

Understanding School Meal Charging Policies

The Nutrition Group is proud to manage your child's school food service program. We're glad to have this opportunity to discuss School Meal Charging Policies, a subject that's been a "hot topic" at gatherings of parents, administrators, and food service managers. Let's look at the basic facts concerning charging policies, their common components, and who has what responsibilities as a result of these policies.

Whether or not students are allowed to charge meals is a decision made by your district administrators and school board members, not The Nutrition Group. Your district must have a Charge Policy in place if they allow students to charge meals. Typically, Charge Policies state who may charge meals, how many meals may be charged (or a dollar amount that may be charged), the consequences of exceeding the established charge limit, and the details of how the amount of charges due will be communicated to the student or parent/guardian. The food service department has direct contact with the students so we enforce your district's Charge Policy, but we may not alter or ignore the policy. Remember, all the money coming into your cafeterias for student accounts, sales, and repaid charges goes directly to your district's bank account, not to The Nutrition Group.

Just as our food service team follows state and federal requirements for nutrition, quality, portion size, and food safety, there are state and federal mandates and guidelines that your business office and board members must follow when determining the district's meal and a la carte prices. These mandates extend beyond minimum meal pricing to guidelines for charge policies and for the collection of money owed for charged meals.

The District is directed through the federal Office of Management and Budget to make every effort to collect outstanding debt (meal charges) throughout the school year. At the end of the school year, funds equaling the outstanding meal charges must be transferred by the district to your cafeteria fund to cover those unpaid meal charges.

This doesn't mean those unpaid charges just go away. Your district can continue to seek payment for those

transferred, unpaid charges. The bottom line is that the transferred money is tax-payers' money; money that was tagged for other district programs, not for repaying meal charges.

Let's outline who has what responsibilities when it comes to your district's Meal Charging Policy:

Your District

The School Board decides whether or not to allow student meal charges.

- The School Board creates a Meal Charging Policy to manage student meal charges and repayments

The Nutrition Group (the food service department):

- Abides by/enforces the district's Charging Policy
- Ensures charges are properly recorded and reported to the district per the district's Charge Policy
- Collects, records, deposits charge repayments in the district's bank account

Student/Parent/Guardian:

- Parent/Guardian completes a Free/Reduced-Priced Meal Application at any time throughout the school year as need arises to avoid charging meals
- Everyone reads your district's Charge Policy and stays informed on the balance in the student's cafeteria account and on any charges due
- Pays charges promptly
- Contacts the person identified as the contact person in your district's Charge Policy if you have questions about your student's cafeteria account activity

We hope this information has opened a dialog about School Meal Charging Policies. Remember, each district's Meal Charging Policy is unique, so we only covered the basics here. For more detailed information, please read your district's Meal Charging Policy and contact your district representative for answers to any questions.

