

Making Time for School Lunch



The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 required changes to the nutrition standards for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.¹ As a result, schools are serving more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, as well as reducing the sodium content of the meals.²⁻⁴ However, there is concern that students may be unfamiliar with, and take longer to eat, some of these healthier options.

Schools can address factors that affect students' acceptance and consumption of healthier items including providing nutrition education, giving students opportunities to try new foods before they appear on the menu, and ensuring that students have **at least 20 minutes once they are seated** (i.e., seat time) to enjoy their meal and socialize.⁵⁻¹⁰

What is seat time?

Seat time is different from the total time for the lunch period and does not include waiting in line to select and pay for the meal. This distinction between adequate seat time and the length of the meal period overall is important because many activities can shorten time to eat, including using the restroom, handwashing, walking to where the meal is served, waiting in line, selecting items for the meal, waiting to pay, walking to the table, socializing with friends, and bussing trays after the meal.¹¹

Are schools providing enough seat time for lunch?

Nearly one-third of school districts nationwide do not require or recommend that schools provide students with at least 20 minutes to eat lunch once they receive their meal.¹² And although two-thirds of districts do require or recommend at least 20 minutes of seat time, some food service directors report that students do not have sufficient time to consume lunch.^{13,14} Some students also report that insufficient time to eat is a key reason for not participating in the school lunch program.¹⁵

What are the benefits of more time for lunch?

Studies have shown that providing more time for lunch is associated with the following:

- Increased consumption of food and key nutrients.⁷
- Increased selection of a fruit.⁸
- Increased consumption of fruits and vegetables,^{8,9} lunch entrée,⁸ and milk.⁸
- Decreased plate waste.⁷



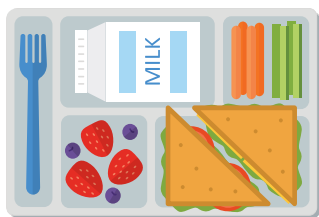
What are ways to help students have enough time to eat lunch?

Each school may need to use different strategies, but there are many ideas and best practices to consider.^{8,11,16}



• Schools can

- ◆ Schedule lunch periods that are longer than 20 minutes to account for the time it takes students to get to the cafeteria (or other location where the meal is served), wait in line, pay for lunch, find a place to sit, socialize with friends, and eat the meal. Some studies suggest that a 30-minute lunch period allows students to have the recommended 20 minutes of seat time.^{8,17}
- ◆ Schedule recess before lunch, when possible.¹⁰
- ◆ Train lunchroom paraprofessionals to create comfortable eating environments.
- ◆ Ask for parent or grandparent volunteers to help provide lunchtime supervision, and to help younger students open milk, condiments, and other prepackaged items.
- ◆ Require a specific amount of time for sitting and eating before students go out to play.



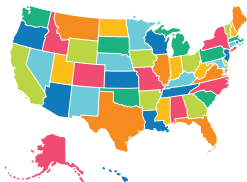
• School nutrition programs can

- ◆ Provide adequate training to school nutrition staff so that meal service and payment are efficient.
- ◆ Minimize wait time in lines by adding serving lines, rearranging points of service so that they are easier for students to access, or offering preorder of meals.
- ◆ Offer grab-and-go meal options in the cafeteria or in remote locations.
- ◆ Cut up fruit, such as apples and oranges, so they are easier for students to eat.
- ◆ Consider using the Community Eligibility Provision or other provisions that allow all students to receive free meals. This can increase participation in the meal programs and decrease the time that students wait in line to pay for their meal.¹⁸



• Parents, school staff, and community members can

- ◆ Join the school wellness team or district wellness committee that sets the policies for health and wellness, and ensure that wellness policies say that students should have at least 20 minutes of seat time to eat lunch.
- ◆ Educate district and school administrators about the importance of school lunch and adequate seat time.



- States can adopt policies that address sufficient seat time, which is significantly associated with schools providing at least 30 minutes for lunch.¹⁹

References

References can be accessed at: https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/nutrition/school_lunch.htm