



Contact Mary Ladd
Public Information Coordinator
Cell 580-352-4188
Email laddm@pcps.us
Website www.pcps.us

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PONCA CITY PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARD OF EDUCATION APPROVES NEW UNPAID MEAL CHARGE POLICY

The Ponca City Public School Board of Education approved a new proposed “Unpaid Meal Charge” policy at their June regular meeting. This policy is mandated by the federal government and dictates procedures for collecting unpaid meal charges from students with insufficient funds for school meals and delinquent accounts in the Child Nutrition Program.

The intent of the policy is to establish a process and procedure to handle situations when children eligible for reduced-price or full-price meal benefits have insufficient funds to pay for school meals as well as for the collection of unpaid meal charges and delinquent account debt.

Ponca City Public School Child Nutrition Director Jeff Denton explained, “The Child Nutrition Department has maintained a procedure for unpaid meals for many years, but now we have to put this practice into policy.”

“Unpaid meals occur due to several situations; however, most of the time it is due to inaction from the parent or guardian. There are so many ways in which a student can apply for free or reduced meals. It is a long, drawn out process of notifying households in obtaining a remedy for their student’s debt. The CNP of the Ponca City Schools goes to great length, time and effort to resolve the situation before denying a meal.”

Denton continued, “When a student and household don’t qualify for free or reduced meals and do not pay, the meal is not reimbursed and becomes a financial burden on the program and district. At some point, the parent or guardian must take responsibility for either completing an application, arranging for payment or providing a meal for their child.”

Some of the important points and highlights from the policy are listed below.

- Students who qualify for free meals will not be denied a reimbursable meal even if they have accrued a negative balance on their cafeteria account.
- Students who have money to pay for a reduced-price or full price meal at the time of service must be provided a meal. If the student intended to use the money for that day’s meal, the CNP will not use the money to repay a negative balance or other unpaid meal charge debt.
- Students will be allowed to charge meals, depending on circumstances. In this case a student meal debt of \$30.00 is considered excessive debt.

- This policy is required by the USDA to address Child Nutrition unpaid meal liabilities by July 1, 2017. The mandated policy was made one year ago in July of 2016.
- This policy sets out the procedure for collecting unpaid meal charges and establishes notification of household in the event of a negative balance.
- The threshold to suspend meal service to a student is \$30.00.
- The policy establishes communication of policy procedures.
- The policy addresses and defines delinquent and bad debt.

All school food authorities (SFAs) must develop a written policy for children eligible for reduced-price, full-price meals that do not have money to pay for meals at the time of service and communicate the policy to all students and households by the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year.

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs are integral in ensuring that students have access to nutritious meals to support their academic success. It is also imperative to protect the financial stability of school nutrition program.