

Analysis of School Meal Charge Policies in North Carolina

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During the COVID-19 pandemic USDA waivers allowed free meals to be served to all students which prevented the use of school meal charge policies. However, with the end of these waivers many students are unable to afford the cost of their school's lunches resulting in the accumulation of school meal debt. Students who cannot afford to pay for their lunch often face a broad range of consequences such as being served alternative meals, or the restriction of graduation. To investigate the prevalence of these policies in North Carolina, school meal charge policies were collected from each district's online board policies. A data extraction tool was then used to standardize the information gathered from each district. We surveyed all 115 North Carolina school districts and found that 40% of school districts mentioned serving alternative meals to students, yet only 17% of school districts specify what those alternative meals are. In addition, meal debt followed a student from year to year in 56% of school districts. Based on the evidence gathered, school meal charge policies in North Carolina are vague and vary in their willingness to allow meal charges, consequences, and implementation. Further research is needed on how unclear school meal charge policies might affect students who are unable to pay for their lunches.