

# FACT SHEET: An Act to Promote School Nutrition

Senate Bill 256, House Bill 585 - filed by Senator Cynthia Stone Creem and Rep. Andres Vargas

This legislation seeks to promote access to nutritious school meals in four ways: 1) reduce school meal debt for both school districts and low income families by maximizing federal reimbursement; 2) feed children a nutritious meal and require districts to communicate directly with responsible adults about meal debt; 3) eliminate the reduced-price meal co-pay for low income families; and 4) provide free meal status to children raised by grandparents or other relatives.

**School meal debt** remains a challenge for most school districts as they struggle to ensure students are fed and ready to learn while ensuring the costs of food and labor are covered. Policies for how local districts deal with this issue at the local level vary significantly. A [March 2018 inventory of 154 Massachusetts school districts](#) identified a wide range of policies for how districts handle meal debt, including:

- “No charge” policies where students without meal money in hand end up hungry the whole day.
- “Account cap” policies where food services staff are put in the difficult position of having to serve an “alternate meal” – usually a cold sandwich – and/or instructed to speak directly to the child about unpaid debt. In some districts, the food services staff report they must toss a hot meal already served to a student.
- District policies that barred students and/or siblings from all extra-curricular school activities, denial of grades or graduation activities, referrals to DCF for unpaid meals.

The FY2019 Budget, Chapter 154 of the Act of 2018 included language that directed all school districts to “*publish and disseminate meal charge policies in accordance with USDA guidance, ... in a format that is easily accessible and, if possible, made available for parents and guardians before the start of the 2018-2019.*” (Line Item 7053-1909). Many school districts have in fact updated their school meal policies, but others have yet to do so. And many schools still include meal debt policies that do not allow students a meal if any meal debt or other troubling practices.

**WHAT DOES THIS BILL DO?** The bill takes the following steps to reduce unpaid meal debt and boost fed revenue:

1. **Community Eligibility (CEP):** The bill requires schools and school districts with a high number (60%+) of low income “directly certified” students to implement the universal free school meal options (CEP or “Provision 2”) *unless* the district more students is able to justify to the state that doing so would impact costs. Additionally, schools or districts with 40% to 60% “directly certified” students would be required to implement an option, but the School Committee could vote to “opt out” of the federal options.
2. **Eliminate Reduced-Price co-pay:** The bill allows school districts to offer all families with income under 185% FPL free meals and seek reimbursement from the state for the “reduced-price” co-payment. Other states have eliminated the reduced-price co-pay for some or all students for breakfast and/or lunch – including the states of CO, ME, MN, ND, OH, OR, VT and WA. Research shows doing so boosts overall meal participation.
3. **Maximize federal NSLP reimbursement & not involve students in meal debt:** This bill requires school districts to reduce meal debt by more robustly checking data-bases for free meal eligibility; promoting the SNAP (food stamp) benefits that trigger automatic free meal status for a family; directly communicating with responsible adults about meal debt; and limiting the steps a district might take against students who may have debt. While a district may bar a student with meal debt from a *fee-based activity* – such as paid sports or plays – districts could not deny student participation in regular (non-fee) activities such as field trips, receipt of grades, nor deny a student food as behavioral punishment.
4. **Kinship care free meal status:** This bill would authorize districts to seek state reimbursement provide free meal to grandchildren living with grandparents (and other caregivers) including former foster children, special needs and/or severely disabled children. Many of these children don’t currently able to qualify for free-meal status despite caregivers taking on significant care obligations. This provision also included in S.D. #773 H.D.#3406.

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