

Background

- The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day.¹
- A school must serve a reimbursable meal in order to receive federal assistance.
- Reimbursable lunches are typically divided into 3 categories. Paid, Reduced, and Free.
- Children in households with incomes below 130% of the federal poverty level or those receiving SNAP or TANF qualify for free meals. Those with family incomes between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level qualify for reduced-price meals.¹
- Many students who receive free or reduced-price lunch are unable to afford the cost, which can lead to the accumulation of school meal debt.²
- Schools cannot pay off meal debts using federal child nutrition funds and must find other sources of funding to cover any outstanding debts.²
- There is no national standard for how meal charges should be collected. Policies are decided at either the State or local level.³
- Students who cannot afford to pay for their lunch are sometimes served alternative meals which can negatively affect their academic performance.⁴

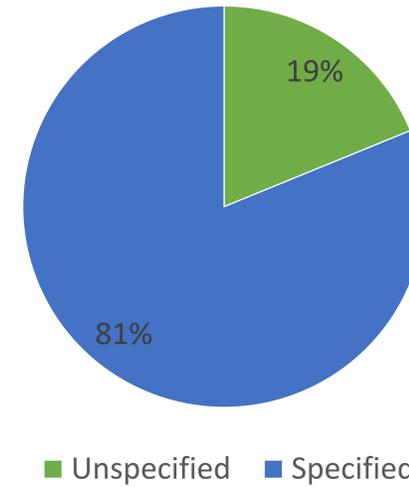
Objective

- To obtain an understanding of what is included in meal charge policies in North Carolina.

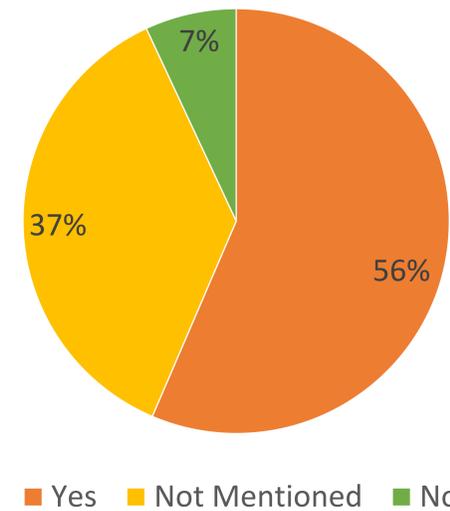
Methods

- School meal charge policies for public schools were located in each respective districts online board policies.
- A data extraction tool was created in order to assist in uniform data collection from each district.
- The policies were analyzed for information regarding their school meal charge policy including their max meal charge allowed for students, consequences of unpaid meal debt, whether they served an alternative meal for students who could not pay, and if there were any restrictions on who could charge lunches.

School Districts in North Carolina with an unspecified meal charge policy



Does Lunch Debt follow a student in North Carolina Districts?



Results

- 40% of School Districts mention serving an alternative meal to students who cannot pay for their meal but only 17% of School Districts specify what those meals are.
- The average maximum school meal charge allowed was \$12.04*
- The range of maximum meal charges was \$5-\$25*
- Out of 115 School districts in North Carolina 74% allowed all student to charge meals. 10% allowed only middle and elementary school students to charge lunches, and 3% allowed only elementary students to charge lunches. 1% did not allow any meal charges and the remaining 12% did not have a meal charge policy posted.
- * Only schools that listed a monetary value were included.

References

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3. Guide to state unpaid meals legislation and Trends. schoolnutrition.org. https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/Legislation_and_Policy/State_and_Local_Legislation_and_Regulations/State-Unpaid-Meals-Legislation-Tracking.pdf. Accessed April 19, 2022.
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5. Blad E. The pandemic brought Universal Free School Meals. will they stay? Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-pandemic-brought-universal-free-school-meals-will-they-stay/2021/06>. Published June 9, 2021. Accessed April 21, 2022.

Conclusions

- School meal charge policies in North Carolina are vague and vary in their willingness to allow meal charges, punishments, and implementation.
- In order to properly inform students and their families, school districts should publish their meal charge policies.
- Further research is needed on how unclear school meal charge policies might affect students who are unable to pay for their lunches.
- During the COVID-19 Pandemic USDA waivers allowed free meals to be served to all students, preventing the accumulation of meal debt. Continuing to provide free meals for all students is a possible solution to prevent unpaid meal charges.⁵

Consequences of Unpaid meal charges

