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MEMORANDUM

TO: 2014 Senate Education Committee, Members
FROM: Laurie Colgan, Agency of Education (AOE)
SUBJECT: School Lunch Testimony April 3, 2014
DATE: 04/18/14

Vermont School Meals Programs Background

Schools participating in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs provide healthy, nutritious meals to students each day and when possible, these meals include local Vermont products. In turn, the schools receive federal and state funds for reimbursable meals served to all students. Families who meet federal income guidelines are eligible to receive these meals at a free or reduced price and schools receive different levels of reimbursement for the free, reduced-price, and full-price student meals.

At the beginning of each school year, schools provide notice to households whose children are on the Direct Certification List who are automatically eligible for free meals and who do not need to submit an application. Schools are obligated to provide all parents with free and reduced price meal applications to complete and return, as well as information about the school meals program. Schools also provide this information to newly enrolled students throughout the school year. Vermont families who are eligible for reduced price meals that would typically pay 30 and 40 cents for breakfast and lunch, respectively, receive the meals at no charge because the Vermont Legislature, with their support of students being well-fed and ready to learn in school, has generously appropriated funds to cover these reduced-price meals.

Vermont School Meals Programs Policies

School meal program information must include the opportunity to apply for free or reduced price meals, the prices charged for school meals, how parents provide payments for school meals, and any school policies regarding non-payment or meal charging. This is also an opportunity for parents to learn how the student accounts are managed, whether through a computerized point of sale system, debit cards, tickets or other means of meal counting. Not only is this an opportune time to inform parents and students what the expectations are, it is a good time to advise the community about the benefits of participating in school meals programs, the variety of food items made available, and information about the relationships that the food service program might have with local farmers that provide items for the food service program.

In the school food service program, schools may not:

- Deny meals to free or reduced-price students regardless of any other charges at the school;
- Deny meals to students for disciplinary reasons;
- Deny meals because of bills accrued from a previous school year;
- Deny a meal because of unpaid charges if the student had money in hand for today's meal; or
- Deny meals to students who were free-eligible the previous school year while their application is being processed for the first 30 days of school or up until October 15th at the latest.

Schools are advised to develop policies regarding the expectations for pre-payments for meals, the recommended policy that the purchase of any a la carte items is done on a cash basis only, no charging, and the steps that the school will take in the event that the parents have not provided sufficient payments for meals. Some meal counting and claiming programs available today provide parents with the opportunity to use their debit or credit cards to make school meal payments to student accounts online. They also allow parents to monitor accounts to determine when additional funds are needed.

What Schools Can Do:

- Schools may, but are not required to, allow students to charge meals or extra food items.
- Schools are encouraged to develop a policy that specifically defines and communicates how many meals or how much money may be charged, and what steps will occur should they reach the maximum.
- Schools may ask or require payment in advance for meals.
- Schools may disallow charging for a la carte items.
- Schools are not obligated to provide meals to non-paying full price students.
- Schools may set up a fund to cover or supplement the costs of meals for student accounts in arrears.
- Schools may choose to give students an alternate meal, whether or not it complies with USDA meal pattern guidelines.
- Schools can continue to encourage families to complete a free and reduced price meal application.
- If the school has a high number of free and reduced price students, the school may become a Provision 2 School, where meals are served at no charge to all students, and the school earns federal and state funds for all meals served. Schools should contact the Child Nutrition Programs at the Agency of Education for more information.

- IF the school has 40% or more of its students directly certified for free meals, the school may participate in the Community Eligibility Provision where meals are served at no charge to students and the school earns federal reimbursement for meals served.

Best practice for meal charging, in the event that the school allows it, should include the following steps:

- The policy should be written and should ensure that it does not discriminate against any single student or group of students.
- Ensure the school board, administration and food service are fully advised and supportive of the written policy.
- Ensure the community is aware of the published policy.
- Provisions are made to provide elementary students with meals.
- A procedure is made to inform parents when accounts are hitting a low level.
- A procedure is made to notify parents when the account reaches a zero or negative balance.
- Students are not to be harassed or embarrassed in the line if their parents have not made provisions to pay for school meals.
- If the school provides a meal alternative, it must be made clear to parents and the school community.

Please contact Laurie Colgan, Director of Child Nutrition Programs at (802) 479-1187, or laurie.colgan@state.vt.us, if you have any questions or need technical assistance.