



# *One Year After the End of Universal School Meals:*

*Kansas Schools and Families Feel the  
Burden of Meal Debt*

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# *One Year After the End of Universal School Meals: Kansas Schools and Families Feel the Burden of Meal Debt*

Hunger in Kansas is a policy choice, and expanding access to school nutrition programs to relieve the burden of unpaid meal fees is no different. More than 90,000 children in the state face food insecurity, and school meals are one of the most effective ways to give low-income students guaranteed access to food.<sup>1</sup> Students who participate in school meals not only benefit from improved health outcomes, but they also display better test scores, fewer school absences, and fewer behavioral referrals.<sup>2</sup> However, many barriers like cost and limited eligibility for meal-assistance programs can prevent school-aged kids in Kansas from accessing the nutrition they need to succeed.

From March 2020 through June 2022, universal free school meals were a federal COVID-19 initiative that further proved public policy is an integral step to reducing hunger and eliminating barriers. For many Kansas families, kids, and schools, the end of the universal free meals program resulted in an accrual of school meal debt. And when it comes to ensuring kids are fed regardless of their family's economic status, unpaid meal debt can be a massive burden for both schools and families.

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School meal programs are critical to Kansas kids' educational success and overall well-being. In the United States, one in eight children live in a household without consistent access to adequate food. In Kansas, that number is even greater, with one in seven children not knowing where their next meal is coming from.<sup>3</sup> School meals have become an important tool for reducing child food insecurity, providing children one-third or more of their recommended nutritional needs for the day.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, for many children, the food they receive in school may be the most nutritious meal they eat in one day.<sup>5</sup> Because of this, ensuring Kansas children have consistent access to nutritious school meals is a priority and a necessity.

Through the National School Lunch Program, 41% of Kansas students received free meals and 7% of students received reduced-price meals during the 2022-23 school year.<sup>6</sup> For Kansans to be eligible for this program, a family of four must make less than \$39,000 per year to qualify for free meals, and less than \$55,500 to qualify for reduced-priced meals.<sup>7</sup> Families approved for reduced-priced meals are still required to pay a portion of the cost of a meal. While it may seem doable for a family to pay a lower cost of \$0.30 for breakfast and \$0.40 for lunch, many of these families are still in an uphill battle, struggling daily to afford food, rent, gas, and utilities.<sup>8</sup>



This shows poverty persists even outside of federal guidelines. During the pandemic, wages rose and pushed some families just over the threshold of qualifying for the National School Lunch Program.<sup>9</sup> Families who make slightly more than the free or reduced guidelines do not qualify for school meal assistance of any kind. The USDA does adjust its limits for inflation, but with rising food, gas, and housing costs, families' food budgets are stressed.<sup>10</sup>



Overall, school meal programs are built to be self-sustaining with all costs to produce and provide a meal covered through sales, federal, and state reimbursements.<sup>11</sup> However, students may not have sufficient funds to pay for their meal due to economic hardship or something as simple as a parent forgetting to put money in the lunch account. In these instances, school districts will often allow the student to charge meals to their account for a limited amount of time.<sup>12</sup> But those charges can add up across all students, and school districts may end up with a significant amount of debt from unpaid meals. When that occurs, schools are forced to do at least one of the following:

- Collect unpaid meal debt from parents
- Shift funding from other district accounts
- Receive charitable donations to cover the debt

Of all the meal debts paid, only 22% are covered by the parents of the student who incurred the debt.<sup>13</sup> Typically, school districts end up paying for meal debt through general funds or charitable donations, cutting into budgets set aside for educational purposes.<sup>14</sup>

**UNIVERSAL MEALS DURING THE LAST TWO YEARS MEANT KANSAS SCHOOL DISTRICTS DID NOT HAVE TO SPEND TIME, FUNDS, OR OTHER RESOURCES COLLECTING DEBT.**

Universal meals during the last two years meant Kansas school districts did not have to spend time, funds, or other resources collecting debt. During the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, children and school districts benefited from Healthy School Meals for All. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the USDA made school breakfast and lunch free for all students, regardless of their economic status or background.<sup>15</sup> Throughout those years, 480,000 students in Kansas had access to healthy school meals, resulting in an increased access to free school meals by approximately 65%.<sup>16</sup> Universal free school meals in the state provided much-needed relief to families struggling to make ends meet in the face of an unprecedented crisis.





