

Meal Charge Policy

Federal Requirement

The purpose of the Meal Charge Policy is to address the need for School Food Authorities (SFA) participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) to institute and clearly communicate a meal charge policy, which would include, if applicable, the availability of alternate meals. Because all students in participating schools may receive reimbursable school meals, all SFAs must have a policy in place for children who are participating at the reduced-price or paid rate, but either do not have money in their account or in hand to cover the cost of the meal at the time of service. Such a policy ensures that school food service professionals, school administrators, families, and students have a shared understanding of expectations in these situations.

This policy establishes consistent meal account procedures throughout the school division and the goals of this policy are:

- To treat all students with dignity in the serving line regarding meal accounts.
- To support positive situations with division staff, division business policies, student and parent/guardian to the maximum extent possible.
- To establish policies that are age appropriate.
- To establish a consistent district policy regarding charges and collection of charges.

State Requirement

The Meal Charge Policy must contain the following provisions required by Section 22.1-79.7 of the Code of Virginia:

- Prohibit school board employees from requiring a student who cannot pay for a meal at school or who owes a school meal debt to do chores or other work to pay for such meals or wear a wristband or hand stamp.
- Require school board employees to direct any communication relating to a school meal debt to the student's parent. Such policy may permit such communication to be made by a letter addressed to the parent to be sent home with the student.
- Prohibit the school board from filing a lawsuit against a student or the student's parent because the student cannot pay for a meal at school or owes a school meal debt.
- Prohibit the school board or any school board employee from denying a student the opportunity to participate in any extracurricular school activity because the student cannot pay for a meal at school or owes a school meal debt.

Communication

- Any communication of a student's debt must be directed to the parent/caregiver. Schools may no longer communicate this information directly to the student.
- The written meal charge policy is communicated to households via the FCPS website.
- School Nutrition Program (SNP) staff receive training on meal charge policy and a record of the training is maintained.
- Documentation of the communication and training plan is maintained for the Federal Program Administrative Review.

Student Meals & School Nutrition Accounts

- 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.

- Students who qualify for reduced-price meals will not be denied a reimbursable meal even if they have accrued a negative balance on their cafeteria account (reduced-price meals are provided at no cost).
- Students who do not have money to pay for a full-price and/or paid meal at the time of service must be provided with a reimbursable meal.
- If the student has money intended to use for that day's meal, FNS will not use the money to repay a negative balance or other unpaid meal charge debt.
- Students will not be made to work for their meal or to work to settle any unpaid meal charges. In addition, students will not be labeled with a hand stamp, sticker, wristband, or identified in any other way if they cannot pay for a meal or have an unpaid meal charge.
- Students who charge meals will receive reimbursable meals – one (1) breakfast and one (1) lunch per student per day.

Notification

- The student's household will be notified when a student's school nutrition account balance is low (\$10.00 or below) via the FCPS messaging system.
- Parents/caregivers will be notified directly if students have an outstanding debt via the FCPS messaging system (text messages, phone calls, and/or emails) or U.S. mail.
- Notifications to households will include the amount of unpaid meal charges and where to go for questions or assistance. Schools follow the steps outlined below once a student's school nutrition account balance is negative and has reached the value of five (5) lunches (-\$16.25 at ES and -\$17.50 at MS/HS/SS).
 - FNS provides the school principal with the list of students.
 - The school principal calls the student's parents/caregivers to follow up on the negative school nutrition account balance.
 - The school social worker conducts a home visit and assists the family with submitting a household application for free and reduced-price meals.
- FNS school-based staff are responsible for collecting payment for meals at the point-of-service. School office or administration and central office staff are responsible for contacting households.

Debt

- Delinquent debt is allowable in the SNP and may be carried over each successive school year until a student graduates, withdraws, or is no longer affiliated with FCPS.
- Bad debt is defined as delinquent debt that is deemed uncollectible at the end of a student's duration with FCPS. Bad debt is unallowable in the SNP and cannot be carried over to the next school year.
- Funds resulting from bad debt cannot be recovered using SNP funds and must be offset by non-federal sources.
- At the end of the school year, the Assistant Superintendent of Financial Services and the FNS Director will evaluate all delinquent debt for conversion to bad debt. Bad debt will be restored to FNS from the general fund prior to the end of the same fiscal year.
- Efforts to collect delinquent and/or bad debt will be handled by notification letters addressed to the parents/caregivers.
- School boards cannot file a lawsuit against a student or the student's parent because the student cannot pay for a meal at school or owes a school meal debt.

Assistance

- Households with questions or in need of assistance may contact the school office where their student attends or the Office of Food and Nutrition Services, 6840 Industrial Road, Springfield, VA 22151/703-813-4800.