

1. POLITICS

Massachusetts schools must craft meal debt policies by Sept. 30

Updated 3:59 PM; Posted 3:55 PM



In this Thursday, May 4, 2017 photo, third grade student Lucas Jameson taps in his student identification number to deduct a meal payment at Gonzales Community School in Santa Fe, N.M. All students are offered the same lunch at Gonzales and other Santa Fe public schools to avoid any chance of embarrassing students whose parents may have fallen behind on meal payments. New Mexico in April became the first state to outlaw the shaming of children for any unpaid meals. (AP Photo/Morgan Lee) (*Morgan Lee*)

7

21 shares

By [Shira Schoenberg](#)
sschoenberg@repub.com

Massachusetts school districts have until the end of the month to create and publicize their policies on students who do not have money to pay for lunch.

"We're hoping by Sept. 30 they're aware they have this obligation to look at their policies and make accessible to parents what the meal policies are," said Pat Baker, senior policy analyst at the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute.

Baker has been advocating for schools to create more student-friendly policies. The issue gained attention in March when the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute published a report shedding light on the disparate practices across school districts when a student's family owes money for meals.

In some districts, a child whose family owes money cannot buy lunch. In other cases, a cashier will throw away the child's hot meal and replace it with a cold cheese sandwich.



What happens when a public school student in Massachusetts can't afford lunch?

A new report by the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute sheds light on how school districts deal with meal debt. The institute encourages schools to do away with practices that shame children for their parents' financial circumstances.

The Massachusetts Law Reform Institute has been arguing for a change in policy to prohibit schools from denying a meal or substituting an alternate meal for students who cannot pay. The group wants to require school districts to seek payment from parents directly, rather than involving students.

"Our goal is to not to put kids in the middle of this issue in the cafeteria line where they're going to suffer embarrassment or go hungry," Baker said.

A bill that was filed after the report came out would have prohibited punishing students for meal debt. But that bill was filed late in the legislative session and never made it through the committee process.

Advocates for school business administrators and nutrition professionals raised concerns about families who can afford to pay for school meals but choose not to as long as the school is feeding their child.

Lawmakers did pass an amendment to the fiscal 2019 budget requiring school districts to publish meal charge policies and disseminate them to parents by Sept. 30. This could include publishing the policy on the school website or in a parent-student handbook.

Although the U.S. Department of Agriculture in May 2017 began requiring school districts to develop meal charge policies, the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute study found that 25 percent of districts did not have policies available and some policies that did exist were outdated or hard to find.

The Massachusetts Association of School Committees published a sample policy in July, which it distributed to school committees around the state.

The sample policy states that students would be allowed to receive a hot meal even if their family owes money, although those students could not buy a la carte items like snacks.

Payment notices would be sent to parents, not given to students. Parents with financial hardship would be encouraged to apply for federally funded free and reduced-price meals.



Mass. Senate votes to require schools to publish meal debt policies

The budget amendment is the Legislature's first step toward addressing "meal-shaming."

Glenn Koocher, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, said the goal was to "get away from the punitive nature" of how some districts deal with economically disadvantaged children and ensure that students who are poor get help.

Koocher said the association does not always hear back from districts about what changes they have made. But he said typically, "many districts just take the model policy we give them."

Jake Oliveira, chairman of the Ludlow schools' policy committee and a former MASC president, said Ludlow made a few changes but mostly adopted the MASC's suggested policy.

"The policy on the books ensures no student would go without a meal regardless of whether parents are delinquent on funds for the program," Oliveira said.

Oliveira said the school district was already largely following the same policy, but the school committee codified it in writing. "It really isn't a change on the ground, it's much more a change in policy to ensure something is on the books for us and parents to follow," he said.



Amherst schools nix 'punitive' lunches for students with unpaid bills

Students who owe money for school lunch will no longer be given a lesser meal after the Amherst Regional School Committee adopted a policy change this week.

Other schools have made significant changes.

In June 2017, before the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute report was released, Amherst ended its practice of providing an alternate meal to students with debt.

This past summer, Framingham changed its policy to guarantee every student a meal, even if their family owes meal debt. Previously, a child could not get lunch once their family ran up a deficit of \$10 in their meal account.

[Metrowest Daily News reported](#) that the school board is trying to figure out how to deal with a negative balance of \$7,700 in its food services department after that policy change.

In Western Massachusetts, the Southwick-Tolland-Granville Regional School District does not have any policy on the books right now, but a draft policy is working its way through a school board subcommittee.

Stephen Presnal, director of finance and operations for Southwick-Tolland-Granville Regional School District, said the proposed policy would codify a shift that has taken place over the last few years.

The district used to provide an alternate meal -- a peanut butter or cheese sandwich - when a child did not have lunch money. The last couple of years, the district started serving a regular hot meal to these children. The district would then reach out to the parents to get the debt paid.

Presnal said the shift was part of a national move away from "lunch-shaming."

"It's a shift to say in the actual cafeteria, you worry about feeding the kids, we'll handle any delinquency or collection issues at a school nutrition office level or a district level," Presnal said.

Presnal said districts do have to "have some teeth in our collection efforts" to make sure that food service programs remain financially self-supporting. So far, he said meal debt in the district has been slightly higher than it was before the policy shift, but it is still at a "manageable level."

Some districts -- including Holyoke, Springfield and, as of this year, Chicopee -- participate in a federal program that provides free meals for all students in districts with a high proportion of poor students. Those districts do not need meal charge policies.

The Massachusetts Law Reform Institute did a preliminary review of a dozen Western Massachusetts districts this month and found mixed results. Some districts still have no policy on their website. Others have not updated their policy in years.