

Communications Best Practices

Overview:

Student-centered communication methods are effective in reducing unpaid debts while remaining empathetic to the students' situations. The following guide is designed to help you navigate difficult situations and minimize unpaid meal charges.

This guide to best practices in communications will cover:

- **Messaging:** What your communications should emphasize and what to keep in mind when discussing school meal charges.
- **Audience:** Identifying who you are talking to and what you should or should not be communicating.
- **Frequency/Location:** How you should reach your audience, what channels to use, and how often you should be interacting with them.

Message:

There are a few main concepts to keep in mind when creating your school meal communications: carrying out your school meal charge policy, maintaining a student-centered approach, and keeping a positive tone.

1.) School Meal Charge Policy

There are 3 main points to balance with your school meal policy:

1. **Feeding all students**
2. **Maintaining financial integrity**
3. **Eliminating lunch shaming**

When making any marketing materials or discussion points about your school's meal policy, use these three points to frame your message. Even if specific initiatives focus on one aspect, the outcome of your communications strategy should balance these three points equally.

The second core element of your messaging should be maintaining **a student-centered approach**. At the end of the day, keeping all students fed is the goal regardless of their account balance.

3.) Positive Attitude

Finally, our last recommendation is to **keep it positive!** Particularly when promoting any school meal assistance programs, having a positive message has a much bigger impact than you might expect.

Audience:

Knowing who you are talking to is vital to any communications strategy. When you are talking about school meals there are most likely 3 separate audiences you are talking to: students, parents, and external stakeholders.

Students

Negative balances can put a strain on your ability to feed all students, but remember that this conversation is **not** to be had with students. Speak with the adults/parents/guardians who are ultimately responsible. If you must speak with students about their delinquent account, use discretion and only as a way of reaching their parents or guardians.

Parents & Guardians

Parents and guardians are the ultimate “decision makers” and are responsible for their student's unpaid meal charges. When looking to resolve any negative accounts, always reach out to the parents and guardians with a clear and concise message. If they need to take any action on their account, strive to make that process as easy as possible – this can save you a lot of time in the long run.

External Stakeholders

External stakeholders include everyone else involved with the meal charge process, but not responsible for paying for an unpaid school meal. These individuals include school meal professionals, school administration/staff, and angel fund investors. When developing communications for these individuals, keep in mind what each individual audience is most interested in and tailor your content accordingly.

Frequency/Location:

Consistency drives results.

When you ask someone to do something, it typically takes more than one time asking them. **Communicate regularly with your audiences**, particularly parents/guardians, when asking them to complete something for you (such as a school meal form) and **use the same tool every time you reach out**. If you want to use another, add it, but don't replace the other unless you have good reason.

Use multiple channels. See what gets you results.

There are many ways to reach your audience. Written reminders like email and letters, verbal reminders by phone call, and automated reminders such as text messages or online payment systems. Website reminders and social media sites can also be useful tools. **Use a mix of channels in your communications strategy**. Everyone has their preferred way to receive content and reaching them where they are most receptive will get you the best results. Take note of where you get the best results and where you do not.

Supplemental State Resources:

MDE's Fiscal Monitoring Unit: advice, suggestions, and alternate resources.

Email: MDE-Fiscal@michigan.gov

Phone: 517-241-5380

USDA “Local Meal Charge Policy Communication Requirements for All SFAs Checklist”: help ensure you are doing what is required for your communication policy.

[VIEW THE POLICY](#)

USDA “Prevent Lunch Shaming – Communication”: a detailed approach and communication strategies.

[Preventing Lunch Shaming](#)