

Lunchtime Supports Learning: Research and Policies on School Meal Time

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School lunch is an essential part of the school day. California's State Meal Mandate requires all traditional public schools to provide a nutritious, free or reduced-price meal to each needy student every school day. Recent federal, state and local efforts have focused on improving the quality and appeal of school food, but these gains are wasted when students do not have adequate time to eat.

Adequate Time to Eat is Essential for Student Health and Learning

Time is a student's most valuable commodity during a busy lunch period. Students will often grab a snack in place of lunch, eat only part of their lunch, or skip lunch altogether when pressed for time, even if they are hungry!

- ➔ Minimizing the wait time for school meals and providing students with lunch periods that allow them to enjoy a meal with friends are among the top 10 factors that leading health professionals identify as essential for healthy eating in schools.¹
- ➔ Providing enough time to eat may encourage students to eat more of the foods that are often under-consumed, such as fruits, vegetables, and milk.²
- ➔ Elementary school students who have 30-minute lunch periods consume significantly more nutrients than those with 20-minute lunch periods- and less food is wasted.³
- ➔ Studies indicate that elementary school children may spend a major part of the lunch period waiting in line for food, which can significantly decrease the time available to eat.^{4,5,6}
- ➔ The length of lunch periods and the amount of time students spend waiting in lunch lines have a significant impact on participation in the school lunch program.⁷
- ➔ Research suggests that a shorter lunch period is associated with an increased BMI and probability of being overweight.⁸

How Does Inadequate Time to Eat Affect California Students?

A survey of over 500 California middle and high school students found that **two of the top three reasons why students skip lunch are due to time pressures**- feeling the line is too long, or feeling they do not have enough time to eat.

- ➔ Almost half of the respondents had lunch periods of 30 minutes or less; of those, 69% reported feeling rushed and 43% said they do not have enough time to eat their meal.
- ➔ The majority of these students reported feeling tired (62%) and hungry (54%) in the afternoons following the lunch period.⁹

A recent UC Berkeley evaluation of California school districts found that most elementary schools allowed only 20 minutes for each lunch period. This may not be sufficient time for students to be served, find a place to sit, and have time to eat a full meal.¹⁰

A forthcoming UC Berkeley study of California middle and high school students supports an association between the length of the lunch period and students' fruit and vegetable consumption.¹¹

How Can Schools Ensure Students Have Adequate Time to Eat?

When students don't have enough time to eat, the health and academic benefits of nutritious school meals are lost. When students don't have enough time to eat, valuable resources, including state and federal funds, are lost. California can commit to the health and well-being of its students by ensuring that they have adequate time to eat during the school day.

Time to Eat Can Increase Without Lengthening the Lunch Period

- ➔ Many factors can increase the amount of time students have to eat *without lengthening the lunch period*. Increasing service areas, making all food choices available at each line, training staff to provide more efficient service, and utilizing a cashless-only point of sale system can all help ensure that students will have more time to eat. ¹²

A survey of administrators at 150 California schools (all grade levels) found that many schools are missing opportunities to provide students with more time to eat.

- ➔ Multiple points of meal service alleviate wait times for food and reduce time spent finding a place to sit. Only 47% of surveyed middle schools and 53% of surveyed high schools served lunch at any place other than the main cafeteria.
- ➔ Cashless school cafeterias increase efficiency through reduced transaction time, while eliminating the stigma associated with low-income students receiving free and reduced-price meals. All schools surveyed had the capability to accept cashless payment at the point of sale, yet only 24% of elementary schools, 16% of middle schools and 3% of high schools eliminated cash sales.
- ➔ Staggered lunch periods reduce crowding and wait times, giving students more time to eat a full meal. Of high schools surveyed, over 33% scheduled more than 1000 students per lunch period, with 15% scheduling more than 2000 students in a single 30-40 minute period.

