



A Union of Professionals

'Cheese sandwich' policies

Across the country, school meal programs are required to be financially solvent. With low federal reimbursement rates and traditionally hard-to-please customers (kids!), fitting great nutrition into a tight budget has always been a challenge. With the introduction of nutritional guidelines for school foods in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA), the country is now on a journey toward cafeterias and school food policies that support holistic wellness.

Meeting the challenge of good school nutrition is more important than ever. We believe the HHFKA-driven increase in healthy, fresh fruits and vegetables and the emphasis on whole-grain goodness is vital not only to the well-being of our schoolchildren but to the health of our nation. We also recognize that these foods cost more. Sometimes that cost is passed on to the families that can least afford it, and their lunch-account money runs out. Sometimes the cost hits the school budget, and administrators who are already struggling to ensure their students have what they need cast about for creative ways to fill in when kids run out of funds.

"Cheese sandwich" policies, also called "unpaid balance" and "alternate meal" policies, apply when a student has surpassed some threshold—five unpaid meals or a negative balance of \$12, for example. The child is offered an alternate meal, often less substantive, less nutritious and cold, such as a cheese or peanut butter sandwich and milk. The child may be given a sticker to wear, or a letter for the backpack, as a reminder to parents to pay the account. The cashier may ask a child to return a complete meal that's already been set on the tray, ready to eat. Parents may be called, texted or emailed about adding to their account balance.

Educators, food service professionals, families, school boards and even state boards of education increasingly are concerned with these policies, which are often insufficient, ineffective, stigmatizing, discriminatory and/or burdensome to implement.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has opened a comment period on this issue through January 2015. **As we approach new conversations about reauthorizing the Child Nutrition Act in 2015, the AFT would like to hear directly from members, especially food service workers, about "cheese sandwich" policies in their local jurisdictions.** In schools where these policies are working well, we would like to promote and highlight lessons learned and best practices. In schools where the policies are not working, we're interested in pushing forward together to find novel solutions that work for families, school meal programs, school employees and children.

