**SNA Member Talking Points on Unpaid Meal Charges**

Pre-pandemic, local and national media reported many negative stories on the “shaming” of students unable to pay for school meals. Schools should anticipate renewed local media interest in their meal charge policies once waivers expire and schools are no longer able to serve all students free meals.

Through proactive media outreach and response, SNA works to combat stories that sensationalize meal charge policies or imply that “lunch shaming” practices are common nationwide. We developed the following talking points to assist members in responding to local media questions about meal charges and “shaming.” Members are encouraged to provide details on how their school meal programs work proactively with parents to enroll students in the free and reduced-price meal program, notify them of low balances and compassionately implement meal charge policies.

Visit USDA’s [Unpaid Meal Charges webpage](https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/unpaid-meal-charges) for additional resources.

**OPENING – *Begin all conversations positively:***

* We are *passionate* about ensuring students have access to healthy school meals.

* We never want to see a child go hungry or feel *any* shame during mealtime.
* Our school nutrition team works hard to connect all struggling families with meal assistance, so no student has to go hungry during the school day.
	+ We work to minimize any stigma associated with free or reduced-price meals and remove any barriers for students in need.

**KEY POINTS**

* During the pandemic, federal waivers allowed schools to serve free meals to all students. Since Congress allowed those waivers to expire, we were forced to start charging for meals again.
* To receive free meals, eligible families now have to complete a free and reduced-priced meal application form – all other students must pay for their meals.
* School meals are as important to learning as textbooks or laptops – ideally, Congress would have allowed us to continue serving *all* students free meals so this would not be an issue.
* Federal funds will only cover the full cost of meals served to students for students who are eligible for and enrolled in the free meal program.
* Schools must charge non-enrolled students the full price (or the reduced-price copay) to cover food, labor and other costs, which have risen dramatically due to supply chain disruptions and labor shortages.
* USDA requires all school districts to:
	+ develop meal charge policies and
	+ work with families to collect debt incurred from unpaid meals.
	+ Schools have latitude on what types of meal charge policies they develop; but ***they are not permitted to use federal funds to pay off unpaid meal debt.***
* Unfortunately, unpaid meal debt can accumulate to create a significant problem that impacts the quality of meals for all students and cuts into education budgets.
	+ *Note: customize this point for your program (eg Cite the amount of debt, sources tapped to pay off debt, explain how meal charge policies have helped limit these negative impacts.)*
* This is not just a problem for our school district. A School Nutrition Association [survey](http://schoolnutrition.org/news-publications/press-releases/2019/90-of-districts-to-exceed-school-meal-whole-grain-mandates/) revealed unpaid school meal debt is a widespread problem.
	+ Pre-pandemic, three quarters of school districts reported having unpaid meal debt.
	+ 43% of districts reported the number of students charging their meals has increased.
	+ *Note: SNA members may suggest reporters contact SNA Headquarters for more information at* *media@schoolnutrition.org**.*
* We do everything we can to prevent or minimize student meal charges. *Cite examples from your school district, eg, We offer:*
	+ Personalized help to complete free and reduced-price applications
	+ Convenient online payment and monitoring of account balances
	+ Auto alerts for low balances
	+ School staff directly notify parents about low balances and meal charges
* We want to make sure *every* student is fed. *Cite examples, We:*
	+ Offer payment plans for struggling families
	+ Utilize charitable donations to pay off debt for needy families.
	+ NEVER shame students/always communicate with parents

**SPECIFIC QUESTIONS**

***Why is no charge allowed?***

* Again, we wish Congress allowed us to provide free meals to *all* students, but we are prohibited from using federal funds to cover the cost of unpaid meals. This is a policy no one enjoys enforcing.
* We had to institute a no charge policy to manage the level of unpaid meal debt. We make every effort to:
	+ inform parents and students of this policy throughout the year,
	+ connect struggling families with meal assistance and
	+ keep families informed about their account balance.

***But is it ok to trash a lunch or make a child feel shame?***

* We work very hard to avoid that from *ever* occurring.
* Our staff is passionate about making the cafeteria a welcoming place for students and are trained on how to minimize the stigma for students with negative account balances / receiving alternate meals.
	+ *Note: Insert examples from your school, eg – we notify students with negative account balances at the beginning of the school day so they can call their parents before lunch time / staff can discreetly provide them an alternate meal / our alternate meal is a less expensive daily meal choice so students who receive them are not overtly identified, etc.)*
* We constantly work to connect students in need with meal assistance and encourage parents to contact us if they need help. We make it easy for parents to monitor account balances and pay for meals, and we strive to keep everyone informed of our meal charge policies.

***Why do you serve alternate meals?***

* School nutrition professionals want *all* students to receive a complete meal, but when meal charges and debt get out of hand, alternate meals ensure no child actually goes hungry during the day, while trying to preserve the financial sustainability of the program.
* School nutrition professionals go to great lengths to make sure alternate meals don’t shame students. *Insert examples from your school, eg – we notify students with negative account balances before they enter the cafeteria so staff can discreetly provide them an alternate meal / our alternate meal is a less expensive daily meal choice so students who receive them are not overtly identified, etc.)*