The end of universal meals in June 2022 happened at the same time as historic inflation, the end of other COVID-19 relief measures, and rising school meal costs. As a result, school districts saw a staggering increase in school meal debt as families fought to pay rent or mortgage payments and put food on the table. A recent survey of school nutrition programs found that school districts have been rapidly accumulating meal debt since universal meals ended. Almost all respondents across the nation reported that unpaid meal debt has increased following the elimination of universal meals, with Midwestern and Mountain Plains regions of the USDA seeing the largest meal debt.<sup>17</sup>

Kansas schools have not escaped this trend. Prior to the pandemic, Kansas school meal debt totaled \$4.45 million. Since then, school meal debt has increased nearly 6 times to about \$23.5 million.<sup>18</sup> When school meal debt exists, children are the first to suffer the consequences as they face missing out on meals while still being expected to behave and perform at the same level as their peers.

**PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC, KANSAS SCHOOL MEAL DEBT TOTALED \$4.45 MILLION. SINCE THEN, SCHOOL MEAL DEBT HAS INCREASED NEARLY 6 TIMES TO ABOUT \$23.5 MILLION.**

School districts have cited unpaid meal debt and the end of universal free meals as the top challenges they are facing. Between stressed budgets, inflation, and the additional strain of free meals ending, Kansas school districts are being forced to raise meal prices to keep up with rising costs.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, staffing shortages and supply chain issues have put a larger burden on school administrators and their budgets.<sup>20</sup> On average, it currently costs more to produce a school meal than school districts are charging or being reimbursed for.<sup>21</sup> This is likely an even larger challenge now that increased federal reimbursements for school meals have expired.<sup>22</sup> Persistent meal debt paired with increased costs and decreased federal reimbursement has left school districts' meal service budgets in a precarious financial position, hindering schools' ability to provide meal access.

