



STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
LANSING

RICK SNYDER
GOVERNOR

MICHAEL P. FLANAGAN
STATE SUPERINTENDENT

March 6, 2014

MEMORANDUM

TO: Local and Intermediate School District Superintendents and
Public School Academy Directors

FROM: Mike Flanagan, State Superintendent 

SUBJECT: Unpaid Meal Balances

I recently received correspondence from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regarding outstanding balances on students' meal accounts. They were deeply troubled by a recent incident where meals were taken away from several elementary school children, allegedly due to outstanding balances on their school meal accounts. Although it was likely an isolated incident, USDA is committed to protecting the integrity of the child nutrition programs and ensuring that families and children are treated fairly and respectfully. To this end, USDA will conduct a study of the policies and practices of school districts for serving meals to students who are unable to pay. Furthermore, USDA will soon convene a multidisciplinary working group to solicit best practices and recommendations in this area.

In Michigan, addressing unpaid meal charges is ultimately a local decision. States in USDA's Midwest region have state policies addressing unpaid meals charges. Although Michigan does not have a state policy on unpaid meal charges, I do want to share some positive steps your school district can take to prevent potential issues:

- School districts should ensure that charges are not being applied to children who are eligible for free meals. A child's eligibility status can change, so families not eligible at the beginning of the school year may become eligible later in the year. Eligible children may also not be receiving free meals due to perceived paperwork burden or language barriers.

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- School districts are responsible for setting clear policies on collecting payment for school meals and might consider a more robust notification system for households with low balances. A variety of strategies for collecting debts can be used, including sending requests to parents for repayment via phone, text, email, or letter; or working with school principals or other school officials to enforce payment.
- School districts can also consider options such as eliminating the reduced-price category, or provide free meals to all children. One such option is the new Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), currently in place for Michigan schools. In lieu of collecting individual applications, eligible schools are required to pay the difference between the level of financial resources allowed by the law and the total cost of operating the program. This provision reduces administrative burdens for schools and allows them to offer free meals to all children.

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs play a critical role in ensuring that Michigan's children have access to the nutritious food they need to learn and succeed in the classroom. I know you share my concern about ensuring that school children have access to healthful meals during the school day. Maintaining both program integrity and student dignity is a goal we must all support.

Questions regarding this communication can be directed to Kyle Guerrant, Director, Office of School Support Services at 517-335-0565 or guerrantk@michigan.gov.

cc: Michigan Education Alliance