

# Information for grandparents and caregivers about school meal debt



## The local school district claims my grandchild (niece, nephew) has an outstanding meal debt. Do I have to pay it?

You should not be held responsible for any school meal debt that occurred before your grandchild, niece or nephew started living with you. The adult(s) where your child was living may owe the school district for meals received in the past. But school districts should not transfer meal debt to you, nor transfer the debt to the child now in your care.

## How do I tell the school district I am not responsible?

Attached is a sample letter you can send the school district. If the school district asks you to pay for meal debt before you started caring for a child, send them a letter asking them to stop. It is best to hand-deliver the letter (get the name of the person you give it to), or send the letter by certified mail. This will help prove that you told the school that they are attempting to collect money from the wrong person. Keep a copy of the letter.

The school district should not “punish” or “shame” a child in your care because of this meal debt – such as serving the child an “alternate meal” (a cold cheese sandwich) or barring the child from extra-curricular or other activities because the debt.

If the school district continues to try to collect money from you, or to treat your grandchild, niece or nephew differently after they received this letter, they may be breaking state law.<sup>1</sup> Depending on your income, you may be able to get free legal help or advice by contacting:

- The Legal Aid Resource Finder: [www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid](http://www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid)
- The Volunteer Lawyers Project, Eastern Massachusetts: 617-603-1700
- Mass Legal Answers Online: [www.masslao.org/](http://www.masslao.org/)

## Can my grandchild, niece or nephew get free school meals now?

School districts should automatically certify children for free school meals if they receive or live with a child who receives: SNAP (food stamps), TAFDC cash assistance, and/or certain types of MassHealth coverage. Children are also free-meal eligible if under DCF foster care, are homeless or migrant. These children are free-meal eligible even if living with a grandparent or other caregiver with income. Be sure the school district has this information about the child in your care.

Otherwise, a household can file an application for free or reduced-meal status. You can apply any time of year, not just at the start of school. Free or reduced price meal eligibility is based on the gross (pre-tax) income of all household members where the child lives. This includes the income of grandparents or other caregivers. See attached MLRI flier for more information.

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<sup>1</sup> Legal authority: MGL 93 § 49, MGL 93A (Mass General Laws) 940 CMR § 7.07(2) (Code of Mass Regulations)

SAMPLE LETTER TO SCHOOL DISTRICT ABOUT PAST MEAL DEBT

[Current Date]

Food Services Director/Administrative Office

[School name]

[School address]

Re: [Child's name XXX] School Lunch Debt

Dear Food Services Director or School Administrative Office,

I am writing about the school lunch debt on [my grandchild/children's XXX] account. I am XXX's [state your relationship]. I began taking care of XXX on [month/day/year]. I do not owe any school meal debt for XXX before that date. [List name of XXX's parent/previous caregiver] is responsible for any debts prior to [date you started taking care of XXX child].

I ask that you direct any communication about debt owed before [date you started taking care of XXX child] to [name of XXX's parent/previous caregiver]. Please do not contact me or [XXX] about this debt.

Please also stop any activities that treat XXX differently due to meal debt owed by the child's [name of parent/previous caregiver]. [List anything the school is doing that treats the child XXX as if he or she had debt, such as not receiving a hot meal at lunch, not allowed to participate in extracurricular activities, etc].

Thank you for your cooperation. Please acknowledge receipt of this letter.

Sincerely,

Your signature

Your full name (print)

Your home address (print)