

MEAL CHARGE POLICY

I. PURPOSE

The intent of this policy is to establish a process and procedure to handle situations when children eligible for reduced-price or full-price meal benefits have insufficient funds to pay for school meals and to communicate the process for the collection of unpaid meal charges and delinquent account debt, to ensure compliance with federal requirements for the USDA Child Nutrition Program, to establish a fair and consistent process for the collection of school meal program debt.

II. SCOPE OF RESPONSIBILITY:

The Food Service Department: Maintains charge records and notifies the school district of outstanding balances. The Food Service Department also notifies parents/guardians of low or deficit balances at regular intervals during the school year.

The School District: Supports the Food Service Department in collection activities. The District will also be responsible for any unallowable debt owed to the Food Service Department.

The Parent / Guardian: Supplies the student with the means to get the nutrition they need to stay focused in school. Provides immediate repayment of charges made by the student for breakfast and lunch meals.

III. ADMINISTRATION

1. Free and Reduced-Price Meal Students

- a. **Free meal status** allows a student to receive free meals (breakfast and lunch) everyday.
- b. **Reduced-price eligible** students will be able to purchase school meals at a reduced price, within a range established under USDA regulations. A reduced-price eligible student will be allowed to charge a maximum dollar equivalent of five (5) meals to their account after the balance reaches zero, which will be known as the “account limit.”

2. Full Pay Students will pay for meals at the school’s published paid meal rate each day and will be allowed to charge a maximum of five (5) meals to their account after the balance reaches zero, which will be known as the “account limit”.

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3. General Considerations:

- a. Charged meals will include any menu items that are part of reimbursable meals that are available to all students.
- b. Students who qualify for free meals will not be denied a reimbursable meal even if they have accrued a negative balance on their cafeteria account.
- c. Students who have money to pay for a reduced-price or full price meal at the time of service must be provided a meal. If the student intended to use the money for that day's meal, the Food Services Department will not use the money to repay a negative balance or other unpaid meal charge debt.
- d. When a student reaches the "account limit", they will be offered a designated menu lunch alternative in a manner that does not cause embarrassment or stigma in the cafeteria; students in grades K-2 will be exempted from receiving an alternate meal. The designated meal alternative will be charged to the child's meal account at the standard meal rate and will contain all of the components for a complete meal, including Milk, Fruit, Vegetables, Whole Grain, and Meat/Meat Alternate.
- e. If a student is without meal money on a consistent basis, the administration will investigate the situation more closely and take further action as needed. If financial hardship exists, parents and families will be encouraged to apply for free or reduced price lunches for their child if applicable.
- f. Hand stamps, stickers, or any other means of overt identification of children with unpaid meal debt in the cafeteria or the classroom are prohibited.

4. Preventing Meal Charges

To ensure that all eligible families are certified for free and reduced-price school meals, the Food Services Department will proactively work with households to certify all eligible children for free and reduced-price meals to prevent households that are unable to pay from accruing meal debt.

Households that are subsequently certified for free or reduced-price school meals at a point later in the school year are still responsible for any charges made before the qualifying determination is made. The school district will submit retroactive claims for any meals charged to the household from the date of application to the date of certification, to the extent allowed under USDA regulations.

5. Student Meal Account Balances

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Funds should be maintained in student meal accounts to minimize the possibility that a child may be without meal money on any given day. Any remaining funds for an individual student will be carried over to the next school year.

- a. **Block On Accounts:** A parent may call the Food Service Director to place a block on their child's account to prohibit the purchase of a la carte items or set dollar cap.
- b. **Refunds for withdrawn and graduating students:** A written or e-mailed request for a refund of any money remaining in their account must be submitted within 180 days of departure. Students who are graduating at the end of the year will be given the option to transfer remaining funds to a sibling's account with a written request.
- c. **Unclaimed Funds:** All refunds must be requested within 180 days. Any unclaimed funds after 180 days will then become the property of the Mansfield Public Schools Food Service Program.