State Policy Can Ensure That Students Have Adequate Time to Eat at School

In *School Nutrition...by Design!*, the California Department of Education recommends that each student has no less than 20 minutes to eat after being served. ¹³ Providing 20 minutes of 'table time' is the evidence-based recommendation for the minimum time needed for children to eat lunch. ¹¹ This recommendation is recognized and promoted by USDA and nutrition experts. ¹⁴

- ➔ Nine other states and the District of Columbia already have policies in place that require all schools to provide students with adequate time to eat. ¹⁵

There are a variety of ways to provide students with adequate time to eat- even within tight scheduling constraints. By recognizing that sufficient lunch periods are an essential part of the school day, we can help ensure that students have what they need to learn, grow, and achieve.

Additional Resources

California Department of Education State Superintendent's Support for Adequate Time to Eat:

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/el/le/yr13ltr0125b.asp>

California School Nutrition Association:

<http://www.calsna.org/documents/PositionPapers/PositionPaperMealtimeManagement.pdf>

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Nutrition Services Branch:

<http://www.nutritionnc.com/ResourcesForSchools/docs/esmm/AdvocacyTools/ActionTools/MakeEatingEnjoyable.pdf>

¹ American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Dietetic Association, National Hispanic Medical Association, National Medical Association, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). (2000). Prescription for change: Ten keys to promote healthy eating in schools. In USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Changing the scene: Improving the school nutrition environment, Washington, DC: Author.

² Guthrie, J., & Buzby, J. (2002). Several strategies may lower plate waste in school feeding programs. *FoodReview*, 25, 36-42.

³ Bergman, EA; Buergel, NS; Englund, TF; Femrite, A. (2004) The relationship between the length of the lunch period and nutrient consumption in the elementary school lunch setting. *J Child Nutr Manag*. Issue 2, Fall 2004.

⁴ Bergman, E., Buergel, N.S., Joseph, E., & Sanchez, A. (2000). Time spent by schoolchildren to eat lunch. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 100, 696-698.

⁵ Buergel, N.S., Bergman, E., Knutson, A., & Lindaas, M. (2002). Students consuming sack lunches devotes more time to eating than those consuming school lunches. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 102, 1283-1286.

⁶ Sanchez, A., Hoover, L.C., Sanchez, N.F., & Miller, J.L. (1999). Measurement and evaluation of school lunch time elements in elementary, junior high, and high school levels. *The Journal of Child Nutrition & Management*, 23, 16-21.

⁷ Marples, C., & Spillman, D. (1995) Factors affecting students' participation in the Cincinnati public school program. *Adolescence*, 30, 745-754.

⁸ Bhatt, R.R. The Impact of School Lunch Length on Children's Health. Working paper, Andrew Young School of Policy Studies Research Paper Series No. 09-07., Georgia State University, 2009.

⁹ PerryUndem Research/Communication. California Students' Voices on School Meal Time: Results from a Survey of California Middle and High School Students. 2013. Available at:

http://cfpa.net/ChildNutrition/ChildNutrition_CFPAPublications/Student%20Meal%20Time-%20Final%20Report-2013.pdf

¹⁰ Michelle Ross, MPH; Pat Crawford, DrPH, RD. "Evaluation of the Healthy School Meals Project: Report of Findings from Ten California Districts." Atkins Center for Weight and Health. Prepared for the California Endowment. 2013.

Available at:

http://cwh.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/primary_pdfs/Healthy_School_Meals_Full_Report_FINAL2_small.pdf

¹¹ Gosliner W. School-level factors associated with increased fruit and vegetable consumption among students in California middle and high schools. *J Sch Health*. 2013;(in press).

¹² Martha T. Conklin, PhD, RD; Laurel G. Lambert, PhD, RD, LD; and Janet B. Anderson, MS, RD. "How Long Does it Take Students to Eat Lunch? A Summary of Three Studies." *The Journal of Child Nutrition & Management*, Issue 1, Spring 2002.

¹³ School Nutrition...by Design! Report of the Advisory Committee on Nutrition Implementation Strategies, California Department of Education, 2006. Available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/he/nutredres.asp>

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2000). A guide to local action. In Changing the scene: Improving the school nutrition environment, 22. Washington, DC: Author.

¹⁵ National Association of State Boards of Education. State School Health Policy Database. Available at:

http://www.nasbe.org/healthy_schools/hs/bytopics.php?topicid=3110. Accessed Jan. 6, 2014.