

Nebraska School Unpaid Meal Debt Best Practices



Nebraska's school unpaid meal debt has increased significantly in recent years. One source estimates that the overall unpaid meal debt in Nebraska has grown from \$2,882,000 in 2020 to \$14,876,022 in 2022 - a 5-fold increase. Additionally, legislation from 2024 banned Nebraska school districts from using collections agencies to collect school meal debt. **Find national unpaid meal debt best practices that can support districts AND students below.**

Local Unpaid Meal Debt Policies

- **Focus debt collections efforts on parents and guardians rather than students.** When students are the target of collections efforts or publicly identified for having debt, they can be stigmatized or shamed resulting in emotional trauma and poor relationships with a school.
- **Create a local district unpaid meal debt policy that clearly outlines district actions at set meal debt levels and/or time intervals.** These can be automated emails, notices mailed home, a call from a school social worker, a call from a school administrator, etc.
- When a local district unpaid meal debt policy is put into action with a family, **include a copy of the policy with the action.**
- Clearly **communicate local district unpaid meal debt policies and practices with parents/caregivers** at least twice during the school year.
- **Post your local district unpaid meal debt policy** publicly on district and school websites.
- Make **payment options convenient**, use a **pre-payment system**, and **provide payment plan options.**



Free and Reduced Price Meal Forms

- **Share the importance of filling out free and reduced price meal forms** with families early and often. Include [creative, compelling graphics](#) that outline the ways data from forms are used.
- **Make sure meal forms are translated** or interpretation support is provided to everyone who needs it.
- Include language to **combat misinformation in immigrant communities**: “The public charge rule does not affect participation in school meals, and a Social Security number is not required to complete the application.”
- Be sure **students transferring** into a district are given the opportunity to fill out a free or reduced price meal application as soon as possible.

School Cafeteria Best Practices

- **Provide every student who requests one a full, regular, non-alternative meal**, even if they have debt.
- Limit a student's ability to purchase á la carte foods.
- Schools **should not take actions that stigmatize or single out students**.
- Do not publicly identify, mark students with a wristband, stamp, or other identifying mark, separate them from their peers, or any other discriminatory practice.
- **Do not deny students participation** in any school activities, including extracurricular activities, after school programs, graduation, or field trips.
- **Do not require students to perform chores** or work to pay down debt.

Reducing & Preventing Unpaid Meal Debt

- Consider adopting National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program options that reduce unpaid meal debt and increase participation in school meals including the **Community Eligibility Provision, Provision 2**, using local funds to pay for the **reduced-price meal copay**, or serving breakfast with an **alternative breakfast model**.
- Schools can accept donations from individuals, organizations, churches, businesses or others to pay down meal debt. **Distribute donations in an equitable way**.
- Consider doing **outreach for the SNAP and Medicaid programs** which allow participating students to receive free meals at schools. See <https://iserve.nebraska.gov/>.

Talk to an Expert

- Nebraska Appleseed has been studying unpaid meal debt in Nebraska and working with school districts to responsibly address debt since 2017. Reach out to talk about implementing strategies that support students as well as your bottom line.
- The Nebraska Department of Education Nutrition Services Department will be doing compliance checks to understand local unpaid meal debt policies and practices at annual reviews. Reach out to better understand rules and regulations around this issue.

Sources & Additional Resources

- United States Department of Agriculture, "Unpaid Meal Charges," <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/unpaid-meal-charges>
- Education Data Initiative, "School Lunch Debt Statistics," <https://educationdata.org/school-lunch-debt>
- Food Research and Action Center, "Strategies to Increase Applications for School Meals", <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-Application-Toolkit-Aug-22.pdf>
- School Nutrition Association, "Guide to State Unpaid Meals Legislation and Trends," <https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/State-Unpaid-Meals-Legislation-Tracking.pdf>
- Food Research and Action Center, "Unpaid School Meals Fees: A Review of 50 School Districts' Policies in 2019," <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Unpaid-School-Meal-Fees-update-1.pdf>



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