

MEAL CHARGE POLICY

The School Committee is committed to providing students with healthy, nutritious meals each day so they can focus on school work, while also maintaining the financial integrity of meal programs and minimizing any impact on students with meal charges. However, unpaid meal charges place a large financial burden on the school district, as food services is a self-supporting entity within the district. The purpose of this policy is to ensure compliance with federal reporting requirements of the USDA Child Nutrition Program, as well as provide oversight and accountability for the collection of outstanding student meal balances.

The provisions of this policy pertain to regular priced school meals only. The School Committee will provide a regular meal to students who forget or lose their lunch money.

Meal Charges and Balances

Students will pay for meals at the regular rate approved by the School Committee and for their meal status (regular, reduced-price, or free) each day. Payment options will be delineated in student handbooks as well as the district's website, and provided to parents/guardians of incoming students.

After a student's balance reaches zero and becomes negative, students will not be allowed to purchase a la carte items including but not limited to a second entrée, snack, ice cream, or an additional beverage. After a balance reaches zero or becomes negative, students at the high school will be allowed to charge one meal (breakfast or lunch). Students in grades K-8 will be allowed to charge 3 meals (any combination of breakfast or lunch).

Staff will not discuss any outstanding meal debt in the presence of any other students. Students who incur meal charges will not be overtly identified, and will not be required to wear or carry any item that would identify unpaid meals.

Schools will not take any action directed at a pupil to collect unpaid school meal fees. Schools and the Food Service Department will deal directly with parents/guardians regarding unpaid school meal fees. Unpaid meal charges will be addressed directly with the student's parent or guardian who is responsible for providing funds for meal purchases.

Payments

Parents/Guardians are responsible for all meal payments to the food service program. Notices of low or deficit balances will be sent directly to parent/guardians via email or regular postal mail at regular intervals during the school year. At no time shall any staff member give payment notices

to students unless that student is known to be an emancipated minor who is fully responsible for themselves or over the age of 18. If parents/guardians have issues with student purchases they should contact food services for assistance. If there is a financial hardship, a parent/guardian should contact the Food Services Department directly to discuss payment options such as an individualized repayment plan.

Parents/Guardians are encouraged to pay for meals in advance. Further details are available on the school district webpage and in student handbooks. Funds should be maintained in accounts to minimize the possibility that a child may be without meal money on any given day. Any remaining funds for a particular student, whether positive or negative, will be carried over to the next school year.

All school cafeterias possess computerized point of sale/cash register systems that maintain records of all monies deposited and spent for each student and those records are available to parents/guardians by setting up an online account (see student handbooks for more details) or by speaking with the school's food service manager. The point of sale system is designed to prevent direct identification of a student's meal status. Parents/guardians will receive automated low-balance emails or mailed notices weekly, if applicable. If notices do not result in payment, parents/guardians will receive a phone call. If the phone call does not result in payment the food service manager may turn the account over to the business office.

Refunds

Refunds for withdrawn and/or graduating students require a written request (email, postal, or in person) for a refund of any money remaining in their account to be submitted. Graduating students also have the option to transfer funds to a sibling's account or to donate to a student in need with a written request.

Delinquent Accounts/Collections

Failure of a parent or guardian to maintain reasonably current accounts may result in a referral to the Business Manager for his/her review. The Superintendent shall ensure that there are appropriate and effective collection procedures and internal controls within the school district's business office that meet the requirements of law.

If a student is without meal money on a consistent basis, the administration may investigate the situation more closely and take further action as needed. If financial hardship exists, parents/guardians and families are encouraged to apply for free or reduced price lunches for their child. Each school handbook shall contain detailed instructions for family assistance.

Policy Communications

This policy shall be communicated to all staff and families at the beginning of each school year and to families transferring to the district during the year.

LEGAL REFS: MGL 71:72; USDA School Meal Program Guidelines May 2017

CROSS REFS: JQ, Student Fees, Fines & Charges

Adopted by Dracut School Committee February 25, 2019

Amended February 12, 2024