



January 25, 2013

Dear School Leaders:

PROVIDING STUDENTS ADEQUATE TIME TO EAT LUNCH

As educators, we know that students perform best academically when well-nourished. It is essential that they consume nutritious meals to assist in meeting their physical, social, and emotional needs. Eating habits formed during childhood impact health patterns into adulthood. Yet often students do not have adequate time to eat a healthy lunch. I urge you to ensure that students have sufficient time at the lunch table to finish their meal.

We are all making changes to improve the health of our children and youth. One of the most exciting is the improved nutrition standards for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), part of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. These standards require increased variety and servings of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. My Team California for Healthy Kids initiative reinforces this use of more produce (especially fresh) by supporting salad bars in schools at lunchtime. However, students need sufficient time to eat the healthier meal or it may end up wasted. In fact, providing enough time for students to sit with friends and enjoy their meals is among the top 10 factors identified by health professionals as important to the development of healthy eating behaviors¹. In *School Nutrition...by Design!*², the California Department of Education (CDE) recommends that each student has no less than 10 minutes for breakfast and no less than 20 minutes for lunch **after being served**.

Students who participate in the NSLP have better nutrient intakes than students who make other choices, such as purchasing lunch from vending machines, bringing lunch from home, or eating off campus³⁴. It is critical that we do everything we can to make it easy for students to purchase and eat a school lunch. Research indicates that inadequate time to eat discourages students from buying and eating complete lunches. Waiting in line is the most commonly reported factor contributing to student dissatisfaction with lunches. When they do not have enough time to consume a complete lunch, students throw away a large portion of the meal, buy snacks instead, or skip lunch entirely⁵. As a result, they are not ready to focus on their afternoon education. Research consistently shows that hungry students cannot learn, and ensuring that students have enough time to eat a nutritious meal promotes academic achievement.

¹Martha 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.

² *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>

³ Rainville, A. "Nutritional Quality of Reimbursable School Lunches Compared to Lunches Brought From Home," *The Journal of Child Nutrition & Management*, Spring 2001.

⁴ Gordon A, Devaney B, Burghardt J. "Dietary effects of the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program." *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 1995; 61(supplement): 221S-231S.

⁵ Cynthia Curl Henderson, "The State of Nutrition and Physical Activity in Our Schools," *Environments and Human Health, Inc.* 2004. Available at http://www.ehhi.org/reports/obesity/obesity_report04.pdf

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We are committed to finding solutions to this important challenge. The CDE's Child Nutrition Consultants will share best practices for mealtime management during NSLP administrative reviews. We will send out updates to keep you informed.

Each school has unique characteristics. We recognize the difficulty in lengthening the amount of time students have to sit and eat lunch when considering costs, workload, and mandated instructional time. There is not a single strategy that will work for every situation. Attached is a compilation of tips and techniques that you, as school administrators and food service professionals, may find useful in making incremental improvements to ensure students have enough time to eat a nutritious lunch.

CDE staff is collaborating with our partners to identify a variety of ways that schools can successfully address adequate time to eat while preserving instructional minutes. Your district's insights are invaluable, and we invite you to share your experiences with implementing positive changes in the school lunch environment. To help us achieve this goal, please submit your best practices to Martie Hague, Staff Services Analyst, by e-mail at mhague@cde.ca.gov.

If you have any questions regarding this subject, please contact Sandip Kaur, Director of the Nutrition Services Division, by phone at 916-323-7311 or by e-mail at skaur@cde.ca.gov.

Sincerely,



Tom Torlakson

TT:dt
Attachment

cc: California Association of School Business Officials, Child Nutrition Professional Council
California Center for Public Health Advocacy
California Food Policy Advocates
California Parent Teachers Association
California School Board Association
California School Nutrition Association
Center for Ecoliteracy
The California Endowment
U.S. Department of Agriculture, Western Regional Office

Adequate Time to Eat: Tips and Strategies

Consider the following tips and strategies to maximize the time students are seated and eating school meals.

No or Low Cost Ideas

1. Provide menu flyers or signage, preferably with photos, at various points in line so students can decide what they want before reaching the serving area. Consider offering the healthiest foods at the start of the line.
2. Make sure that students get a full lunch period so they can finish their meal. Dismiss students from class on time; do not use the lunch period for discipline.
3. Form a team of students, parents, teachers, food service staff, and school leaders to consider how to make lunchtime work better. Assess the mealtime. What is working? How can you build on that? How much time do the students spend in line? How much time do students have to get to the cafeteria? Identify the points of gridlock and research how to tackle them.
4. Schedule recess before lunch at elementary schools so children can come to lunch less distracted and more ready to eat. Studies show that students eat more when recess is scheduled before lunch. In addition, it actually adds more instructional time to the day because children do not need as much time to settle down when they return to class. You can download Montana's Team Nutrition Program Recess Before Lunch Guide from the Montana Office of Public Instruction Web site at <http://opi.mt.gov/pdf/schoolfood/RBL/RBLGuide2008.pdf>.
5. Include language about adequate time to eat in your district's wellness policy. Work together with the school wellness committee, parents, students, teachers, nurses, administrators, and others who share your concerns. The more of the school community that participates in decision-making, the more successful you will be.

Additional Ideas

6. Prepackage healthy items into a grab-and-go full meal, in order to minimize the wait time on the meal line and increase consumption of healthy options. For example, package a vegetable and lean meat sandwich on whole wheat bread with orange slices. Create soup, salad, and potato bar options. Move some quick grab items, such as fruit and milk, to the snack counter or alternate serving point. Have a runner on the serving line to replenish depleted items.
7. Calculate the optimal lunch period length for your school. To calculate a school meal period of appropriate length, add the traveling time (to and from the cafeteria) to the service or wait time, time at table (eating and socializing), and time returning trays for

clean-up. Giving students at least 20 minutes after they are seated allows them time to finish their lunch. It also provides them with socialization time, which is important for students' emotional and developmental needs and reduces chatter when they return to class.

8. Consider adding extra food service lines, additional registers, or staggering lunch so they overlap in order to serve students more quickly and provide them with more time to eat their lunch. Additionally, reduced wait time in line can increase participation in the meal program.
9. The recent passage of almost \$11 billion in local bonds provides school boards the opportunity to address upgrades and the expansion to food service facilities. As school boards develop the capital improvement plans for schools, present the need for kitchens and dining area upgrades early in the planning process to ensure that food service needs are considered and evaluated along with all of the other needs of the school. A useful publication to refer to in this planning is the California Department of Education (CDE) publication, *Healthy Children Ready to Learn*, which can be accessed on the CDE School Facilities Publications Web page at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/fa/sf/publication.asp>.

Meal Time Resources and Information

Alliance for a Healthier Generation:

https://schools.healthiergeneration.org/_asset/57s6o4/08-730_SWFactSheet.pdf

American School Health Association:

http://www.ashaweb.org/files/public/Resolutions/ASHA_Supports_Appropriate_Timing_of_School_Meals.pdf

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>

Vermont Healthy Schools Resource:

http://healthvermont.gov/local/school/documents/HealthySchoolsResource_Nutrition.pdf

USDA Team Nutrition Call to Action: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/CalltoAction.pdf>

Diet Quality of American School-Age Children by School Lunch Participation Status:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/Ora/menu/Published/CNP/FILES/NHANES-NSLP.pdf>