

## **UNPAID MEAL CHARGES**

### **I. PURPOSE**

The purpose of this policy is to establish consistent district practices for the provision of meals to students who have insufficient funds in their school meal accounts and the collection of unpaid meal debt.

### **II. GENERAL STATEMENT OF POLICY**

- A. The School District's goal is to provide nutritious meals to students to promote healthy eating habits and enhance learning as well as maintain the financial integrity of the National School Breakfast and Lunch program and eliminate stigmatization of children who are unable to pay meal charges.
- B. It is the policy of the School District to offer breakfast and lunch meals that meet state and federal guidelines.
- C. Families may apply for free/reduced-price meal benefits anytime during the school year. Meal applications are distributed to all families in the district prior to the student's first day of classes. In addition, applications are available at all school building offices. If household income or size changes, families can apply for meal benefits anytime during the school year.

### **III. PAYMENT OF MEALS**

- A. All meal purchases are to be prepaid before meal service begins. Families may add money to a student's account through the School District's website or send payment with the student to pay at the school office.
- B. If the school district receives school lunch aid under MN statute, it must make lunch available without charge to all participating students who qualify for free or reduced priced meals regardless of account balance.
- C. If a parent or guardian chooses to send in one payment that is to be divided between sibling accounts, the parent or guardian must specify how the funds are to be distributed to the students' accounts. Funds may not be transferred between sibling accounts unless written permission is received from the parent or guardian.

### **IV. UNPAID MEAL CHARGE POLICY**

- A. All students will be served a meal regardless of unpaid foodservice accounts. When a student eligible for PAID meals has “cash in hand” to pay for a meal and has a negative balance, the “cash in hand” will be applied towards the meal and not be applied towards past due balances.
- B. When a student has a negative account balance, the student will not be allowed to charge a la carte items regardless of the meal benefit status.

## **V. LOW OR NEGATIVE ACCOUNT BALANCES - NOTIFICATION**

- A. The School District will make reasonable efforts to notify families when meal account balances are low or fall below zero.
- B. When a student’s account falls below \$10.00, an automated phone call, text and/or email will be made to the parent/guardian informing them of the low balance and that money will need to be put into the account. The food service meal system will notify the families three times during the week on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday.
- C. Food Service Cashiers will verbally notify paid status students that “Your balance is low, and a payment is needed soon” when a student reaches a balance of less than \$10. This process will continue until the student’s balance becomes greater than \$10.
- D. Once a student’s account reaches -\$20.00, the Food Service Director will send a letter to the family requesting payment for the negative balance and will send a free/reduced meal application in case there has been a change in financial circumstances. Once a student’s account reaches past -\$40.00, a second letter will be sent to the family requesting payment for the negative balance and will send a free/reduced meal application in case there has been a change in financial circumstances. If a student’s account reaches past -\$60.00 and not paid prior to the end of the school year, a final letter will be sent notifying the family the account will be turned over to a collection agency and the student account will be reset back to a \$0.00 balance.
- E. When the School District is operating under a State or Federal program where meals are free for families, the low balance notifications will begin when the account is below zero.

## **VI. COLLECTION OF UNPAID MEAL DEBT**

- A. The School District will make reasonable efforts to communicate with families to resolve the matter of unpaid charges. Where appropriate, families may be encouraged to apply for free and reduced-price meals for their children.
- B. The School District will make reasonable efforts to collect unpaid meal charges classified as delinquent debt. Unpaid meal charges as delinquent debt when payment is overdue, the debt is considered collectable, and efforts are being made to collect it.

Delinquent meal debt becomes “delinquent meal bad debt” when payment is overdue, and it is determined that further collection efforts for delinquent debt are useless or too costly. Food Service funds cannot be used to cover the losses of delinquent meal bad debt. Delinquent meal debt will be considered bad debt when the debt is transferred to a collection agency.

Each year, the bad debt costs will be presented to the School Board at the September regular meeting, along with the subsequent transfer from the General Fund to the Food Service fund.

- C. Throughout the school year, invoices will be sent to families with deficit “stale” meal accounts. A deficit “stale” meal account is defined as unpaid meal charges prior to a student qualifying for free and reduced meal benefits or a student that has left the District with a negative meal balance. Payment will be requested within 30 days after a student qualifies for free and reduced assistance. If no payment has been received (or no payment plan has been established with the Director of Business Services) after 30 days of notification, the invoice will be referred to a collection agency, and the student account will be reset back to a \$0.00 balance.
- D. Negative balances of more than \$60.00 and not paid prior to the end of a school year will be turned over to the District Office for collection. Collection options may include, but are not limited to, use of collection agencies, claims in the conciliation court, or any other legal method permitted by law.
- E. Negative balances of more than \$10.00 when a student leaves the School District will be turned over to the District Office for collection at the end of a school year. This includes graduating Seniors. Collection options may include, but are not limited to, use of collection agencies, claims in the conciliation court, or any other legal method permitted by law.
- F. The School District may not enlist the assistance of non-school district employees, such as volunteers, to engage in debt collection efforts.

## **VII. COMMUNICATION OF POLICY**

A. This policy and any pertinent supporting information shall be provided in writing (i.e., mail, email, back-to-school packet, student handbook, etc.) to:

1. All households at or before the start of each school year;
2. Students and families who transfer into the school district, at the time of enrollment; and
3. All school district personnel who are responsible for enforcing this policy.

B. The school district may post the policy on the school district's website, in addition to providing the required written notification described above.

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