



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

OFFICE OF THE STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF

EDUCATION

MEMORANDUM

To: School Food Authorities

From: *Elizabeth Leach*

Elizabeth Leach
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Date: August 15, 2016

Re: Access, Eligibility, and Meal Charges in the National School Lunch Program

State Agency Memo
NSLP #09-16

USDA has recently released five memos regarding student access and eligibility as well as meal charges in the National School Lunch Program. The purpose of this State Agency Memo is to inform local education agencies (LEAs) of these USDA memos and highlight major changes and recommendations. This information pertains to all LEAs but is most applicable for those not in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Please read through the memo in its entirety. We highly recommend clicking through to read each of the USDA memos in their entirety as well. If you have any questions please reach out to myself or your designated program specialist.

[SP 43-2016 Ensuring Access to Free and Reduced Price School Meals for Low-Income Students](#)

This memo outlines steps LEAs and schools can take to improve access to the school meal programs. In particular, it highlights ways to help ensure children who are not currently directly certified but are eligible for free or reduced price meals are successfully connected to these programs and ways to reduce the number of eligible children who lose access to meals during the verification process.

1. Improving the Application Process
 - a. Simplify the application process and encourage eligible families to apply
 - b. Provide materials in a language and at a level that parents can understand
2. Strengthen the Direct Certification Process
 - a. Increase direct certification matching frequency beyond the currently required three times per school year to at least once per month to reach students who become eligible during the school year in a timelier manner
3. Improving the Verification Process
 - a. Provide clear instructions on the verification notice
 - b. LEAs must make at least one attempt to contact any household that does not respond or provide insufficient documentation. The State Agency recommends

additional follow up and using multiple communication channels such as a telephone call, e-mail, mail, or in-person.

[SP 46-2016 Unpaid Meal Charges: Local Meal Charge Policies](#)

The purpose of this memo is to address the needs for a meal charge policy, which would include, if applicable, the availability of alternate meals. All School Food Authorities (SFAs) must have a policy in place for children who are participating at the reduced price or paid rate, but either do not have money in their account or in hand to cover the cost of the meal at the time of service. This must include policies regarding the collection of delinquent meal charge debt. The policy must be provided in writing to all households at the start of each school year and to households that transfer to the school during the school year as well as to all school or SFA-level staff responsible for policy enforcement. Such a policy ensures that school food service professionals, school administrators, families, and students have a shared understanding of expectations in these situations.

The State Agency allows each SFA to develop and implement their own meal charge policies for each school and encourages the following:

- Include the policy in student handbooks and/or online portals households use to access student accounts
- Policies that allow children to receive the nutrition they need to stay focused during the school day
- Policies that minimize identification of children with insufficient funds to pay for school meals
- Policies that maintain the integrity of the nonprofit school food service account (NSFSA)

USDA is currently developing resources that SFAs can use in their efforts to create an effective meal charge policy. These resources will be available on the USDA website in 2016.

[SP 47-2016 Unpaid Meal Charges: Clarification on Collection of Delinquent Meal Payments](#)

This memo clarifies the process of designating delinquent debt that has been determined to be uncollectable as bad debt and obtaining assistance to offset bad debt losses. Additionally, this memo clarifies how Federal Government regulations and the USDA definition of “bad debt” apply to the NSFSA when unpaid meal charges are not collected.

USDA is currently developing resources that SFAs can use in their efforts to create an effective meal charge and delinquent account policies. These resources will be available on the USDA website in 2016.

[SP 50-2016 2016 Edition of the Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#)

The [Eligibility Manual for School Meals Determining and Verifying Eligibility School Year 2016-17](#) provides comprehensive information on Federal requirements, policies, and procedures, and is intended to help LEAs accurately determine, certify, and verify children’s eligibility for free and reduced price school meals and free milk. Notable changes are highlighted in yellow throughout the manual.

Significant changes are included in Section 3: Establishing Eligibility and Section 4: The School Meal Application. [State Agency Memo NSLP #06-16](#) sent on May 27, 2016 reviews updates to the school meal application. Other major updates are bulleted below and included throughout this memo. The State Agency recommends reading all highlighted portions of the manual.

- Page 11: USDA Nondiscrimination Statement, new as of November 2015
- Page 13: Except for a foster child, the household indication of Other Source Categorically Eligible Status must be confirmed through documentation prior to certifying the child's eligibility for free meals.
- Page 37: A student's eligibility from the previous school year (before July 1) carries over for up to 30 operating days into the new school year, or until a new eligibility determination is made, whichever comes first.
- Page 43: LEAs may establish the date of submission of an application as the effective date of eligibility, rather than the date the official approves it.

[SP 51-2016 Ensuring Year-long Eligibility in the School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs](#) **Transfers Between LEAs**

The purpose of this memo is to strongly encourage LEAs to accept eligibility determinations from a transferring student's former LEA to minimize disruptions in meal benefits for low-income students and avoid student debt resulting from unpaid meal charges. The new LEA should retain written documentation of the eligibility determination made by the former LEA; an email from the former LEA stating the eligibility status is sufficient. LEAs are also reminded that they do not need a parent or guardian's consent to disclose student information to administrators of other school meal programs to determine a student's eligibility for school meal programs and they can include this information in the transferring student's file.

Special Provisions

LEAs ***must*** provide up to 10 school days (or until a new eligibility determination is made, whichever comes first) of free, reimbursable meals to students who transfer from a Provision school, including schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision, to a non-Provision school within the same LEA. The State Agency ***is allowing and encourages*** all SFAs within the District of Columbia to provide up to 30 operating days (or until a new eligibility determination is made, whichever comes first) of free meals to students who transfer from Provision to non-Provision schools, within or between LEAs, both during and between school years. By July 1, 2019, LEAs will be required to provide up to 10 schools days of free meals to students who transfer from a Provision to a non-Provision school in a different LEA.