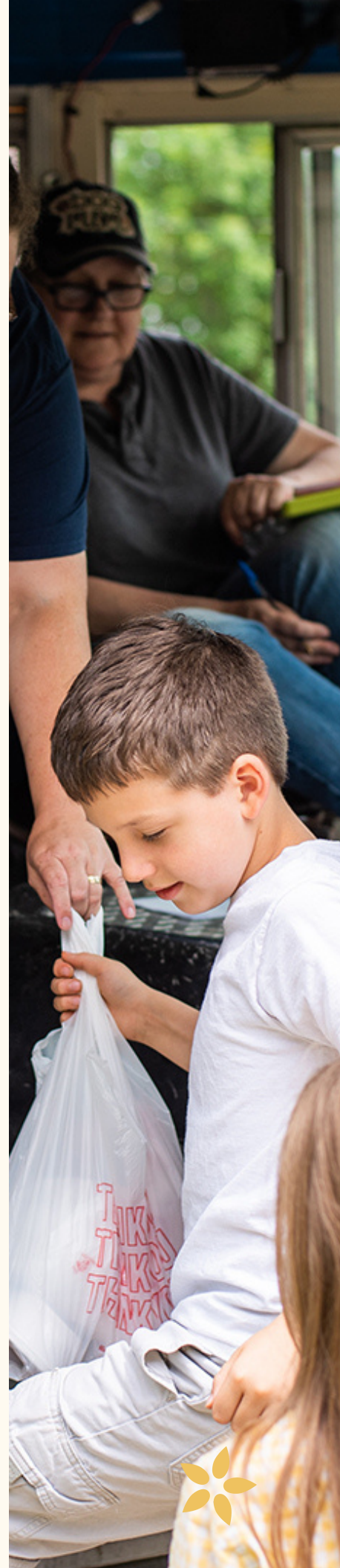


School districts that participate in the Child Nutrition Programs are required to develop a school meal fee policy and clearly communicate it to families.<sup>23</sup> That policy determines how the school district responds when a child arrives in the cafeteria without cash in hand or money in their school lunch account. Strong policies ensure there is no overt identification of students, that students do not miss out on academic, enrichment, or school activities due to unpaid school meal fees, and that any communication about school meal debt takes place between adults. Often when families are struggling to pay for their school meals, it is a sign that the household is struggling and needs additional support.

**LUNCH SHAMING IS, “THE PRACTICE OF EMBARRASSING STUDENTS WHOSE MEAL ACCOUNTS HAVE A NEGATIVE BALANCE. THESE ARE ACTIONS TAKEN TO COERCE THE STUDENT AND THEIR FAMILY INTO PAYING OVERDUE MEAL BILLS.”**

School meal debt can accrue in several different ways: parents may not remember to pay for meals, families may forget to apply or not qualify for meal assistance, or they are overwhelmed by financial hardships.<sup>24</sup> No matter the cause, when a child has a zero or negative balance in their meal account, they face going without a meal or getting a smaller, alternate meal, and their family could potentially be sent to a debt collector. Because of this, unpaid school meal debt can create a stigma or shame for children whose families are unable to pay because of “lunch shaming” policies.

Lunch shaming is, “The practice of embarrassing students whose meal accounts have a negative balance. These are actions taken to coerce the student and their family into paying overdue meal bills.”<sup>25</sup> The actions often overtly identify, isolate, or embarrass the child. They include taking away a meal from a child, giving the child an alternate meal, denying a child a meal, having the child eat elsewhere, and restricting a child’s participation in extracurriculars.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, the USDA does not establish national standards for what needs to be included in a school district’s policy, nor does it provide any baseline for protecting children and families. Instead, it only requires that there be a policy, and the Department has left decisions on what those policies will look like to states.<sup>27</sup>



Through policy change, Kansas school districts and school boards have the unique ability to reduce the harm of school meal debt. In Kansas, individual school districts make decisions on what unpaid meal policies will look like. These vary widely across the state, impacting children's access to much-needed school meals and the environment within the school cafeteria. For example:

- Approximately 20% of school districts in the state have no documented language on the type of meal a child with a negative meal account balance will be served. When this happens, a child could potentially go without a meal.
- 60% of Kansas school districts have documented policies that allow children an alternate meal for at least a limited amount of time. Some districts do not define what the alternate meal consists of, meaning that they may offer the students the same meal as their peers. In other cases, the policy states what the alternate meal is.
- The quality of the alternate meal option varies significantly across the school districts. Most districts offer an alternate meal of either a peanut butter or cheese sandwich and milk. However, one district policy notes that the student will be served canned fruit and crackers. Another policy says the student will be given a granola bar and milk. In some school districts, students are charged the same amount for the alternate meal as a regular meal, meaning the family is collecting debt for a smaller meal while paying the same price they would for the full meal.
- Only 4% of school districts have documented policies that allow students to continue to receive the same meal as their peers without being overtly identified as unable to pay through an alternate or no meal.<sup>28</sup>



Some Kansas school districts have policies that could potentially isolate students from their peers solely based on their family's ability to pay for meals. For example:

- One school district's policy removes the child from the cafeteria and provides a minimal snack. It states that the child will be brought to the principal's office during mealtime and offered pretzels and fruit while there.
- Another school district's policy requires students to pick up their alternate meal from the office.
- Another has the alternate lunch delivered to the classroom where the student is to eat, away from their peers.
- At least two school districts' policies impose non-meal related measures such as not allowing the child to participate in activities or withholding grades from parents until the debt is paid. This further isolates and identifies the student from their peers based on their family's ability to pay.<sup>29</sup>

