

Time to Eat

Overview

How would you describe lunch at your school? Is the eating experience chaotic or stressful? Do students have enough time to eat enough food to meet their nutritional needs? Student lunch is also about having time to talk, laugh and socialize with friends. Socializing is an important aspect of dining because allowing students sufficient time to relate to others provides a break in routine and refreshes them for afternoon classes. Children enjoy their food more and may even try more healthy options if they can relax, eat, and socialize without feeling rushed.



The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that students get *at least* 20 minutes for lunch. But that means 20 minutes to actually sit down and eat – excluding time waiting in line or walking from class to cafeteria. [Does your school provide adequate time to eat?](#)

Take Action

- Advocating for more time to eat requires an understanding of the school schedule and environment. Make sure you consider these items and prepare to discuss it with administration:
 - The number of students served simultaneously
 - The building size

- The seating capacity of the cafeteria
 - The daily schedule, including the timing and number of meal periods
 - The number of serving lines/stations
 - The number of students and staff in the cafeteria at once
- Observe first. Spend a few days observing mealtimes to identify trends, challenges and opportunities. Is behavior management an issue? Are teachers consistently showing up late to drop off their kids for lunch?
 - When you're ready, set up a time to talk with the school nutrition director, school principal and administration about what you have observed. Continuing the discussion with students, parents and school staff.
 - There are many factors to consider when looking to find more time to eat at school. These factors listed below can be a starting point when discussing ways to add more time to eat into the school day. Some positive factors to consider when looking at meal timing include:
 - Increasing the number of serving lines
 - Considering a meal express line (meal card only, no ala carte)
 - Structure meal options by age, so younger children aren't overwhelmed by choices
 - Having all food choices for complete meals available on each line to eliminate the need for line hopping
 - Offering quick service "bundled meal" kiosks to speed along choices
 - Offering milk vending services
 - Training of service staff and cashiers to provide efficient service
 - Ensuring students are dismissed from class at the proper time (class not held over)
 - Considering staggered lunch and recess at the elementary level to limit the line for meal service

Tips



Review your school district's local wellness policy for any statements about specified time allotments for eating and use this information as a tool to advocate for sufficient time to eat.



Review your school schedule to determine if there are opportunities to schedule [recess before lunch](#). This can eliminate challenges associated with students hurrying to eat to head out to recess.



Are there other activities that compete with time to eat like recess, open gym, clubs, activities and tutoring? Talk about the importance of enough time to eat with the people in charge of these activities to see if they can schedule activities for another time.



When meeting with the school nutrition director, school principal and administration, consider meeting over school lunch to help illustrate how limited time to eat can be.



Be patient! It may take time to work out all the details and garner the support to add minutes to meals, but it is time well worth it.



Increase lunch participation by having a closed campus during lunch! Encourage your students to stay at school, instead of going to outside restaurants by hosting taste tests and other active incentives.

Additional Resources

[School Nutrition Environment and Wellness Resources](#)

[Most US Public Elementary Schools](#)

[Provide Students Only Minimal Time to Eat Lunch](#)

Related Activities

Smarter Lunchrooms

Is your school lunchroom lively and colorful? If not, it's time to make your lunchroom smarter by making small changes like hanging student artwork or rearranging food in your cafeteria to encourage students to eat more of the foods we want them to eat.

Recess Before Lunch

Did you know that it's best practice to shift the school schedule so students play at recess first, then eat lunch?