

Schools must help reduce the cost of the Feeding Every Hungry Child policy

In 2009, the SF Board of Education passed the Feeding Every Hungry Child resolution, which mandated that students coming through the cafeteria line with no money to pay for their meal, and ineligible for government-paid meals, would be fed regardless; the resolution directed the individual schools to contact all families to make sure that every student had a completed meal application on file, and to notify families whose students had unpaid meal charges.

Some schools have done a stellar job both of getting virtually all families to return a completed meal application, and of following up to collect outstanding meal balances, but others have not been as diligent. In the 2010-11 school year, SFUSD Student Nutrition Services (SNS) provided hundreds of thousands of meals to students who were not qualified to receive free or reduced price meals, but whose families did not pay for their child's school breakfast or lunch, at a total cost of over \$548,000.

With Student Nutrition Services (SNS) running a deficit in excess of \$2 million and the school district required to make up this deficit out of the general fund, leaving less money for teacher salaries and classroom expenses, it is imperative that every school address their own deficit. There is no staff at SNS to handle this job; if money owed to the school district is ever to be collected, all schools must address their own meal charges, and their meal application collection. SNS updates lists monthly of students with charges, and of those with no meal application on file, which are available to school administrators on SharePoint.

Unpaid meal charges fall into five categories: refused benefits, no application, denied expired, denied income, and free/reduced. Here is an explanation of what each category means:

"Refused benefits" means the family checked the "not interested" box on the meal application and turned it in. This option was added to the standard meal application to accommodate middle income families who already knew that they would not qualify for government-paid meals, and who didn't want to have to fill out the entire form, including details of family income, for a benefit which they were not asking to receive. Years ago, such families simply threw the form away, but in recent years all families have been asked to fill out the form, so as not to stigmatize those who are applying for the benefit. When all students turn in the form, lower income students do not stand out among their peers; this has resulted in a much greater number of low income students, who may in the past have failed to turn in a form out of embarrassment, being qualified for free meals. Families who "refused benefits" presumably they knew they would not qualify for free lunch, or else were 100% certain their student would not be eating in the cafeteria, or both. It is also possible that some families whose children do intend to eat in the cafeteria may be checking the "not interested" box because it is quicker and easier, and they know their children will be fed regardless. **In 2010-11, over \$67,000 was charged by students whose families "refused benefits."**

"No application" means the family never returned the meal application at all, or returned an incomplete application; the most common reason why applications are incomplete is that the parent fails to sign it (federal regulations require a parent signature). Incomplete applications are returned to the school, so that the school can return them to the parent for signature and resubmit.

However, often forms returned to a school for signature never make their way back to Student Nutrition Services; sometimes they don't even make their way back to the family, who believe that the application has already been submitted. Starting August 1st, families can fill out the meal application online, and school administrators should urge ALL of their families to fill out the form this way; the online form will not even send until it is filled out completely, eliminating the possibility of a family mistakenly thinking they had filled out a form, when really it was incomplete, returned to the school, and then fell into a black hole. **In 2010-11, over \$87,000 was charged by families with "no application" on file at Student Nutrition Services.**

"Denied expired" means that the family did submit a completed meal application, but were only qualified for "temporary eligibility." Students whose families list \$0 income qualify for 8 weeks of benefits; shortly before the 8 weeks expires, the family is sent another meal application to fill out (the requirement to fill out a new application is a federal rule; it is assumed that having \$0 income is a temporary state of affairs.) Many never do fill out the new application which is sent (along with an explanation of the need to fill it out) after the initial 8 weeks; thus their benefits expire, and their student reverts to paying status; if the family does not start paying for meals, then meal charges begin accruing after the temporary eligibility expires. If a family lists even \$1 of income, instead of \$0, then their children will qualify for free meals for the whole year with just the one application. **In 2010-11, over \$72,000 was charged by families whose temporary eligibility expired and was never renewed by filing a new application.**

"Denied income" means the family submitted a completed application but did not qualify for benefits because the family income was too high. These students are considered to be on "paid" status (as opposed to "free" or reduced price" status) and their families are expected to pay full price for their meals. However, because of the high cost of living in San Francisco, some families whose income is just a little too high to qualify for government-paid meals still struggle to get by; the original intention of the Feeding Every Hungry Child resolution was to provide a safety net for those families who missed the cutoff for eligibility for free meals but who nonetheless did not always have enough money to feed their children. **In 2010-11, over \$145,000 was charged by families in the "denied income" category.**

"Free/reduced" are charges by students who eventually were qualified for free or reduced price meals. If the student is new to the school district (all incoming Kindergarteners and some older students) these may be charges that students racked up during the first couple of weeks of school before their meal application was processed. These charges may also belong to students who, for whatever reason, were not qualified for free meals the previous year, but did eventually qualify in the current year. A third possibility is students who did not get the new meal application turned in until after the first 30 days of school. During the first 30 school days, students who were qualified for free/reduced meals in the prior school year may use their prior year eligibility (ie – if you qualified for free meals last year, your first 30 days are automatically free this year, even if you don't turn in the new application until day 29.) This allows school districts to be able to collect government reimbursement for most of their qualified students even as they are trying to collect and process the current year applications. Some schools, however, mistakenly believe that "everyone eats free for the first 30 days", which is not true – only students who were qualified for free meals in the previous school year eat free for those days. This is another reason why schools should be encouraging all of their families, but especially incoming Kindergarten

families or any student new to the SFUSD, to fill out the online meal application before school starts. **In the 2010-11 school year, over \$175,000 was charged by students who eventually qualified for free or reduced price meals, the largest amount of any of the five categories of charges.**

With the SFUSD still facing a budget deficit in the millions of dollars and hundreds of teachers being laid off, schools must do a better job of eliminating these charges. It may still be possible for SNS to feed every hungry child, as the Board of Education intended, but only if every family submits a completed application (and those on temporary eligibility continue to submit new applications as necessary), those who refuse benefits pay for their children's meals, and those qualified for free/reduced meals submit their online application before the first day of school.