District policies also often take punitive action against families. Such policies cause additional stress to families trying to make ends meet and take time and resources away from school districts and food service staff. For example:



- Over 40% of school districts in Kansas have documented policies that take punitive action by turning unpaid meal debt over to collection agencies, small claims courts, or the Kansas debt offset program in an effort to collect debt.
- Aggressive debt collection policies take time and resources away from administrators while they are already facing shrinking funds and staffing shortages. Food service directors in Kansas did not sign up to be debt collectors. Policies that turn them into debt collectors take time and resources away from their actual jobs, which is feeding kids meals.<sup>30</sup>
- Aggressive debt collection policies also have a low success rate. Most unpaid meal debt is paid through charitable donations or other district funds. Enforcing debt collection policies is stressful to families who are struggling and is ineffective and inefficient for school districts.<sup>31</sup>



Some district policies even go so far as to equate poverty and food insecurity to abuse and neglect. At least nine school districts in the state have documented policy language where various unpaid meal debt levels trigger the district to contact the Department for Children and Families (DCF) and report the child as a “Child in Need of Care” case.<sup>32</sup> Poverty is not a crime and is not neglectful or abusive parenting. Although a referral to DCF might not lead to the child being removed from the home, it could trigger an invasive and distressing investigation process. It is also a waste of DCF resources and stresses an already struggling child welfare system.

It is unclear to what extent school districts put into practice written policies. However, an analysis of these written policies displays inconsistencies across the state. Kansas school districts should be given the flexibility to create policies that work for their community, but when it comes to the treatment of students and families experiencing school meal debt, developing consistent and trauma-informed policies is best practice.<sup>33</sup>

This work is already happening in Kansas. A handful of school districts have successfully implemented policies that allow a child with a negative account balance to continue receiving the same meal as other students without their family’s economic hardships being overtly identified to their peers.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, other states have implemented laws that regulate what school districts can and cannot do about unpaid meal debt. For example, Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Dakota, and others have laws in place that provide protections for children and families. The details of these state policies do vary, but they generally limit the use of alternate meals and do not allow segregating or overly identifying students who cannot pay.<sup>35</sup>

There are actions Kansans, working together, can take to alleviate the burden of unpaid school meal fees. Ending the stigma and shame for students and families based on their ability to pay for meals can help ease the negative consequences kids and families experience in lunchrooms across Kansas. For example:

- School districts and school boards should review and update their unpaid meal fee policies to eliminate meal shaming language and intimidating collection tactics.
  - Students should be served the same meal as other students, regardless of how much money is owed. That includes the end to alternate meals - a practice that overtly identifies children who cannot pay for a meal in any way.
  - It should require all communication regarding school meal debt to be directed to the parent or legal guardian, not the child, and prevent students from being excluded from other activities.
  - Ideally, the policy would end the use of collection agencies for unpaid meal debts. The USDA requires districts to make a reasonable effort to collect debt. However, it does not define reasonable and allows state agencies and school districts to consider the benefits of collections in relation to the costs of those collections.<sup>36</sup> The cost of collecting debt should never be more than the debt itself. If collection agencies are used, the policy should not require parents to pay the fees from collection agencies.<sup>37</sup>
  - School district policies should not threaten a DCF investigation or make parents fear their child will be taken away from them based solely on their ability to pay for school meals.
- Further, the state should consider creating laws or policies regulating what school districts can do when students have unpaid meal debt. All policies and laws should follow USDA guidelines.





