

ISSUE:

School meal debt is a challenge for most school districts as they struggle to ensure students are fed and ready to learn while ensuring the costs of food and labor covered. Policies for how local districts deal with this issue at the local level vary significantly. A recent inventory of 154 Massachusetts school districts identified a wide range issues including:

- “No charge” policies where students without meal money on hand end up hungry the entire day.
- Policies setting “account caps”, after which cafeteria workers are directed to serve a cold sandwich and toss the hot meal, as well as speak directly to the child about the meal debt
- District tactics to collect unpaid meal debt including barring students and siblings from extracurricular activities, denying report cards, withholding graduation caps and gowns.

California, New Mexico, New York, Iowa, Oregon, Washington, and West Virginia have all passed policies to address school meal shaming. **It’s time for Massachusetts to take this step.**

Lack of a statewide policy puts children in harm’s way, cafeteria workers in tough positions with little or no guidance and teachers struggling to teach hungry students.

WHAT IS THE NSLP?

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is the core federal nutrition program designed to reduce childhood hunger, increase school attendance, and educational outcomes. In many districts, students who do not qualify for free or reduced-price meal status, or whose parents have not applied, must pay for meals served to a child at the paid price. Yet not all Massachusetts families eligible for NSLP free meal status are enrolled, and many families find themselves without enough money to pay for their school lunches. Some school districts fail to maximize federal NSLP revenue through robust data matching of eligible students or regular outreach. Changes in a family’s income during the school year or district data errors in data matching students for free meals, end up contributing to school meal debt.



HOW CAN WE FIX THIS?

The bills would require districts to take steps to reduce a family's meal debt by maximizing federal reimbursements and limit debt communication to responsible adults. Consistent with the United State's Department of Agriculture's 2016 findings urging school districts to reduce meal debt shaming practices and maximize federal revenue, this legislation will:

- Prohibit school officials from punishing students or siblings for meal debt such as serving an inferior meal or barring extracurricular activities, report cards, or graduation.
- Require districts to communicate directly with responsible adults about meal debt.
- Require districts to take steps to reduce student meal debt by maximizing federal revenue.
- Require districts with 40% or more economically disadvantaged students to elect the "community eligibility provision" to provide universal free meals unless the school board votes to opt out.

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