

## **565 MEAL ACCOUNT MAINTENANCE PROVISIONS/ UNPAID MEAL CHARGES**

### **I. PURPOSE**

The purpose of this policy is to establish meal account maintenance in the provision of meals to students.

### **II. GENERAL STATEMENT OF POLICY**

- A. Alexandria Public School's goal is to provide nutritious meals to students to promote healthy eating habits and enhance learning. The school district employees, families, and students will 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 and 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.
- B. Alexandria Public Schools will offer breakfast and lunch meals that meet state and federal guidelines.
- C. Our district strives to ensure that nutritious meals are available to all students, and will work with families to keep account balances positive in order to avoid passing on debt to other paying families.
- D. Families may apply for free/reduced-price meal benefits anytime during the school year. Meal applications are distributed to all families in the school/district prior to the school year. In addition, applications are available at the Food and Nutrition Services office, school office or on the district website. If household income or size change, families can apply for meal benefits anytime during the school year.

### **III. PAYMENT OF MEALS**

- A. If the student or family account is less than adequate to pay for breakfast and/or lunch, school staff will follow procedures listed below:
  - 1. All students will be provided a meal regardless of meal account status. While the district is under no legal obligation to do so, we believe that this is in the best interest of the student.
  - 2. Students in prek-5 will be allowed to choose meal options without restriction.
  - 3. Students in 6-12 will be provided a predetermined, courtesy meal, which meets the required meal pattern guidelines. District staff will ensure the meal includes a carbohydrate, protein, fruit and/or vegetable and milk. The

courtesy meal will be served to students with a negative balance of \$100 or greater. Students will not be charged for the courtesy meal.

4. Ala Carte items will not be available for purchase for students with negative meal accounts.
- B. If the school district receives school lunch aid under Minn. Stat. § 124D.111, it must make lunch available without charge to all participating students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals regardless of account balance.
- C. A student with an outstanding meal charge debt will be allowed to purchase a meal if the student pays for the meal when it is received.
- D. The school district may provide an alternate meal that meets federal and state requirements to a student who does not have sufficient funds in the student's account or cannot pay cash for a meal. The school district will accommodate special dietary needs with respect to alternate meals. The cost of the alternative meal will be charged to student's account or otherwise charged to the student.
- E. When a student has a negative account balance, the student will not be allowed to charge an ala carte item.
- F. If a parent or guardian chooses to send in one payment that is to be divided between sibling accounts, the parent or guardian must specify how the funds are to be distributed to the students' accounts. Funds may not be transferred between sibling accounts unless written permission is received from the parent or guardian.

#### **IV. LOW OR NEGATIVE ACCOUNT BALANCES - NOTIFICATION**

- A. The school district will make reasonable efforts to notify families when meal account balances are low or fall below zero. Families will be provided access to account status via Parent Vue, an online parent portal.
- B. Low Balance Notification: Families will be notified via Parent Vue when their account has a low balance.
  1. The Food Service Department will initiate an automated low balance email message to households with \$15 or below in their account. Parents/Guardians will have the ability to adjust the threshold for earlier notification.
  2. Food Service Department will encourage parents to complete the free/reduced-price meal application.
  3. Reminders for payment of outstanding student meal balances will not demean or stigmatize any student participating in the school lunch program.

C. Negative Balance:

1. When a family account reaches <\$.01> households will be notified of negative balance in their family account. Automated calls will be placed after 6:15 p.m.
2. When a family account reaches <\$25.00>, households will receive a personal phone call from food service staff members with notification of negative balance.
3. When a family account reaches <\$50.00>, principals and/or counselors from each child's school will contact parents/guardians to learn more about family circumstances, to offer assistance to fill out free/reduced lunch applications, or to assist in developing a plan to rectify status.
  - a. Beginning in grades 6-12, counselors or principals will meet with the student privately, to discuss account status and meal options.
    - 1) A letter/invoice requesting payment will also be mailed to parents/guardians with the same information discussed with secondary student.
4. When a family account reaches <\$75.00>, the Director of Food and Nutrition Services will call parent/guardians to notify of potential credit bureau referral at balance of <\$100.00>. Collection options may include, but are not limited to, use of collection agencies, claims in the conciliation court, or any other legal method permitted by law.
5. When a family account reaches, \$100>, the Food Services Department will continue to notify family of account status via email, telephone and/or US postal mail.
  - a. Courtesy meals will commence for students in grades 6-12.

V. **COLLECTION OF UNPAID MEAL DEBT**

- A. The school district will make reasonable efforts to communicate with families to resolve the matter of unpaid charges. Where appropriate, families may be encouraged to apply for free or reduced-price meals for their children.
- B. The school district 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.

- C. Negative balances of more than \$100, not paid prior to the end of January and the end of the school year will be turned over to the superintendent's designee for collection. Collection options may include, but are not limited to, use of collection agencies, claims in the conciliation court, or any other legal method permitted by law.
- D. The school district may not enlist the assistance of non-school district employees, such as volunteers, to engage in debt collection efforts.
- E. Students eligible for free or reduced price meals will always be served a meal regardless of unpaid food service accounts. When a student has "cash in hand" to pay for a meal, the student will be served a meal regardless of unpaid food service accounts. The "cash in hand" will not be applied towards past due balances.
- F. Through notification process, parents will be reminded of their responsibility to pay for children's meals.
- G. Assistance from the county Social Services may be requested by the school if parents refuse to provide meals or pay for school prepared meals for their children.
- H. A formal letter will be sent to the household notifying that the debt will be turned over to the collection agency and the credit bureau and the student meal account will be closed.
- I. The student/family will be required to provide their own meals until the meal debt is paid.
- J. The expectation is all fees owed to the District will be paid in full on the last day of attendance for the current school year.

VI. COMMUNICATION OF POLICY

- A. This policy and any pertinent supporting information shall be provided in writing (i.e., mail, email, back-to-school packet, student handbook, etc.) to:
  - 1. All households at or before the start of each school year.
  - 2. Students and families who transfer into the school district, at the time of enrollment; and
  - 3. All school district personnel who are responsible for enforcing this policy.
- B. The school district may post the policy on the school district's website, in addition to providing the required written notification described above.

***Legal References:***

Minn. Stat. § 124D.111.subd. 4

42 U.S.C. § 1752 *et seq.* (Healthy and Hunger-Free Kids Act)

7 C.F.R. § 210 *et seq.* (School Lunch Program Regulations)

7 C.F.R. § 220.8 (School Breakfast Program Regulations)

USDA Policy Memorandum SP 46-2016. Unpaid Meal Charges: Local Meal Charge Policies (2016)

USDA Policy Memorandum SP 47-2016, Unpaid Meal Charges: Clarification on Collection of Delinquent Meal Payments (2016)

USDA Policy Memorandum SP 23-2017, Unpaid Meal Charges: Guidance and Q&A

***Cross References:***

Policy Adopted: July 17, 2017

Alexandria Public Schools - No. 206

Alexandria, Minnesota