



## **UNPAID MEAL CHARGE AND DEBT COLLECTION POLICY**

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that students receive healthy and nutritious meals through the school nutrition program and that school employees, families, and students have a shared understanding of expectations regarding meal charges. The policy seeks to allow students to receive the nutrition they need to stay focused during the school day, to minimize identification of students with insufficient funds to pay for school meals, as well as to maintain the financial integrity of the school nutrition program.

### **General Statement of Policy**

Cotter Schools' goal is to provide nutritious meals to students to promote healthy eating habits and enhance learning as well as maintain the financial integrity of the National School Breakfast and Lunch program, and eliminate stigmatization of children who are unable to pay meal charges.

Cotter Dining strives to produce quality meals at a reasonable cost. Achieving this goal is, in part, dependent upon generating the financial resources necessary to fund the school meal program. Primary funding sources for the school meals program are the Federal and State governments and meal prices charged to families and staff. Federal and State funds cover the cost of meals for children that come from households with income below defined levels, set by the government.

Cotter will require timely and full payment for meals purchased and collection of all outstanding payments due in order to maintain the lowest possible meal prices for all. When each family pays for the meals consumed by their child(ren), on time, everyone pays their appropriate share.

Families may apply for free/reduced-price meal benefits anytime during the school year. The Application for Educational Benefits is distributed to all families prior to the start of each school year. In addition, the Application for Educational Benefits is available on the Cotter Dining website, within the Wordware lunch portal, and in the Cotter Business Office. If household income or size change, families can apply for meal benefits anytime during the school year.

### **Charge Policy**

Meal payments are accepted through the Wordware lunch portal, through US Mail, or can be brought directly to the school. A service fee is applied to online transactions. Cash or Check

payments can be made in the business office to avoid transaction fees. Parents and guardians may access all meal account statuses and activities on the Wordware lunch portal.

**Accounts require prepayment.** Accounts with a negative balance will be notified via email, or text message, from Wordware. Statements will be emailed to families monthly. A regular meal will be served, but parents who choose not to make payments will be asked to send a bag lunch with their child. No ala carte items can be charged.

Once staff have placed a meal on a tray or otherwise served the meal to a student, the meal may not be subsequently withdrawn from the student by the cashier or other school official, whether or not the student has an outstanding meal balance. The family account will be charged for this meal.

Students eligible for free or reduced-price meals will always be served a meal regardless of unpaid food service accounts.

Students with an overdrawn account are not allowed to charge ala carte items.

### **Notification of Account Status**

Any reminders for payment of outstanding student meal balances do not demean or stigmatize any child participating in the school lunch program, including but not limited to dumping meals, withdrawing a meal that has been served, announcing or listing students' names publicly, or affixing stickers, stamps, or pins.

Families can check their students' meal account balances via the Wordware lunch portal, or by contacting the Cotter Business Office.

Email notifications are sent to families on Sundays and Thursdays with balances of \$10.00 or less. Text notification are sent to families on Sundays and Thursdays with balances of \$ -0.01 or less (negative balances). The parent/guardian will be notified via phone call when the household account is at a negative balance of \$60.00 or more.

### **Collection of Unpaid Meal Debt**

Cotter Schools will make reasonable efforts to collect unpaid meal charges classified as delinquent debt. Unpaid meal charges are designated as delinquent debt when payment is overdue, the debt is considered collectable, and efforts are being made to collect it.

Cotter Schools reserves the right to take steps deemed necessary to collect overdue payments. These actions may include: turning the outstanding balance over to a collection agency, small claims court, revocation of charging privileges, or other actions as deemed necessary.

The school may not enlist the assistance of non-school employees, such as volunteers, to engage in debt collection efforts.

The expectation is all fees owed to Cotter Schools will be paid in full prior to the end of each school year.

## Policy Communication

This policy and any pertinent supporting information shall be provided in writing to:

1. All households at or before the start of each school year,
2. Students and families who transfer into the school system upon enrollment, and
3. All school personnel responsible for enforcing this policy.

The school will also post this policy on the school website, in addition to providing the required written notification described above.

In accordance with federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, age, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity.

Program information may be made available in languages other than English. Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication to obtain program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotope, American Sign Language), should contact the responsible state or local agency that administers the program or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339.

To file a program discrimination complaint, a Complainant should complete a Form AD-3027, USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form which can be obtained online at: <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/USDA-OASCR%20P-Complaint-Form-0508-0002-508-11-28-17Fax2Mail.pdf>, from any USDA office, by calling (866) 632-9992, or by writing a letter addressed to USDA. The letter must contain the complainant's name, address, telephone number, and a written description of the alleged discriminatory action in sufficient detail to inform the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (ASCR) about the nature and date of an alleged civil rights violation. The completed AD-3027 form or letter must be submitted to USDA by:

- (1) **mail:** U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; or
- (2) **fax:** (833) 256-1665 or (202) 690-7442; or
- (3) **email:** [program.intake@usda.gov](mailto:program.intake@usda.gov)

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

Approved 11/2/2022