6. Notifying the Household of Low or Negative Balance in Student Meal Account

To ensure that households are aware of low and negative account balances and the potential to accrue meal debt, the Food Services Department will:

- include general written reminders in school newsletters, lunch menus, and student take-home folders to remind families to check for low account balances to prevent unpaid meal charges.
- send out low balance notices prior to students needing to charge meals;
- notify and/or work with principals, school counselors, and/or teachers to understand the student's and parent's situation and if a school meal application is needed

Any household with a negative school meal account balance of \$5 or more will be contacted by Food Services staff by email, phone, or letter home to provide information on how to apply for free or reduced-price school meals or how to add funds to the school nutrition account. Notifications to households will include the amount of unpaid meal charges, expected payment dates, the consequences of non-payment, and where to go for questions or assistance. The consequences of non-payment will be determined on a case-by-case basis by the building principal.

7. Unpaid Account Balances, Delinquent Debit, and Bad Debt

All communication regarding unpaid meal debt will be directed at parents/guardians. Prior to contacting households regarding unpaid meal debt, the District will ensure that the student is not participating in state or federal programs which would confer categorical eligibility for free *Mansfield Public Schools*

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school meals, or is not homeless, migrant, or in foster care, and would allow them to be certified without an application.

Funds from the non-profit food service account cannot be used to cover the cost of charged meals or food items that have not been paid. Unpaid student meal account balances will be identified as a financial obligation of the parents/guardians and remedied in accordance with current practices observed across the school district.

Collection of balances owed and collection of funds and fees for checks returned for Non-Sufficient Funds (NSF) will follow the policies and procedures set by the district. All accounts must be settled at the end of a school year or anytime a student leaves the district. Any balance owed to the Food Service program will be carried over into subsequent years in an attempt to collect the debt. The consequences of non-payment will be determined on a case-by-case basis.

The Superintendent or designee will be notified at the end of the school year of any outstanding debt and will be responsible for assessing debt collection efforts and evaluating all delinquent debt for conversion to bad debt. Bad debt will be restored to the Food Service program from the general fund prior to the end of the same fiscal year.

IV. NOTICE

The written meal charge policy will be posted on the Mansfield Public Schools website, included in all student handbooks and with all Meal Benefits Applications, and provided in information packets to all transfer students during the school year.

This policy will be provided to and reviewed annually with all school level staff responsible for its enforcement, including food service personnel responsible for collecting payment for meals at the point of service, food service staff responsible for notifying families of low balances, and business office staff involved in notifying families of negative balances. Food Services staff will receive training on meal charge policy and record of training will be maintained as required under USDA regulations.

School nurses, school counselors, principals, assistant principals, and other administrators will be informed of this policy annually.

Adopted: August 15, 2017

Legal Reference: 7 CFR 210, Office of Management and Budget Circular A-87
M.G.L. Chapter 71, Section 72 – Sale of Lunches

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M.G.L. Chapter 71, Section 68 – Duties of towns to maintain schools; transportation of children; school building committee representation

M.G.L. Chapter 71, Section 37K – Business demonstration projects; disposition of proceeds

M.G.L. Chapter 44, Section 69 – Municipal or district services, fees or charges; insufficient funds checks; penalty

M.G.L. chapter 60, Section 57A – Payment by check not duly paid; penalty

M.G.L. Chapter 93: Section 40A. Dishonored checks; demand for payment

USDA SP 29-2017: Overcoming the Unpaid Meal Challenge: Proven Strategies for our Nation's Schools, May 2017, Memo

USDA SP 23-2017: Unpaid Meal Charges: Guidance & Q&As, March 2017

USDA SP 47-2016: Unpaid Meal Charges: Clarification on Collection of Delinquent Meal Payments, July 2016

USDA SP 46-2016: Unpaid Meal Charges Guidance, July 2016

Other References: *Establishing Unpaid Meal Policies*, Food Research and Action Center

Cross Reference: JQ Student Fees, Fines, And Charges
ADF Student Wellness Policy And Wellness Plan
EF/EFC Food Services Management And Free & Reduced Price Food Services