CENTER FOR Science IN THE Public Interest

No Time to Eat:
The Need to Provide Children with Sufficient Time to Eat

For many students, lunch periods offer just enough time to make it through the lunch line, but not enough to consume their meal, use the restroom, and socialize. Not only is lunchtime crucial in ensuring proper nutritional intake, but it is also an opportunity for students to tend to their physical and mental wellbeing during a long day at school.

Now that the school day looks different due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with lunch in the classroom, increased safety protocols in the cafeteria, and remote learning, sufficient **Time to Eat (TTE)** is more important than ever. TTE is the time spent towards eating the food while sitting down.[1] During the meal period at school (breakfast or lunch), students must have the chance to eat their meal.

What is Sufficient TTE?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that students should be given at least 10 minutes for breakfast and 20 minutes for lunch once they have received their meal,[2] in total, a minimum 30-minute lunch break.[3]

20 minutes
Seated time

30 minutes
Total lunch period time

Benefits of Sufficient TTE

Reduces Plate Waste and Ensures Children Eat More of the Meal

When children are given more time to eat, less food is wasted,[4] and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends a 30 minutes lunch period as a strategy to mitigate plate waste.[5] A randomized control trial that evaluated seat times and food consumption and waste found that during 10 minutes of seated lunch time, participants consumed significantly less fruit and vegetables compared with 20 minutes of seated lunch time.[6] Critics of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) nutrition standards point to plate waste as evidence that the standards should

be weakened, yet research shows that plate waste has not increased with implementation of the standards.[7] Rather than weakening nutrition standards, providing sufficient time to eat should be prioritized.

Other indirect benefits

Sufficient TTE could indirectly improve participation and reduce stigma in the school lunch program. For instance, some students report that because purchasing lunch from school does not provide them with enough time to eat, they choose to not participate in the program and bring their own lunch.[8] Greater participation in the program from students who are non-income-eligible may reduce stigma.

Not Just the Duration: Timing Matters

Research shows that the time of day that meals are served is associated with how much of the meals students consume.[9] Similarly, research suggests that recess before lunch is associated with reduced plate waste, increased student consumption of food, decreased student wait time in line, and reduced student discipline referrals.[10,11,12] According to USDA, as much as 30 percent of plate waste can be reduced by scheduling recess before lunch.[13]

A Need for Action

In a 2013 nationally-representative poll of 1,368 parents and caretakers, 14 percent of respondents reported that their child had 15 minutes or less to eat during the allotted lunch period.[14] According to CDC, about 20 percent of school districts required a minimum amount of time for consuming breakfast and 35 percent for lunch.[15] Of schools with a policy, nearly 90 percent required or recommended at least 10 minutes for breakfast and about 65 percent required 20 minutes for lunch.[16] At the state level, only 16 states and the District of Columbia had laws requiring a minimum lunch duration.[17] For timing of the meals, less than 10 percent of elementary schools require recess before students eat lunch.[18]

Recommendations

Policymakers, administrators, school foodservice staff, and the school food community can work together to make mealtimes more beneficial to students and less wasteful. Outlined below are key strategies for relevant stakeholders:[19,20]

- Policymakers (federal, state, and/or local (including school administrators)
    - Support policies that establish a minimum of 20 minutes for TTE and require recess be scheduled before lunch
- School and district administrators
    - Provide scheduling and logistical support to teachers and school foodservice personnel to implement policies around minimum TTE, recess before lunch, and appropriate lunch times
- School foodservice leadership
    - Train staff in strategies to optimize the meal service and payment processes

    - If feasible, add lines to reduce wait time
    - Offer healthy, grab-and-go meal options in multiple locations on-campus
    - Cut up fruits and vegetables to make them easier for students to eat
    - Use programs such as Community Eligibility, which expedites payments since they allow all students to obtain school meals at no cost
- Parents and community
    - Join the school or district wellness committee and advocate for sufficient TTE, recess before lunch, and appropriately timed lunch periods

For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

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