

USDA PREVENTING LUNCH SHAMING: COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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 through their communication methods.

FOCUS ON ADULTS RESPONSIBLE FOR PAYMENT

USDA recommends schools focus on the adult(s) responsible for providing funds for meal purchases, rather than focusing debt collection efforts on the child. We encourage schools to communicate respectfully, privately, and directly with adults via phone, text, and/or email. This is preferred to communicating with or through the child, as the child may be embarrassed if communication about lunch debt occurs in front of their peers. Schools are strongly discouraged from directing any potentially stigmatizing communication towards a child. For example, USDA discourages the use of hand stamps, stickers, or other visual markers to identify children with lunch debt.

CHOOSE DISCRETE PAYMENT REMINDER OPTIONS

Proactively reminding families of low account balances is a best practice in many schools. USDA recommends choosing payment reminder options that will not single out children with lunch debt in the classroom or cafeteria. The following strategies are available to schools:

- Written reminders, sent to a parent/guardian email account or home address
- Verbal reminders, communicated through a “robo-call” system or a personal telephone call
- Automated reminders, sent through an online payment system
- Written reminders sent home in a student folder or an unmarked envelope with other school reminders or notices

COMMUNICATE REGULARLY WITH ALL FAMILIES

At a minimum, school food authorities are required to share information about their meal charge policy on an annual basis. USDA encourages schools to share this information regularly and in a variety of ways. Schools should post the policy on their web and social media sites, include the policy in print and online versions of student handbooks, and include the policy in other written communications to families, such as in monthly school newsletters and on cafeteria menus.

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!