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# **The Challenges of Unpaid Meals: Proven Strategies from Our Nation's Schools**

**February 4, 2016**

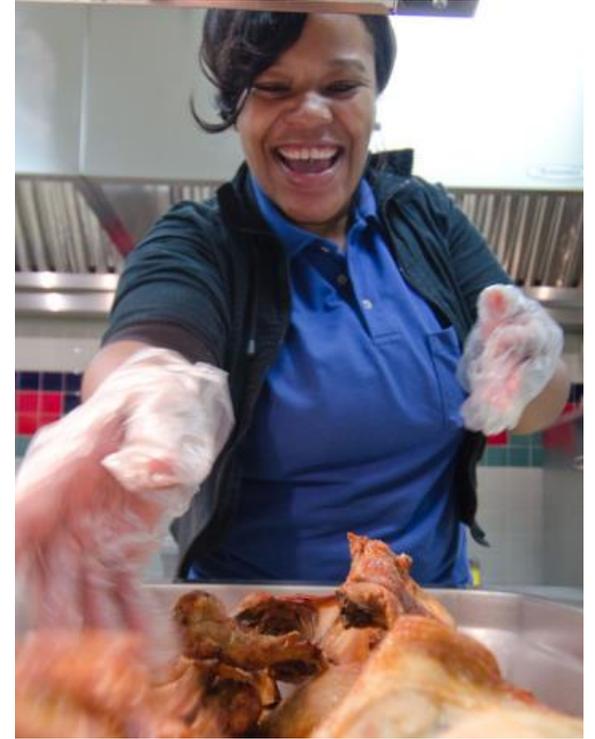
**Today's Presenters:**

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# The Unpaid Meal Challenge

- The intent of the school meal programs is to provide nutritious meals to children during the school day
- Sometimes, children who are not eligible for free meals want a meal, but do not have money in their account or in hand
- Schools have a variety of ways to respond to this challenge





**Thank You!**

# Background

## School Year 2011-2012

### Special Nutrition Program Operations Study

- Over 80% of schools surveyed provided either a reimbursable or alternate meal
- All schools indicated that some revenue was lost
- Study provided a baseline on unpaid meal charges

### Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010

- Required USDA to examine and report on the current policies and practices on meal charges and alternate meals and to report to Congress on feasibility of national policy

# Request for Comments

- USDA published a notice in the Federal Register on October 16, 2014
- Notice sought local-level comments and requested LEAs provide copies of their unpaid meal policies
- The comment period ended on January 14, 2015



***462 total comments were received  
95% came from the local level***

# Overview of Request

- USDA asked commenters to respond to a series of questions, including:
  - Are written policies provided and followed? Who is involved with developing policies?
  - If alternate meals are offered, what do they contain?
  - How is overt identification of students with a low or negative balance prevented?
  - How is unpaid debt affecting the operating budgets?
  - Is there any outside assistance from school or school district administrators?

# Comment Summary: Charge Policies

- 87% indicated policies and procedures were in place for handling charges
- Many limited the charges, allowing more or less leniency based on age
- Most indicated that school officials were involved in developing the policy



# Comment Summary:

## Alternate Meals

- If offered, policies usually established when offered and how long students could have alternate meals
- Varying methods of cost of alternate meals to students:
  - At no cost
  - For a small amount (\$1 or cover cost of food, for example)
  - Few charged paid meal price
- Examples of alternate meals:
  - Cheese or peanut butter sandwich, fruit and milk
  - Lower cost entrees with other components
  - Brown bag lunches
- Offering alternate meals may increase money owed by students as well as affect the SFA's budget

# Next Steps for the USDA

- Submit Report to Congress
- Clarify and update existing guidance
- Collect and share best practices that meet the needs of schools, students, and families



# Share Your Success!

- Please submit your own **success stories** and **best practices** by using the comment feature on your screen.
- We will be sharing your ideas and answering questions throughout the webinar.



# Reach All Eligible Students

- Provide applications in multiple ways and encourage families to apply throughout the year
- Offer to assist families with application process
- Conduct direct certification regularly
- Adopt Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) when financially viable



# What's Being Done?

- An LEA on the East Coast has a **summer outreach effort** to encourage families to apply early.
- An LEA in the Midwest is **developing a video** in English and Spanish to provide instructions on filling out the school meal application.
- Several LEAs nationwide recommended expanding CEP, saying **CEP has helped eliminate the issue of unpaid meal charges.**

# Make Payment Convenient

- Have a prepayment system available
- Allow families to check their account balance online at no cost
- Include online and cash payment options
- Allow families to set up payment plans to repay changes



# Send Payment Reminders

- Provide reminders in the school newsletter
- Contact families via email or automated calls/texts about low/negative balances
- Send electronic payment reminder “alerts,” if using an online system
- Ensure reminders are available in languages spoken by all families at the school



# What's Being Done?

- An LEA in the Northeast works with families to set up **payment plans** to make debt more manageable.
- An LEA on the East Coast allows families to sign up for **automatic alerts** through an online payment system when their balance gets low.

# Find Alternative Funding

- Work with district and school administrators to find funding to cover unpaid meals
- Have a “Random Acts of Kindness Account” for donations to fund unpaid meals



# What's Being Done?

- An LEA in the Midwest allows families to apply to use **short-term funding** from community donations to cover the cost of meals.
- An LEA on the East Coast **works with the PTA** to provide meals to students unable to pay.
- An advocate from the Southwest reported successfully raising funds for unpaid meals by **engaging the local media**.

# Provide Alternate Meals

- Allow students to pick up alternate meals from the nurse's office before entering the cafeteria
- Serve alternate meals discretely in a brown lunch sack or insulated bag
- If the alternate meal is served in the cafeteria, ensure it is also available for purchase to prevent overt identification



# Prevent Overt Identification

- Place the Point-of-Sale area at the beginning of the lunch line, rather than at the end
- When sending payment reminder slips home, do so as discretely as possible



# What's Being Done?

- An LEA on the West Coast suggested moving the POS to the **beginning of the lunch line**, so students can pick up their alternate before passing through.
- An LEA in the Midwest recommended **delivering sack lunch alternates to students in class**, giving the appearance the student brought the meal from home.

# Get Buy-In!

- Consult with principals, teachers, food service staff, and families before adopting a new policy
- Clearly explain policy to food service staff
- Have families sign off on policy each year
- Ask for feedback and revise policy as needed



# What's Being Done?

- An LEA in the Southwest involved **school administrators, food service staff**, and the **homeless liaison** in their policy development.
- An LEA in the South **revises their policy** annually, with input from several stakeholders.
- An advocate in the Southwest recommended **reaching out to families** to identify any hardship they may be facing when considering the policy.



Questions?

# Resources:

- National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Website:  
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/national-school-lunch-program-nslp>
- 2015 Edition of Eligibility Manual for School Meals:  
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/2015-edition-eligibility-manual-school-meals>
- Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Resource Center:  
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/community-eligibility-provision-resource-center>
- Special Nutrition Program Operations Study - State and School Food Authority Policies and Practices for School Meal Programs School Year 2011-12: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/SNOPSYear1.pdf>
- Request for Information - Unpaid Meal Charges (Comments):  
<http://www.regulations.gov/#!docketBrowser;rpp=25;po=0;D=FNS-2014-0039;dct=PS>
- SP 11-2014 - Effective Date of Free or Reduced Price Meal Eligibility Determinations: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/effective-date-free-or-reduced-price-meal-eligibility-determinations>