

USDA TAKES ACTION TO PROTECT LOW-INCOME STUDENTS FROM STIGMATIZATION IN NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

Project: [School Lunch Policy \(/school-lunch-policy\)](#)

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Low-income students will be better protected from having their income status revealed to their classmates thanks to recent steps taken by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

In its newly updated School Meals Manual and Guidance Memorandum [SP 45-2012], the Agency clarifies the scope of the responsibility districts have in keeping confidential which students are eligible to receive free school meals based on their parents' income. The new guidance is intended to ensure privacy is not lost due to operational decisions that can unintentionally make the student's income status obvious to other students.

"These new guidelines are a significant step toward ensuring that, at lunchtime, low-income students don't have to choose between going hungry or enduring the embarrassment and discrimination that comes with being labeled poor by other kids at school," said Colleen Kavanagh, spokesperson for the Campaign for Better Nutrition, which advocated for the policy.

At issue are two common, institutionalized cafeteria practices that can segregate, identify and stigmatize students who receive their school meals for free.

Currently, many schools have two lunch lines. In one, mostly low-income students stand to receive a free lunch as part of NSLP. Meanwhile, the other line consists mostly of their peers purchasing more appealing "competitive food" in a different location, effectively segregating the students by income status.

In addition, some schools require low-income students to use an electronic payment method at the cash register while most all of their peers pay in cash. This means low-income students are easily identified by anyone seeing them at the register. Students want to keep the fact that they qualify for free school meals private because, as one student said, "some kids look down on people who don't have money and think they're worthless" (Poppendieck, *Free for All*, p. 192).

When faced with these practices, many students choose to skip lunch and make up stories about why they are not hungry rather than endure the stigma attached to receiving a free meal.

But the consequences go deeper. Research shows that skipping lunch interferes with a child's education. Students who are hungry have trouble paying attention in class and retaining information and have difficulty with executive functioning, which inhibits their ability to plan and prioritize.

Many involved in school nutrition programs assumed overt identification was a vestige of the past. Concerns raised in 2009 by the San Francisco Department of Public Health over these same operational practices in San Francisco Unified School District inspired a 2010 report funded by the San Francisco Foundation entitled, "[Flunking Lunch: How Misused Subsidies and Separate Lunch Lines Undermine the NSLP](http://publicadvocates.org/publication/flunking-lunch)" (<http://publicadvocates.org/publication/flunking-lunch>).

In this report, the Campaign for Better Nutrition and civil rights law firm and advocacy organization Public Advocates Inc. cited survey results in which more than one-in-ten school districts had designed their operation in a way that resulted in mostly low-income students standing in one line for NSLP meals while the vast majority of their peers stood in a separate line or went to a different room to purchase more appealing “competitive foods.” According to the report, not only do these practices run counter to our nation’s values around public education and social justice, they go against the express directive of Congress as written in the National School Lunch Act.

Based on these concerns, Representative George Miller (D-Calif.), the senior Democrat on the House Education and the Workforce Committee, and Representative Sam Farr (D-Calif.), the senior Democrat on the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, asked USDA to update and clarify its guidance to help schools protect low-income students from identification and stigmatization by their peers.

Rep. Miller lauded the Agency’s action saying, “No child should have to endure any stigmatism imposed by others over their economic background. School nutrition activists and the Department are to be applauded for pursuing this issue.”

Some school districts are already ahead of the curve in conforming to the new guidelines. At the urging of Campaign for Better Nutrition and Public Advocates —with significant support from the San Francisco Department of Public Health — San Francisco Unified School District has eliminated competitive food lunches. The district is working toward eliminating cash payment in the cafeteria altogether by actively encouraging all families who pay cash for lunch to prepay for their children’s meals.

As a result, the district has seen more students eating school meals and has been able to improve meal quality and variety. In addition, the cafeteria staff reports that more students are eating healthy meals instead of some of the less healthy snack options available in the former competitive food program.

“Actions like this are an important step in both ending childhood hunger and closing the achievement gap,” said Tara Kini, a senior staff attorney at Public Advocates. “Low-income children have enough obstacles to getting a good education without them worrying about being hungry.”

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*The **Campaign for Better Nutrition** aims to improve the nutrition children receive through public programs and at home so they can learn more, be healthier and better achieve their goals. We work on the local level to find where policies in public programs are undermining healthy eating. We advocate improving those policies from the local-to-federal level to leverage improvements in personal nutrition and increase social justice in public programs. See [campaignforbetternutrition.org/](http://www.campaignforbetternutrition.org/) (<http://www.campaignforbetternutrition.org/>).*

***Public Advocates Inc.** is a nonprofit civil rights law firm and advocacy organization that challenges the systemic causes of poverty and racial discrimination by strengthening community voices in public policy and achieving tangible legal victories advancing education, housing and transit equity. We spur change through collaboration with grassroots groups representing low-income communities, people of color and immigrants, combined with strategic policy reform, media advocacy and litigation, “making rights real” across California since 1971. See [publicadvocates.org](http://www.publicadvocates.org/) (<http://www.publicadvocates.org/>).*

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