

Unpaid Meal Charges

A research brief about school year 2022–2023



Key Takeaways

- School food authorities (SFAs) that charged students for school meals in school year 2022–2023 tended to have local rather than State policies on meal charges.
- The most common policy components were notifying households of low or negative balances and encouraging them to apply for free or reduced-price meals.
- SFAs recovered about half of the money they were owed for unpaid meals.
- The most commonly used strategy for recovering funds, which was also one of the most successful, was billing households or otherwise notifying them about negative balances.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program to provide nutritious, low-cost or free school meals to children. State agencies administer the school meal programs in each State and Territory through agreements with local school food authorities (SFAs). SFAs are responsible for the school meal programs in one or more schools, including program finances, and must maintain a nonprofit school food service account ([7 CFR § 210.14](#)).¹

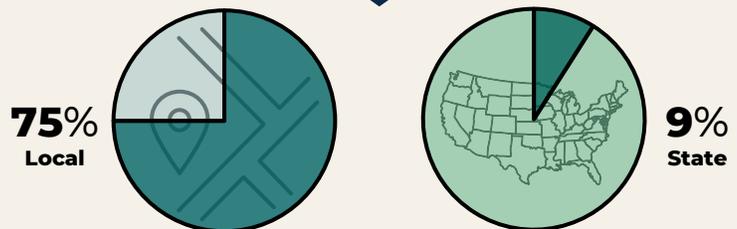
Sometimes students who are required to pay for school meals do not have money at mealtimes. FNS requires SFAs to develop policies to address these situations (unless all schools in an SFA serve all school meals for free) and encourages them to adopt policies that allow children to receive the nutrition they need, minimize the identification of children with insufficient funds, and maintain the financial integrity of the nonprofit school food service account ([FNS 2017](#)).²

This brief describes SFAs' meal charge policies and the strategies SFAs used to recover the cost of unpaid meals in school year (SY) 2022–2023. We distributed a survey to a nationally representative group of 1,100 SFAs, but the questions about unpaid meals excluded SFAs in California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont because these States offered universal free school meals.

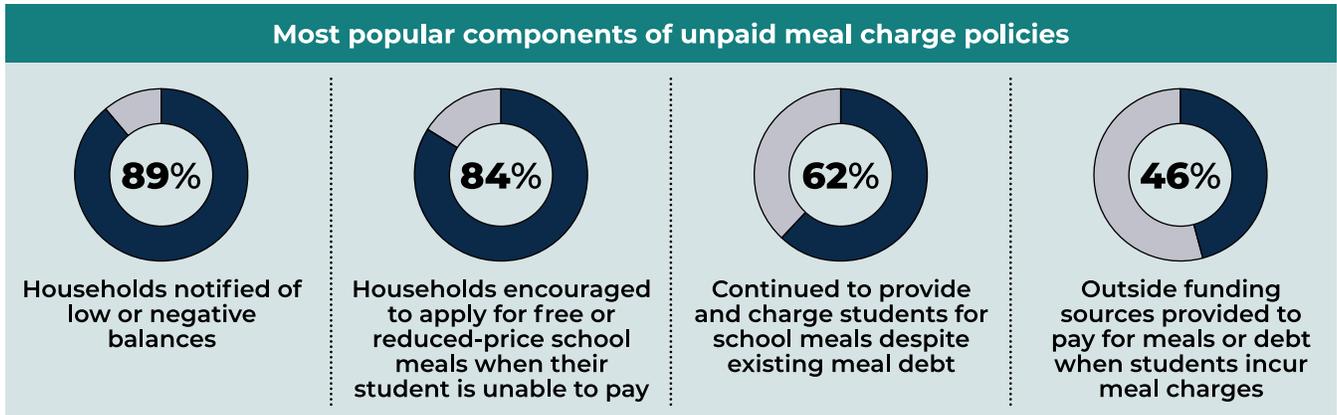
Meal charge policies

FNS requires SFAs to develop meal charge policies, but gives State agencies discretion to develop policies for all of their SFAs to implement ([FNS 2017](#)).² Among SFAs required to have a meal charge policy in SY 2022–2023, 75 percent of SFAs had a local policy and 9 percent had a State policy. Nineteen percent of SFAs did not know whether they or their State developed their meal charge policy.

Percentage of SFAs that had a local or State-level meal charge policy in school year 2022–2023

