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Dear Cherry Hill Community,

The end of August and the waning days of summer are filled with excitement and anticipation as school is about to begin. On Tuesday, September 3, we will welcome more than 11,000 students to our 19 schools, including our first class of full day kindergarten students across the district. There have been many new families to meet in the registration office and even more eager children on the playgrounds at our schools ready for the year to begin. This year, there have also been many discussions regarding overdue balances for breakfast & lunch in our schools. While the most recent discussion was initiated at the Board of Education Meeting on August 13, 2019, there has been ongoing discussion in our district about this issue for the past two years. This time, however, the discussion spread onto social media and into the press.

Unfortunately, what has been lost in many of the discussions, on Facebook and in the press, is the complexity of this issue and the legal requirements of [New Jersey State Statute 18A:33-21](#).

The Board of Education and Administration welcome public input into the discussion regarding [District Policy 8550 – Unpaid Meal Charges/Outstanding Food Service Charges](#)

The following are foundational facts in this discussion:

- 1) Children have not been denied food, regardless of current outstanding balances on their meal payment accounts.
- 2) Children who eat regular and healthy meals are more successful in school.
- 3) We are mandated by the State of New Jersey to include specific language in our policy, as stated in New Jersey Administrative Code 18A:33-21- Schools meals, notification to parent of payment in arrears before denying to student:

In the event that a school district determines that a student's school breakfast or school lunch bill is in arrears, the district shall contact the student's parent or guardian to provide notice of the arrearage and shall provide the parent or guardian with a period of 10 school days to pay the amount due. If the student's parent or guardian has not made full payment by the end of the 10 school days, then the district shall again contact the student's parent or guardian to provide notice that school breakfast or school lunch, as applicable, shall not be served to the student beginning one week from the date of the second notice unless payment is made in full.

- 4) There are children/families on the outstanding balance list who are in serious need and who would benefit from the Free & Reduced Meal program. We have made multiple attempts to convince the families – in their native languages – to apply, and will continue to do so.
- 5) There are children/families on the outstanding balance list who may not qualify for the Free & Reduced Meal program, but who would absolutely benefit from other social services and supports in our community. We have encouraged and will continue to encourage them to do so.

- 6) There are children/families on the outstanding balance list with the financial means and resources to address their children's outstanding balances who have chosen not to respond.
- 7) During the past four years, the district has forgiven tens of thousands of dollars in outstanding meal balances.

The primary concern of the school district is that we have children who are food insecure. We want to make sure that they, and their families, receive the supports and benefits available to them. The Cherry Hill School District began a pilot program last year, through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to provide backpacks of food to children every Friday to take home. Children were identified in multiple schools to receive this service and we received tremendous feedback from many of the families. This program will continue during the 2019-2020 academic year, as we look to expand the opportunity to benefit more families.

The residents of Cherry Hill have always been extremely generous when it comes to our children. Many have offered to contribute monies to cover the outstanding balances. We urge people who want to make a donation to benefit children who are in need, to make a donation to individual school PTAs or to the Zone PTA to cover the cost of field trips, spirit wear, Mt. Misery and other activities at the schools. If folks want to donate to something that is food related, make a donation to the district to allow us to expand the Friday Food Backpacks to additional families, or make a donation to the Cherry Hill Food Pantry, which supports so many of our families.

We have not denied food to our students.

The Board made a courageous decision to discuss [District Policy 8550 – Unpaid Meal Charges/Outstanding Food Service Charges](#) publicly on August 13. At the Board of Education Meeting on August 27, the discussion will continue. The Board will discuss the provisions that are currently in the Policy and will discuss recommendations for changes.

As the discussion continues, we will continue to feed our students, beginning again on September 3, the first day of school.

Simply erasing the debt that exists does not solve the problem, as has been demonstrated by the \$25,000 in debt that was erased during the summer of 2017 and has since accrued again to \$18,000. Simply erasing the debt does not help those who need support and compassion and meals through the Free & Reduced Meal Programs. Simply erasing the debt does not address the many families with financial means who have just chosen not to pay what is owed.

We will continue to move forward as a community. We have met with some of our local officials and have spoken with state level officials about the impact of [New Jersey State Statute 18A:33-21](#) and we will continue to advocate for the students who are in need.

In all discussions, we encourage informed civil discourse when addressing concerns and questions regarding the outstanding meal balances. We look forward to continuing the discussion of [District Policy 8550 – Unpaid Meal Charges/Outstanding Food Service Charges](#) and reaching a consensus about its final form.

Sincerely,

Joseph N. Meloche, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

Eric Goodwin
Board of Education President