



## **OVERT IDENTIFICATION & STIGMA UNDERMINE SCHOOL MEAL BENEFITS**

Commonplace school foodservice practices cited below can make low-income students' family income status obvious to their peers, subjecting them to stigmatization by other students. As a result, low-income students are less willing to eat school meals, and participation in NSLP meals for all students declines as well. Overt identification of family income status, even if unintentional, is a violation of the student's right to privacy under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

### **Foodservice Location:**

- Some schools have different service lines or areas for students choosing NSLP reimbursable meals than for students purchasing competitive foods. This results in physical segregation of low-income students from more affluent peers if a disproportionate number of students in the reimbursable meal line are low-income compared to the student population.<sup>i</sup> As a result, students are likely to perceive that school meals are primarily for poor children and that all students choosing NSLP meals are poor.

### **Payment Method:**

- The student payment system in the foodservice area can make it obvious which students are from low-income families. Cafeterias that accept both electronic and cash payments increase the risk that low-income children will be identified as poor if they must "pay" electronically while most other students pay in cash.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Impact of Stigma on Participation:**

- SDNA-III and numerous other reports<sup>iii</sup> confirm the common-sense notion that many eligible children choose not to participate in the NSLP so that other students will not think they are poor, particularly in middle and high school.

### **White House Task Force On Childhood Obesity:**

- The First Lady's May 2010 report to the President, *Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity Within a Generation*, recognizes the stigma separate lunch lines can create and recommends that schools "be encouraged to ensure that choosing a healthy school meal does not have a social cost for a child." (Recommendation 3:13).

### **The Child Nutrition Reauthorization of 2010:**

- Rep. George Miller, in his statement accompanying the passage of Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, emphasized that the modern school foodservice environment may be fostering the overt identification of students' family income status. Miller called on the USDA to update its explanation and enforcement of the privacy protections the law affords students.<sup>iv</sup>



## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO USDA TO PREVENT OVERT IDENTIFICATION**

**GOAL: ENSURE MEANINGFUL PRIVACY PROTECTIONS OF STUDENT ELIGIBILITY STATUS FOR SCHOOL MEAL BENEFITS IN THE MODERN SCHOOL FOODSERVICE ENVIRONMENT.**

- **Define the problem:** Provide states and school food authorities (SFAs or school districts) with a clear explanation of how payment methods and the location and layout of NSLP and competitive food services can promote overt identification.
- **Clarify the law:** Ensure that states and SFAs understand that protection of student income status is required by law and that this protection precludes unintended overt identification promoted by payment methods and foodservice layout.
- **Provide support:**
  - issue guidance explaining how SFAs may integrate foodservice lines so that reimbursable meals are not served separately from non-reimbursable meals;
  - issue guidance explaining how SFAs can establish a student payment system that is not an obvious indicator of family income.
- **Institutionalize protections:** Use the review (CRE) process to insure SFAs understand how foodservice layout and payment systems can promote violations of students' right to privacy, require corrective action where necessary, and provide technical assistance as needed.

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<sup>i</sup> Kavanagh, C., *Flunking Lunch: How Segregated Lunch Lines and Misused Subsidies Are Undermining the NSLP*. Campaign for Better Nutrition, 2010, p. 27.

<sup>ii</sup> A recent report by Campaign for Better Nutrition found that while most schools reported having a POS system, nearly all (92%) allow students to pay for meals in cash instead of having prepaid accounts [Kavanagh, C., p. 27-34]. And, in USDA's 2008 Meal Cost Study, some schools reported that students not eligible for free meals must pay cash, which clearly indicated their family income status.

<sup>iii</sup> ABT Associates for USDA, *School Lunch and Breakfast Cost Study-II*, April 2008, p. 6-9. Glantz et al., *School Lunch Eligible Non Participants: Final Report*, 1994. Pogash, C., "Free Lunch Isn't Cool, So Some Kids Go Hungry," *NYT*, March 1, 2008. Poppendieck, J., *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*, 2010, p.196. Kavanagh, C., p. 20.

<sup>iv</sup> *Congressional Record*: 111 Congress (December 8, 2010). The Hon. George Miller of California; Extension of Remarks; Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, p E2083.