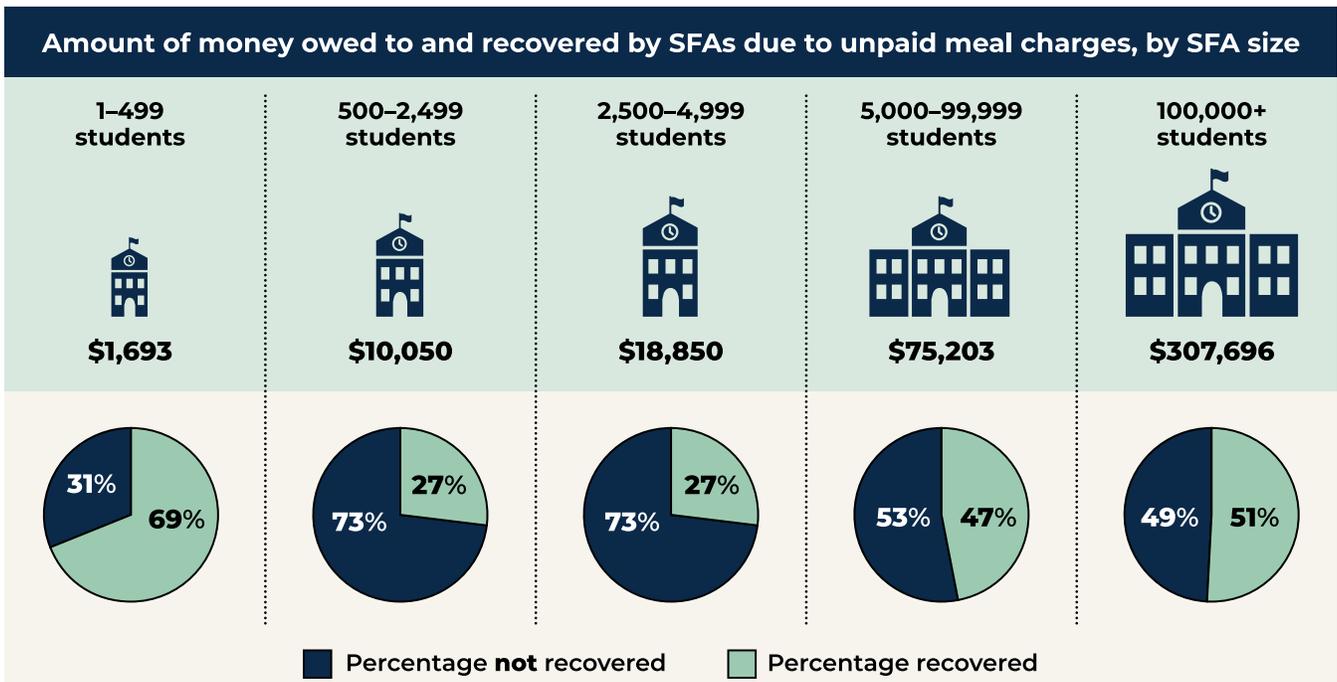


The most common policy components were notifying households of low or negative balances, encouraging households to apply for free or reduced-price school meals, continuing to provide and charge students for school meals despite existing meal debt, and using outside funding sources to pay for meals or for debt when students incurred meal charges.



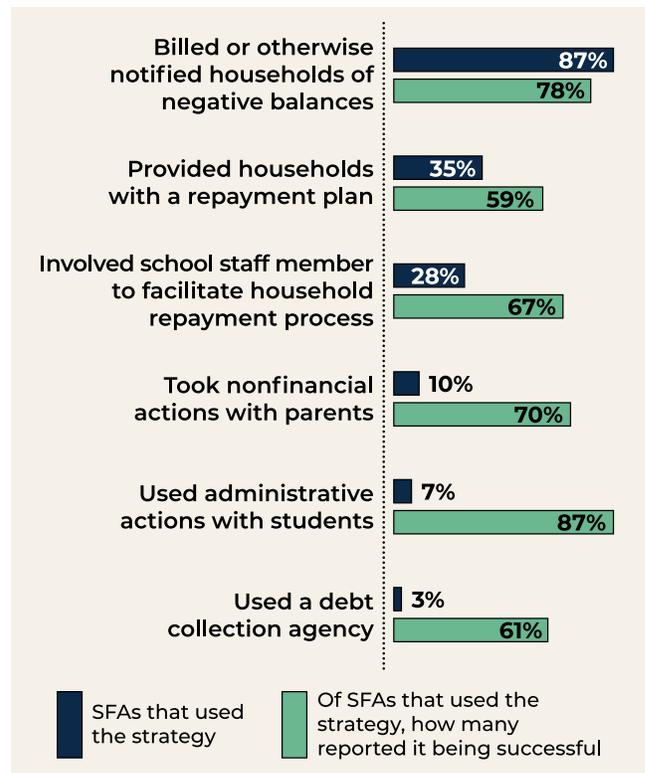
Recovering the money from unpaid meals

During SY 2022–2023, SFAs were owed an average of \$21,573, and a median amount of \$3,900. They recovered about half of the average amount they were owed. The amount of money owed and recovered varied substantially by SFA size. The smallest SFAs, which served fewer than 500 students, were the most successful at recovering unpaid meal balances, recovering 69 percent of the money owed to them. SFAs serving between 500 and 4,999 students were the least successful, recovering only 27 percent of unpaid money. The largest SFAs, serving at least 5,000 students, recovered about half of their unpaid meal charge money.



SFA strategies to recover unpaid meal debt should not have a negative impact on children and should instead focus on adults in the household (FNS 2017).² In SY 2022–2023, only 7 percent of SFAs used administrative actions with students, such as not allowing them to participate in programs and events like field trips or prom. The strategy used by most SFAs was billing or otherwise notifying households of negative balances, and it was also one of the most successful strategies.

SFAs must use non-Federal funds to restore losses to their nonprofit school food service account—for example, the school district’s general fund, special funding from State or local governments, or any other non-Federal sources (FNS 2017).² In SY 2022–2023, SFAs restored a larger share of their losses with district funding and charitable donations rather than State funding.



About the data reported here

This study was sponsored by USDA FNS. The information reported in this brief was collected from an online survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,100 SFAs that participated in the NSLP or SBP during SY 2022–2023. The data tables are available in Supplement B.7, and include some data broken down by SFA characteristic (size, poverty level, and urbanicity).

Suggested citation

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References

¹ Resource Management. 7 CFR § 210.14. <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/section-210.14>.

² Food and Nutrition Service. “2017 Edition: Overcoming the Unpaid Meal Challenge—Proven Strategies from Our Nation’s Schools.” Policy memo, U.S. Department of Agriculture, May 2017. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/2017-edition-overcoming-unpaid-meal-challenge-proven-strategies-our-nations-schools>.