



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Food and  
Nutrition  
Service

3101 Park  
Center Drive  
Alexandria, VA  
22302-1500

DATE: September 19, 2016

MEMO CODE: SP 58-2016

SUBJECT: 2016 Edition: *Overcoming the Unpaid Meal Challenge: Proven Strategies from Our Nation's Schools*

TO: Regional Directors  
Special Nutrition Programs  
All Regions

State Directors  
Child Nutrition Programs  
All States

The school meal programs aim to provide nutritious meals to children during the school day. Children may receive breakfast and lunch at no cost if they are categorically eligible for free meals or if they qualify for free meals based on Federal poverty guidelines. Children who do not qualify for free meals may purchase meals at a subsidized cost, at either the reduced price or paid rate. Sometimes, however, children who do not qualify for free meals would like a breakfast or lunch, but do not have money in their account or in hand to cover the cost of the meal at the time of the meal service.

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) recognizes that unpaid meal charges represent a difficult and complex issue directly impacting the schools participating in the school meal programs and the children they serve. FNS has made a concerted effort to learn from and build on the success of school nutrition directors, principals, and food service professionals with direct experience in managing unpaid meal charges.

The first edition of *Overcoming the Unpaid Meal Challenge: Proven Strategies from Our Nation's Schools* summarizes the best practices FNS has collected. The guide shares positive approaches local program operators can use in their efforts to:

- Reach all eligible children;
- Assist families with the school meal application process;
- Make payment convenient;
- Send payment reminders;
- Get buy-in for a local meal charge policy;
- Provide alternate meals, when necessary; and
- Find alternative funding sources.

Regional Directors

State Directors

Page 2

The guide is designed to support State and local stakeholders working every day to address the challenge of unpaid meal charges. Throughout the guide, readers will hear from school superintendents, principals, food service professionals, and others who shared their own challenges and successes addressing unpaid meal charges during the comment period on unpaid meal charges and during two public webinars FNS hosted on the topic in February 2016.

The guide will be updated as needed to reflect changes to policy, additional best practices, and to incorporate clarifications requested by State agencies and FNS Regional Offices.

### **Unpaid Meal Charges Policy Guidance**

*Overcoming the Unpaid Meal Challenge: Proven Strategies from Our Nation's Schools* is a companion piece to recently issued policy memoranda related to unpaid meal charges, which includes the following:

- SP 46-2016: *Unpaid Meal Charges: Local Meal Charge Policies*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/unpaid-meal-charges-local-meal-charge-policies>
- SP 47-2016: *Unpaid Meal Charges: Clarification on Collection of Delinquent Meal Payments*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/unpaid-meal-charges-clarification-collection-delinquent-meal-payments>
- SP 57-2016: *Unpaid Meal Charges: Guidance and Q&As*, September 16, 2016.

Other resources related to unpaid meal charges may be found on the FNS Unpaid Meal Charges website: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/unpaid-meal-charges>.

State agencies are reminded to distribute this memorandum and attachments to Program operators immediately. Program operators should direct any questions concerning this guidance to their State agency. State agencies with questions should contact the appropriate FNS Regional Office.

**Original Signed**

Angela Kline

Director

Policy and Program Development Division

Child Nutrition Programs

Attachment