

## FREE MEALS

### Lunch

Lunch shaming banned in state; 4 Greece schools will provide meals for all students

**Meghan Finnerty and Justin Murphy** Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

Pressure at the lunch line checkout is off. ■ Four schools in the Greece Central School District will provide free breakfast and lunch for all students this academic year, and across the state lunch shaming is now officially against the rules. ■ English Village, Lakeshore, Longridge and West Ridge elementary school students will all have free school meals in the 2018-19 school year “regardless of household income,” according to district spokesperson Laurel Heiden.

All 1,968 enrolled students will have access to the meals because the district is part of the Community Eligibility Provision in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program, Heiden said. CEP is a national service for schools in low-income areas.

School districts that reach a certain threshold of poverty are eligible for CEP. The program reaches districts with high levels of poverty, including the Rochester City School District.

Across Greece, 42 percent of enrolled students in 2016-17 qualified for free or reduced meals.

The district is working toward greater equity, said Assistant Superintendent Valerie Paine. Students will have access to a healthy breakfast and lunch and hopefully will be ready to learn in the classroom, she said.

### Meal shaming to end

In January, the *Democrat and Chronicle* reported a student was turned away at Greece Odyssey Academy without food after he didn’t have his lunch money. These kinds

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**Jordan Chizuk, a fourth-grader at Victor Intermediate School, reaches for vegetables to put on her tray.**  
FILE PHOTO

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of incidents have come to be known as lunch shaming. The practice has become a hot topic for students, parents and school administrators.

Greece's Board of Education recognized an anonymous donor in February who contributed \$1,500 to clear the district's lunch debt. This was the only meal balance donation in the 2017-18 year, though Heiden said this type of donation usually happens a few times a year within the district.

In June, Greece school board members voted to prohibit meal shaming altogether.

Meal shaming "is a horrible thing to have a child experience," said Paine, who added that the new protocol will let the community know that "Greece takes care of its students" without penalizing them for a parent's inability to pay.

If families are successful, kids will be, and ultimately the community will be healthier and more productive, she said.

Greece district employees will be told to offer the same meal choices regardless of a student's negative balance. Employees cannot "publicly identify or stigmatize any student in line for a meal or discuss any outstanding meal debt in the presence of any other students," according to the district. Meals will not be thrown out after they are served due to a student's inability to pay.

All issues related to unpaid meals will be dealt with parents and guardians directly.

Other school districts have adopted similar guidelines.

In January, Hilton Central School District was the only local district with a written policy stating that all students can have a hot lunch no matter their account balance, though several others said they do so in practice.

Now Greece, Penfield, East Rochester, West Irondequoit, Gates Chili and Brighton have it in writing, too.

West Irondequoit started a pilot program in February in which students were allowed to charge as many meals as needed, and still be fed. James Brennan, the district's assistant superintendent of finance, said West Irondequoit schools were aware of the local, state and national conversation on lunch shaming and anticipated that a law was coming.

"I think we implemented successfully," Brennan said. The district received positive feedback as parents said they appreciated the flexibility, he added.

Brennan said the district previously offered alternate meals to older students but that practice has been eliminated.

West Irondequoit finished the 2017-18 school year with a \$5,000 charge deficit out of its \$1.2 million cafeteria budget.

## **In other districts**

A roundup of other district policies includes:

■ Penfield Central School District updated its policy in June to ensure students are not shamed or treated differently than a student who doesn't have unpaid meal charges. After a charge is incurred, parents or guardians will be notified within four days and then every two weeks after.

■ Gates Chili — like West Irondequoit — enacted change before New York passed the law. Gates Chili Superintendent Kimberle Ward said the district provides meals of the student's choice regardless of lunch debt. Kids get a meal to eat with money or not, Ward said. All communication about a negative balance will be between the food and nutritional team, principals and parents. Gates Chili has about a \$700 deficit from unpaid meals.

■ According to Fairport Central School District, having healthy students is a facet of educating the whole child. "FCSD will provide all students with their choice of a reimbursable meal, regardless of their account status. Private messages are discreetly delivered to parents via email or phone call if an account is exhausted."

■ The Webster Central School District did not make any written changes to its policy, according to Krista Grose, district spokeswoman. Students can charge \$15 in hot lunches in grades K-8 and \$10 in high school; after that they can't charge more meals. Students in grades K-8 continue to get a hot meal, while high school students get an alternate lunch.

■ The Spencerport Central School District has not yet implemented changes yet but will be working toward policy change this school year, according to spokesperson Lanette Cypher. Students in grades K-5 can charge three hot lunches, then get an alternate lunch. Students in grades 6-12 can charge one hot lunch, then get nothing.

## **New York says get it in writing**

The law "Prohibition Against Meal Shaming" says that "all public, non-public and charter school food authorities that require students to pay for a school breakfast and/or lunch meal must develop a written plan" to ensure students are not shamed or treated differently due to unpaid meal charges.

Schools were required to submit their plans to the state Education Department by July 1. Each district is required to post its plan online once submitted to the state.

More than half of required schools have submitted plans to the state. The state anticipates more policies submitted after the first day of school.

Schools that do not submit their written policies will be placed on "reimbursement hold," meaning they would not be reimbursed for any food-related claims until a written policy is submitted, according to an Education Department official.

"We will work to ensure that all schools come into compliance quickly," said a department official.

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**Here's a typical school lunch at Greece Odyssey in 2016. CARLOS ORTIZ/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO**

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