significant relationship between the variable and the reference (Ref.) group.

Results from 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 indicate that certain states had lower debt and certain LEAs had lower debt. These results switched between years; likely due to the number of respondents from each year. When examining LEA data that were complete for both school years, we found rural LEAs were more likely to have unpaid meals from reduced price meals compared to suburban LEAs. Because size of school was not related to amount of debt based on a bivariate analysis, these results suggest that suburban schools are likely engaging in positive practices that do not accrue debt. Similarly, Arizona and Utah also had less unpaid meal debt, independent of size. Food service directors may look to these states as potential leaders in this field.

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Because no relationship was found between scores of anti-shaming policies and the amount of unpaid meal debt, we recommend that FSDs deliberately develop stronger anti-shaming policies for unpaid meals. This may reduce the number of shaming instances in the LEA without accruing more debt; or in other words, shaming strategies are not useful for reducing unpaid meals, but may affect children in other ways. Past research has identified that stigma influences NSLP participation (Bhatia, Jones, & Reicker, 2011), thus, reducing stigma associated with unpaid meal debt may benefit children most in need. Many participating school LEAs had low anti-shaming policy scores which indicated many may leverage stigma as a way to collect unpaid meal debt (e.g. throwing away food, wristbands or stickers used to identify children with delinquent accounts, communication directed to children instead of adults). Stigma has been associated with participation in school meals for many years (Marples & Spillman, 1995; Mirtcheva & Powell, 2009; Poppendieck, 2010), including research that indicates parents feel stigma when they do not have enough money to feed their children (Witt & Hardin-Fanning, 2020). Yet, Tangney (2015) reported that shame was not an effective strategy for improving student behavior. Bhatia et al. (2011) also argued that offering different meal services based on financial status is contrary to the mission of equality in public schools. Further, the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity (2010) from President Obama's presidency encouraged schools to "examine their operational practices to ensure that all students have a full opportunity to consider and choose a school meal." Thus FSDs could carefully examine current unpaid meal policies for unintended shame-inducing aspects and refer to the FRAC document for guidance in developing or refining unpaid meal debt policies to include an anti-shaming components. Specifically, the FRAC document suggests avoiding shaming by allowing children to charge meals even if they cannot pay and being careful to not cause embarrassment to children with alternative meal options. FRAC also recommends not stigmatizing or embarrassing children by taking their meals away after service or bringing attention to their lack of funds (e.g., stamping the body of a child, requiring them to "work off their debt", or sending them to the principal's office) (FRAC, 2018).

Additionally, few schools in this study had unpaid meal policies that specifically addressed alternative meals for students with food allergies. Often, policies indicated that students would be served an alternative meal with many of these describing peanut butter or cheese sandwiches as a replacement. Gupta et al. (2018) estimated that almost 8% of school-aged children have a food allergy, with peanut and milk the most commonly reported allergies. USDA programs, like the NSLP and SBP, are required to provide accommodations for children with allergies (USDA, 2016). Yet, the present study identified that almost 90% of the policies reviewed did not have explicit accommodations for children with allergies. These children may be susceptible to

receiving meals that they cannot eat. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013) has indicated that schools should develop and implement a comprehensive plan for managing food allergies, which may include altering the unpaid meal policy to address alternative meals.

In recent years, some states have passed legislation relative to lunch shaming. New Mexico enacted a bill called “Hunger-Free Student’s Bill of Rights Act,” which requires all students to receive a reimbursable meal, prohibits meals being thrown away or taken from a student independent of their meal account status, and requires that schools cannot work to pay back meal debt (Hunger-Free Students’ Bill of Rights Act of 2017). The New Mexico law also does not allow debt collection agencies to be used. California also passed a law in 2017 that prevents the shaming of students for negative account balances including no alternative meals, chores, or other shaming tactics (Child Hunger Prevention and Fair Treatment Act of 2017). Policy changes may be an effective way of reducing unpaid meal debt. For example, universal free meals would eliminate the need for FSDs to collect unpaid meals. Professional organizations like the School Nutrition Association and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics have advocated for universal free meals (Fleischhacker & Campbell, 2020; School Nutrition Association, 2020). Research has demonstrated multiple benefits to universal free meals including increase in participation rates (Leos-Urbel, Schwartz, Weinstein, & Corcoran, 2013; Ruffini, 2018) A study conducted in Vermont among food service professionals found that they would recommend universal free meals to other schools because it improved student readiness to learn and the overall school environment (Taylor, Garnett, Horton, & Farineau, 2020). Eliminating the reduced-price (ERP) category of meals may also be a feasible strategy to reduce the number of unpaid meals. In a Report to the Chairman, Committee on Education and Labor of the House of Representatives in 2009, authors identified at least 5 states and 35 LEAs that have eliminated the reduced-price category. Most of the states cited increases in food security and hunger reduction as the primary reasons for implementing ERP, though a secondary benefit may include less debt from unpaid meals. FSDs can become advocates for policies like universal no cost meals to help support the nutritional needs of school-age children and the financial needs of parents by describing the challenges parents face to both state and federal policy makers.

While the national media has portrayed some extreme examples of school meal debt, the majority of schools in our study were maintaining relatively low debt. The USDA encourages schools to proactively help eligible families apply for free or reduced-price meals (USDA, 2018b). There may be opportunities for future research to explore best practices in enrolling eligible families for free or reduced-price meals and assessing impact of implementing best practices in managing unpaid meal debt.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Data were collected in six Western states that were selected by the researchers. Thus, data may not be generalizable beyond the six states represented. Additionally, it is unknown if state agencies provided guidance on the policy making process, thus this may have influenced differences by state. Yet, to the authors’ knowledge, no data have been published to date about relationships between anti-shaming policies and unpaid meals. Thus, the results from this study make an important contribution to the field of food security and child nutrition management relative to the development of anti-shaming policies.

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