

School Meal Fees Policies

Best practices and recommendations for school meal policies

School meals improve student health, test scores, attendance, and behavior. However, 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.

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.

School meal programs rely on sales and reimbursements, but meal debt arises when students lack funds, whether due to hardship or oversight. Charges add up across all students, and school districts end up with a significant amount of debt from unpaid meals. When that occurs, schools are forced to collect unpaid meal debt from parents, shift funding from other district accounts, or receive charitable donations to cover the debt.

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.

While school districts are required to develop school meal policies and communicate it with families, Kansas school districts have the flexibility to create policies that work for their community. Strong policies prevent student identification, ensure access to activities, and keep meal debt discussions between adults.

Consider these guiding principles for drafting and implementing a school meal fees policy that is consistent and transparent for your families and students, while also maintaining a financially sound school meals program.

- Ensure policies prioritize children's well-being, minimize distress, and provide necessary nutrition for learning.
- Policy must be provided in writing to all households at the start of each school year and to families that transfer into the district/school.
- Disseminate the policy using multiple channels such as enrollment packets, application for free and reduced meal packets, handbooks, website, and contacts with households when balances are low or negative.
- Consult with administrators, teachers, counselors, food service professionals, and school board members when developing the policy. Coordinate with your local school board to draft, review, and approve the school meal fees policy.

Prevent unpaid meal charges through clear communication, easy payment options, and proactive balance reminders.

- Provide convenient ways for families to put money into student accounts.
- Have a prepayment system available including online and cash payment options.
- Allow families to check their account balance online at no cost and set up payment plans for unpaid charges.

Clearly outline meal charge policies, including limits, collection processes, and timelines for delinquent balances.

- 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. 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.

Make every effort to communicate with the adult(s) of the household, not the student.

- Automated reminders may help families while reducing administrative time for staff.
- Remind families to maintain positive account balances using multiple channels:
 - Written, discreet, payment notices via email.
 - General payment reminders can be included in newsletters to all families.
 - Automated notification from online payment systems when balances reach a low level. With household authorization, automated reminders may be sent as text messages.
 - In person or phone contact from a trusted school official. Meal charges may be a sign of other challenges facing a family.

Policies must ensure students are not isolated or singled out due to their family's ability to pay for meals.

- Eliminate the stigma and shame for students by ensuring that all students are served meals in the same way.
- 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.
- 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. 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.

Make applications for free and reduced price meals available through multiple channels within the district/school and the community throughout the calendar year.

- Consider online and paper forms, language or literacy barriers, and accessibility.
- Families can apply for free or reduced price meals at any time during the school year. Notify families of the option to submit a new application if household circumstances change.
- Offer assistance to families in completing applications.
- When students move to your district or school building, transfer eligibility determinations from previous sponsors.
- Educate families about community resources and nutrition programs (e.g., SNAP, school or community food pantries).

Consider program options that would eliminate meal debt entirely.

There are still many schools across the state that could benefit from the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) which eliminate fees for students, but have not yet implemented them, leaving some students in these communities to accrue unpaid meal debt unnecessarily.



Resources:

Kansas Appleseed:

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

Food Research and Action Center:

- ☑ Best Practices For Engaging With Households About School Meal Debt
- ☑ Establishing Unpaid Meal Fee Policies: Best Practices to Ensure Access and Prevent Stigma

Learn more about our work at Kansas Appleseed.

<http://kansasappleseed.org/>