# **Meal debt**

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# What happens if the school meal debt goes unpaid?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture instructs schools to "attempt to collect" any meal-money owed until a student graduates or leaves the district, said Diane Pratt-Heavner, a School Nutrition Association spokesperson.

At that point, the debt is deemed "uncollectible," she said.

In Iowa, schools have reported \$752,386.05 in uncollectible meal debt for the 2025 fiscal year, data from the Iowa Department of Education said.

The problem compounds each school year because the debt is rolled into the following year's negative lunch balance.

It just "kind of (sits) on the books," A'Hearn said. Families had a break from school meal costs during the pandemic, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture temporarily relaxed rules that tie free meals to family income and neighborhood poverty levels. The universal free meals program ended June 2022

Research shows school meals help students perform better, advocates say.

"Congress should be providing them as part of a student's education to ensure that they have everything they need to be able to succeed at school," Pratt-Heavner told the Des Moines Register. "Hungry children can't focus in class. They don't succeed.

"So, it just makes sense to make these meals available to all students."

## What steps do schools take to try and collect payments?

Schools have few avenues for collecting the outstanding meal debts, school officials said. And there is no single policy or rule for how it should be done.

"(The) USDA did issue some clarification a few years back," Pratt-Heavner said. "They say you have to continue to attempt to collect on the debt until it's no longer considered collectible."

At Waukee, staff, including social workers, often work with parents and guardians to figure out options, A'Hearn said.

Families also receive regular reminders of the amounts due.

Waukee students' negative meal account balances range between 5 cents to more than \$1,000, A'Hearn said.

"We understand that, like some of these, it is a large amount, and it would be hard to do in one sitting," she said of paying off the debt.

The Feed the Future Fund pays off charges accrued by students who cannot afford school meals and are ineligible for the federal program that would provide them with food for free or at a lower price.

A'Hearn believes many families must choose between paying rent, utilities or medical care over their child's meal accounts.

In neighboring Urbandale, the Food Service Angel Fund helps cover students' negative account balances. Community donations and a portion of sales from the district's online apparel store support the fund, said Jessy Sadler, who oversees the school district's nutrition services.

It is common for school meal programs to be in the red, Pratt-Heavner said.

A School Nutrition Association national survey showed that the reimbursement rate for school breakfast and lunch is insufficient to cover the cost of producing the meals, she said.

Further complicating matters: schools are barred from using federal funds to settle the negative balances

"It's really a no-win situation that isn't sustainable in the long term in a way that anyone will be happy with," Pratt-Heavner said. "Schools are incredibly grateful for the generous community donations to pay off the lunch debt funds, but the real answer is for the federal government to provide these meals — that are proven to support students' education and well-being — for free to all students."

## Help is available for meal debts

A student's parent or guardian can apply for free or reduced-price meals.

People should check with their children's school to apply, said Pratt-Heavner. If approved, a family should not have to apply again until the next school year.

Students whose families participate in programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Nutrition Program or Medicaid automatically are eligible for free school meals, she said.

Additionally, the federal Community Eligibility Program allows schools and school districts in high poverty areas to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost



Students eat lunch during lunch time at Shuler Elementary School on Dec. 2 in Clive. LILY SMITH/THE

### How to help

#### • Ankeny Community School District

Information on Ankeny's Fill the Fund campaign can be found on the district's Facebook page.

### • Bondurant-Farrar Community School District

For more information on the district's nutrition fund, visit www.bfschools.org.

#### • Johnston Community School District

Checks can be made payable to the Johnston CSD Nutrition Department and can either be mailed to or dropped off at District Office Nutrition Department, 6510 NW 62nd Ave PO Box 10, Johnston, IA 50131. Officials ask to note "Negative Meal Account Fund" in the memo line.

#### • North Polk Community School District

Donations can be sent to the District Administrative Office, 13930 NE Sixth St. Alleman, IA 50007.

#### • Norwalk Community School District

More information about the district's donation funds can be found online at www.norwalkschools.org or www.norwalkhelp.org.

## • Southeast Polk Community School District

Southeast Polk's Nutrition Donations fund can be found on the district's website, www.southeastpolk.org/food-nutrition.

## • Waukee Community School District

More information on Waukee Community School District's Feed the Future Fund can be found at www.waukeeschools.org. Checks can be mailed out to Waukee School District, Attn: Feed the Future, 560 SE University Ave, Waukee, IA 50263.

## • West Des Moines Community Schools

Donations can be made by contacting the schools' nutrition services department at 515-633-5085.

## • Urbandale Community School District

Details on Food Service Angel Fund are featured on the school's website, urbandaleschools.revtrak.net.

to students.

The 2025-26 school year is Des Moines Public Schools' sixth year of the entire district participating in eligibility program, said Phil Roeder, the district's spokesperson.

"Which means that during that time, none of our students have had to pay for breakfast or lunches at school, and so we've not been running into unpaid balances or overdue payments for meals by our families," Roeder said.

Currently, the district is preparing its renewal application, he said.

"We are keeping a close eye on what if any changes may be made at the federal level that could impact participation moving forward," Roeder said, "but at this time, it's too early to know if things may or may not be different next year as a result of that."

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## Slater

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just a sports facility but a destination for outdoor recreation.

#### Some work is already complete

Over the past two years, city leaders have worked to align funding, secure grants and prepare the Trailside Sports Complex site.

This summer, a \$68,000 grant from Story County allowed for grading the land to the proper contours, paving the way for future construction.

The estimated cost of the full project is just over

The estimated cost of the full project is just over \$6 million, though officials hope to reduce expenses through careful engineering and contributions from local contractors willing to donate labor or materials

By fall 2026, the soccer fields are expected to be playable. Baseball and softball fields, complete with lighting, are targeted for completion within the project's five-year plan, rounding out the vision of a fully functional sports complex.

#### Sports complex has a trailside location

The name "Trailside Sports Complex" reflects its unique setting.

The fields will sit less than 30 yards from the High Trestle Trail, offering seamless access for athletes, families and visitors, Christensen said.

The juxtaposition of ball fields, soccer pitches and natural amenities alongside one of Iowa's most beloved trails underscores the project's potential to become a regional draw, he said.

Julie Weeks, recently elected to the Slater City Council, and her husband Craig have not only invested in the city's future but also created opportunities for local families to gather, play, and connect.

Their donation, valued at millions if monetized by acreage, stands as a landmark gift in Slater's history, Christensen said.

For Slater, the Trailside Sports Complex represents more than new fields – it's a symbol of generosity, vision and community pride.

Ames Tribune reporter Ronna Faaborg can be reached at rfaaborg@usatodayco.com.

# "It should be a phenomenal project when it's complete."

### Slater Mayor Taylor Christensen



Slater Mayor Taylor Christensen, Julie Weeks, Craig Weeks and Weeks family members were part of the ribbon-cutting ceremony at Slater's Trailside Sports Complex. PROVIDED BY THE CITY OF SLATER



# Dallas County News

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