

# **Unpaid Meal Charge and Debt Collection Procedure**

## **Introduction:**

Beginning July 1, 2017, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will require all Local Education Authorities (School Districts) to have a written and clearly communicated meal charge policy at the start of each school year. The policy/procedure should articulate how students will be charged for meals, as well as offering alternate meals, limits on meal charges, or charging of ala carte/extra items when a student's account has insufficient funds. Per USDA guidance, the specific policy/procedure is at the discretion of each school food authority.

The USDA encourages that "any reminders for payment of outstanding student meal balances do not stigmatize or demean any child participating in the school lunch program". Collecting and asking for meal payments should be done in a respectful manner. School districts are in the best position to understand their school community's attitudes, beliefs and cultural sensitivities on methods of reminding and collecting payments. At no time should a meal policy target or shame students for financial considerations beyond their control.

When districts notify households of the meal charge and collection policy/procedure, multiple methods of distributing the information should be used. Options are to include it in the student handbook, the back-to-school free and reduced-price meal application, school district newsletter, or posted on the school district website.

## **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 goal of the Allegheny Valley School District 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 district to offer Breakfast and Lunch meals that meet state and federal guidelines.

C. The district Food Service Department operates a computerized debit system. In the system, each student is assigned a PIN (personal identification number). A debit account is then setup for each student and purchases are deducted from the account. Money may be placed into the account via cash, checks, money orders, or online payments at [www.payforit.net](http://www.payforit.net). For those students who participate in the free and reduced program, the computer acts as if the student has credit in his/her account and makes adjustments accordingly. Cashiers will advise students when their account balance is low or in the negative. Maintaining a positive balance is encouraged but not required.

D. Families may apply for free or reduced-price meal benefits anytime during the school year. Meal applications information is distributed to all families in the district prior to the first day of classes and is available on the district web page: [www.avsdweb.org/](http://www.avsdweb.org/). For safe and secure online application submission please visit: [www.paschoolmeals.com](http://www.paschoolmeals.com). Families without internet access may request a paper application available at each school's cafeteria, guidance office, or building administrative office. If at any time throughout the year household income or size changes, families can reapply for meal benefits.

### III. Charge Policy

A. If the student or family account has insufficient funds to pay for breakfast and or lunch meals, the following policies will apply:

- The district will apply a maximum charge limit of \$15.00
- Grades 4 through 12 students that have exceeded the charge limit will be offered a “Basic Alternative Meal” The alternative meal components will meet all applicable state and federal requirements of the national school lunch program. Substitutions will be provided for students with special dietary needs. The student will continue to receive and be charged for the basic alternative meal until all previous charges have been paid.
- Grades 4 through 12 that have exceeded the charge limit will not be permitted to charge a breakfast meal or breakfast ala carte extra items.
- Students exceeding the charge limits have the option of paying the cash value of current purchases or packing a lunch from home to avoid being charged for the basic alternative meal.
- Student or parents may request special consideration from the building principal and or district designee to charge meals above the maximum charge limit.
- At no time are students permitted to charge ala carte or extra item.
- Students eligible for free or reduced-price meals will always be served a meal regardless of unpaid food service accounts.
- When a student eligible for PAID meals has “cash in hand” to pay for a meal, the student will be served a meal regardless of unpaid account balance. The “cash in hand” will not be applied towards past due balances.
- Monies deposited to a negative balance account must first be used to satisfy the negative balance.

### IV. Account Status and Notifications

- For your convenience, the district has implemented a credit/debit card prepayment system. Parents can set-up a free account at: [www.payforit.net](http://www.payforit.net) or follow the link on the district’s web page. Parents will now be able to:
  1. Set-up automated recurring payments by date or by balance.
  2. Request an email report of their child’s purchases for the past 30 days.
  3. View their child’s balance online.
  4. Request email notification when their child’s balance falls between a preset level.
- Negative account balance letters will be sent home with student or mailed on a semi monthly basis.
- The parent/guardian may be notified via a phone call if the negative balance letters do not result in payment on the account.
- When appropriate or requested, students will be given a friendly verbal reminder in the meal service line of current account balance.
- Food Service Department will encourage parents to complete the free/reduced-price meal application and provide application assistance as needed.
- When phone contact is not available the district may use email to notify parents of negative account balances.
- Parent/Guardian is responsible for any carryover meal charges from prior school years and will be notified of negative balance.
- Parent/Guardian is responsible for meal charges made prior to the approval of a free or reduced priced meal application and will be notified of negative balance.
- Notification from bank of checks with non-sufficient funds will result in district removing those funds from students account and the parent/guardian will be notified.

- The parent/guardian should notify the Food Service Department in writing if they wish to restrict their child's access to ala carte items, breakfast, or additional purchases.

\*Notification methods may vary depending on student grade level and individual circumstances.

## **V. Collection of Unpaid Meal Debt**

A. When a student balance remains uncollected the following actions may be taken:

- The building principal or their designee will contact the family and review with them their responsibility to provide meals for their child.
- The Food Service Department will contact the building principal if no payment is received. The principal will contact the parent/guardian to determine an appropriate solution.
- The district may withhold report cards, grade reports, or transcripts until the negative balance is paid.
- If a student has a negative account balance upon graduation, the student may be held out of the commencement ceremony pending payment of account balance or district administrative review.
- If a student has a negative account balance at the time of their withdrawal or transfer, the district will not provide academic reports or transcripts, unless required by law, until negative balance is paid in full.
- Assistance from the county social services may be requested by the district if parent/guardian refuses to provide meals or pay for school prepared meals for their children.
- The district may send a formal certified letter to the household notifying that the debt will be turned over to the local magistrate and the student meal account will be closed.
- The expectation is all fees owed to the district will be paid in full on the last day the student will be attending classes.