NH HUNGER SOLUTIONS
ENDING HUNGER IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

PROTECT STUDENTS FROM MEAL DEBT SHAMING

School meal debt builds up when a child eats a meal at the cafeteria, and their family doesn't pay the bill. School districts are facing growing school meal debt strain – which needs to be addressed – but children should never be shamed to leverage payment of parents' debt.

The Problem

Many NH school districts are burdened by unpaid meal debt. To force parents to pay, some schools resort to punitive tactics that harm students:

- Denying children meals entirely.
- Serving "alternative meals," singling students out and shaming them in front of peers.
- Exposing families' confidential financial details.

Shaming traumatizes children and increases food insecurity – because kids would rather go hungry than go through a lunch line where they will be embarrased for something they have no control over.

The Solution

To stop children from being shamed – and support schools in reducing debt – we must:

- **Ban public shaming** by prohibiting practices that single out students with debt.
- **Protect food access** by guaranteeing full, regular meals for all students — no denying or offering substitute meals.
- **Shield student and family privacy** by requiring all debt communication to go directly to parents, not kids.
- **Support schools and families** by driving enrollment in Free & Reduced Meal programs.

Other Policies that would help:

- **Medicaid Direct Certification**
- **Raising eligibility for free meals**

Why This Matters

Shaming children – and using them as leverage for debt – creates an environment where kids are made to feel less worthy, and less able to participate fully in their education. We can protect kids' dignity and privacy by ensuring that children aren't punished for their parents' financial struggles.

Schools can collect debt from adults – but let kids eat, and learn.