

USDA PREVENTING LUNCH SHAMING: PAYMENT METHODS

Unpaid meal charges represent a challenging issue directly impacting schools and the children they serve. Schools must balance the desire to provide for hungry children with the importance of “staying in the black.” Instances where children are punished for meal charges are not the norm, but USDA is aware that “lunch shaming” occurs in some schools. USDA has consistently discouraged these tactics. This resource provides strategies schools can use to prevent lunch shaming in their payment methods.

MAKE PAYMENT CONVENIENT

Taking steps to make payment more convenient for families can help reduce unpaid meal charges. For example, allowing families to add money to their child’s account from a computer or mobile device is a best practice used in many schools. Online systems also allow families to track their child’s spending and keep tabs on their account balance. Some systems include an optional feature families can use to automatically add money to their account when they reach a set dollar amount, preventing the balance from going negative at any time. These payment methods are also discrete and private, preventing the exchange of funds in the cafeteria.

Note: School food authorities cannot exclusively use an online payment system, and must allow families to make meal payments in person.

USE A PRE-PAYMENT SYSTEM

Encouraging families to pre-pay for meals can help ensure children have consistent access to meals without accruing unpaid meal charges. These systems may also include a feature allowing parental restrictions that limit a child’s spending at the point of service. For example, the system could limit a la carte purchases. These strategies can prevent unexpected or “extra” expenses, which could lead to a child’s account balance dropping to zero earlier than a parent or guardian anticipates.

PROVIDE REPAYMENT PLANS

Some families, especially those just above the threshold for free meals or those experiencing a financial setback, may struggle to pay back a negative balance. Providing these families a repayment plan that allows payment over a specified time period can make the process more manageable. Some schools have found success providing a “lunch debt loan” from a parent volunteer organization, which families pay back over time.

WHERE CAN I GO TO LEARN MORE?

USDA is working hard to provide State and local officials with all the support and resources they need to ensure they succeed in developing fair, sustainable, and transparent policies to navigate situations where children do not have funds to pay for their meal. Visit <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/unpaid-meal-charges> to find policy guidance, webinars, handbooks, trainings, checklists, and more!