

Connect Academy Trust

School Meals Debt Recovery Policy



December 2016

For Review and Approval by the Board of Connect Academy Trust,
December 2016

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School Meals Debt Recovery Policy

1. Introduction

This policy has been written to help our schools adopt a consistent approach to debt incurred by parents whose children take school dinners. It provides clarity and consistency in managing the debt and will also help parents clearly understand what is expected of them.

The Free School Meals (FSM) system is there for parents and children of all ages to claim if they are in receipt of certain benefits; information is available from the School Office or Plymouth City Council's website.

Also, all pupils in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 are now entitled to receive Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM).

Therefore, this policy only relates to pupils in Key Stage 2 (years 3, 4, 5 and 6) whose parents pay for school meals.

The Trust wishes to avoid a situation which allows parents to accrue large amounts of debt for school meals which they then find difficult to clear.

It is very time consuming for the schools office staff to continually chase parents for payment – by letter, phone call or in person. It is also highly embarrassing for all concerned and sometimes it can have a negative effect on our relationships with families.

There will occasionally be the decision to be made by the school about whether a child should be refused a meal in school if they have not paid. School meals are provided by CaterEd, who are no different than any other business and meals taken must be paid for. If we are left with no alternative, we will provide a lunch for a child, but will be from the selection left at the end of lunchtime. By just choosing not to pay, a parent has made a choice and the school is not treating the child differently. **However, the school is no different than any other business and meals taken must be paid for.**

The Board of Directors feel that a system that works best is a 'zero tolerance' approach. We understand that it may seem a very hard stance as there has been a country-wide culture of debt tolerance. However, it will become easy to maintain once parents realise schools can only offer free meals to children whose parents qualify for FSM or UIFSM entitlements, every other meal type must be paid for. Our ParentPay/T2P online cash collection/dinner money system highlights debt immediately so keeping track is easy.

The schools will make parents aware of this policy in the following ways:

- A letter to parents (Appendix 1)
- Reminders in the School newsletter, and
- The policy will be available on the School's website

This will ensure that all parents get the same message in a consistent way. This will be done at least once each year.

All parents will be provided with a copy of the policy when their child joins the School.

2. **Key Information**

1. All parents are provided with a copy of the debt policy when their child joins the School.
2. All school lunches must be paid for in advance.
3. No child should be sent to school with no money in their account and expect to be given a meal.
4. Where a debt has accrued, parents will be asked to provide packed lunches from home until the debt has been cleared.
5. Parents who do not want their child to have a school meal should provide a packed lunch.

3. **Debt Recovery Policy Implementation**

Day 1

Indicator – account goes into arrears

Check 1 Is there a possibility that payments have not been credited online?

Check 2 does this parent normally pay on time – is this just a one off?

Action 1 – Reminder

- Send a debt reminder text on the first day

Day 2

Indicator – a child comes to school again requesting a lunch without the debt being paid

Check 1 Is there a possibility that payments have not been credited online?

Check 2 has this parent made contact?

Action 2 – Personal Contact

- eg. phone the parent to ask them to pay online/bring the money into the school or bring a packed lunch in before lunchtime

Day 3

Indicator – the parent does not comply with any of these options

Check 1 Is there a possibility that payments have not been credited online?

Check 2 has this parent made contact?

Action 3 – School Action

- involve the school's Family Support Adviser (FSA) and/or Education Welfare Officer (EWO) in liaison with the parent, if relevant
- the Headteacher will send a strongly worded letter, see Appendix 2 - Day 3 Letter

Day 4

Indicator – the parent consistently does not comply with any of these options

Check 1 Is there a possibility that payments have not been credited online?

Check 2 has this parent made contact?

Action 4 – School Action

- refuse further school meals until the debt has been cleared
- involve schools FSA to contact parent via classroom door

APPENDIX 1 - DRAFT LETTER TO PARENTS

Date.....

Dear Parents/Carers

School Meals Debt Recovery Policy

Due to an increase in the number of school meals that are regularly not being paid for, Connect Academy Trust has adopted a NO DEBT policy relating to school meals.

We have had incidents where parents have accrued a large amount of debt for school meals which they find difficult to clear. The schools wish to avoid this difficult situation. It is not possible to have food in any high street restaurant without paying; the same applies at school. If debts are not cleared, they will ultimately have to be referred to debt recovery agents.

If you believe that you may qualify for entitlement to Free School Meals please contact the office for more details. This allowance is a statutory right and it is important that you use it if you qualify. We will help you all we can with your application.

Please note: all pupils in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 are now entitled to receive Universal Infant Free School Meals.

Therefore, this policy relates to pupils in Key Stage 2 (Years 3, 4, 5 and 6) whose parents pay for school meals.

School meals must be paid for in advance using any of the methods of payment outlined below:-

- online at School Money or ParentPay
- PayPoint bar code (if available)
- In very exceptional circumstances in cash at the school office

We understand that occasionally a parent genuinely forgets to pay in advance. The School may grant a debt allowance of one meal in this instance. However, this debt must be paid the next day and future meals must be paid for in advance before any meal is provided.

If the debt is not cleared, parents must provide a packed lunch. In a case when a debt payment is not received nor a packed lunch provided, the office will phone the parent to ask them to come to school with the money or provide a packed lunch before lunchtime.

If payment of the debt is not received within two weeks I reserve the right to inform the Chair of the Connect Academy Trust Operations Committee who may decide to begin legal proceedings against parents to recover the debt. The school's Education Welfare Officer and Social Services may also be informed that these parents are not carrying out their responsibility of care by not providing food for their children at lunchtime.

By implementing this debt policy we are aiming to help parents manage school dinner money better and to ensure limited school resources are not wasted on chasing debts, but to provide learning resources.

If you wish to discuss this or have any concerns please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Headteacher

APPENDIX 2 – DAY 3 LETTER

Date.....

Dear Parent/Carer

Re: Dinner Money

Further to our various discussions/telephone calls I note that you have failed to bring your child's dinner money account up to date. Therefore, in line with the School Debt Recovery Policy, we will be withdrawing school meals with immediate effect for.....

You will need to provide your child with a packed lunch until the account is in credit.

If you think you may be entitled to Free School Meals please come into the office and we can review your situation.

If you have any queries regarding this letter please contact the office.

Yours sincerely

Headteacher

Signed
Chief Executive Officer

Date

Signed
Chair of Connect Academy Trust

Date