The surest way to end the burden of school meal debt on families, kids, and school districts is to prevent school debt from occurring to begin with. For example:

- The State of Kansas can subsidize reduced-priced meals. Subsidizing reduced-priced meals would cost the state between \$4 to \$5 million per year. This would be less than half a percent increase in state funding for education.<sup>38</sup>
  - The USDA allows states and school districts to subsidize the family's portion of the reduced-priced meals, so students who qualify for reduced-priced meals would receive meals free of charge.<sup>39</sup> Fifteen other states (Arkansas, Colorado, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington) and Washington DC currently have laws subsidizing reduced-priced meals.<sup>40</sup>
  - Additionally, several school districts in Kansas have made the decision to subsidize reduced-priced meals on their own.<sup>41</sup> This would eliminate the cost and potential burden of debt for those families struggling to make ends meet when paying for school meals.
- Expand Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to more schools and school districts when possible. CEP is a federal program that some districts can elect to adopt. This program provides free breakfast and lunch to all students in any school or group of schools in the district when the identified student percentage (ISP) is at or above 25%. ISP takes into account the number of students in the school participating in programs like SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, or are considered at risk of hunger (because they are homeless or in foster care, for example). If this number is 25% or greater, the school qualifies for CEP and every child eats for free.. In the 2022-23 school year, only about 30% of eligible schools in Kansas adopted the program. That was the 3rd lowest participation rate in the nation.<sup>42</sup> Thankfully, for the 2023-24 school year, many more schools across Kansas have been able to take advantage of Community Eligibility Provision. This progress was made possible through direct certification of free or reduced-priced meals for students who are on Medicaid, as Kansas was a pilot for this program starting in the 2022-23 school year.<sup>43</sup>
- Universal meals, also known as Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA), would benefit families, children, and school districts by reducing food stigma, ending school meal debt, removing administrative burdens, and enhancing academic performance. Nine states (California, Maine, Colorado, Minnesota, New Mexico, Vermont, Michigan, Massachusetts, and Nevada) have temporary or permanent Healthy School Meals for All policies, and many others are considering such policies.<sup>44</sup>





School district food programs need additional support to keep up with the rising costs of producing meals for kids. The effect of meal debt is an increasing problem for school districts in part because their budgets are already too small to keep up with the cost of producing meals.

- During the 2022-23 school year, the federal government temporarily increased the reimbursements schools receive per meal served to keep up with the rising cost of meals. Those increased reimbursements are ending, and school nutrition program staff are very concerned about being able to afford the costs of producing meals.<sup>45</sup>
- Kansas school board members, nutrition staff, and parents can come together to advocate on behalf of school nutrition programs to ensure that federal reimbursements reflect the cost of producing meals for kids.

The bottom line is school meal debt exists in Kansas. Across the state, unpaid school meal fees put an extreme strain on school district's budgets and increase barriers to consistent meals for students and families experiencing economic hardship. Kansans can shift the current approach and start collaborating to build trauma-informed school meal policies that work for their community. At the federal level, communities can advocate for Congress to adopt universal free meals once more. At the state level, Kansans can encourage the State of Kansas to subsidize the cost of reduced-price meals for all students. At the local school district level, superintendents, school board members, teachers, food service staff, parents, and students can come together and construct school meal policies that meet the needs of their local community. Together, working as a team, Kansans can create a state where every school-aged kid has consistent access to school meals.



## *Methodology:*

Kansas Appleseed staff reviewed and analyzed school districts' unpaid meal debt policies:

- Staff reached out to all 286 public school districts in the state and asked them to provide their most up-to-date unpaid meal debt policies. Just under 20% responded and sent their policies.
- Staff also reviewed policies available on school district websites for all 286 public school districts in the state. In instances when the district had also provided an updated policy to Kansas Appleseed, staff cross-checked the publicly available policy to the one provided. When discrepancies existed, staff used the most up-to-date policy.
- 46 (16%) school districts did not provide staff with their policies and also did not have it publicly available on their websites. Under USDA guidance, school districts are to clearly communicate their policies directly to parents and in a public manner through press releases and postings on district websites.<sup>46</sup>

Kansas Appleseed staff obtained and analyzed publicly available data on school meals, free and reduced-priced student numbers, and meal debt available through state and national sources. All Kansas Appleseed analyses and the data used are noted in cited sources.

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## *For More Information:*

For technical support and guidance on assessing your school district's meal debt policy, please reach out to the Kansas Department of Education Child Nutrition Department or the Kansas Association of School Boards.

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