



No Time to Eat

The Need to Rethink School Meal Breaks

The nutritional quality of school meals has improved significantly in recent years.^{1,2,3} School menus today feature a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and are required to meet age-specific guidelines for calories, sodium, and in 2027, added sugars.⁴ With that, many more students nationwide now receive free school meals thanks to the increasing number of states that have passed statewide Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA) policies.⁵

Despite these improvements, too many students do not have enough time to consume their meal, use the restroom, and socialize during their scheduled lunch period.⁶ Not only is lunchtime crucial in ensuring proper nutritional intake, and in turn reducing plate waste,⁷ but it is also an important opportunity for students to tend to their physical and mental wellbeing during a long day at school.

Time to Eat (TTE) refers to the amount of seated time students have to eat their food after they have received their meal.

| **What is sufficient TTE?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that students are given at least 10 seated minutes for breakfast and 20 minutes for lunch once they have received their meal, in total, a minimum 30-minute lunch break.⁸ However, about half of school districts across the U.S. do not require or recommend that schools give students at least 20 seated minutes to eat their lunch.⁹

| **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.¹⁰ Similarly, research suggests that recess before lunch is associated with reduced plate waste and increased student consumption of food.^{11,12} According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), as much as 30 percent of plate waste can be reduced by scheduling recess before lunch.¹³ However, currently, less than 10 percent of elementary schools require recess before students eat lunch.¹⁴

The timing of breakfast matters too. According to a 2023 systematic review, providing breakfast options to students after the school day begins, known as “breakfast after the bell,” is associated with improvements in school breakfast participation, diet quality, and student behavior, “particularly among students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds and students eligible for free or reduced-price meals.”¹⁵

| Need for action

In a nationally representative survey conducted by EdWeek Research Center, 21 percent of teachers said their students had less than 20 minutes for meals. With that, according to CDC, about 20 percent of school districts required a minimum amount of time for consuming breakfast and 35 percent for lunch.¹⁶ Of schools with a policy, most required or recommended at least 10 minutes for breakfast and about 65 percent required 20 minutes for lunch once students receive their meal.¹⁷ As of 2018, at the state level, only 16 states and the District of Columbia had laws requiring a minimum lunch duration.¹⁸

| Benefits of sufficient TTE

Increased meal consumption and decreased plate waste

When children are given more time to eat, less food is wasted,¹⁹ and the USDA recommends a 30-minute lunch period as a strategy to mitigate plate waste.²⁰ A randomized controlled 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.²¹ A common misconception is that the strong nutrition standards established by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) lead to plate waste. Yet research shows that plate waste has not increased with the implementation of the HHFKA nutrition standards.²² To reduce school food plate waste, students need more time to eat, not weaker nutrition standards.

Improved participation and reduced stigma

Sufficient TTE could indirectly improve participation and reduce stigma in the school lunch program. For instance, in a 2025 study, caregivers of school-aged children reported that their child’s favorite aspect of school lunch is socializing with friends, and some reported that their children skipped lunch to socialize with friends instead of waiting in long lunch lines.²³ Students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals have cited feelings of stigma and embarrassment associated with receiving free or reduced-price meals or eating school meals.^{24,25} Therefore, greater participation in the program from students who are non-income-eligible may reduce stigma.

Supported by teachers

Providing students with more TTE may benefit teachers as well. In EdWeek Research Center's 2023 survey, more than a third of teachers surveyed reported wanting a lunch break that lasts 31-40 minutes, with most teachers reporting they currently only get 21-30 minutes.²⁶

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers, administrators, school food service staff, and the school food community can work together to make mealtimes more beneficial to students and teachers and less wasteful. Outlined below are key policy recommendations:

U.S. Department of Education

- Publish non-binding guidance recommending states and districts provide students with a minimum of 20 minutes of seated time to eat during lunch periods.

State policymakers

- Pass policies that establish a minimum of 20 minutes of seated TTE during lunch periods,²⁷ or 30 minutes total, require breakfast to be served after the bell,²⁸ and recommend or require recess to be scheduled before lunch.²⁹

Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and school districts

- Include language in local wellness policies that establish a minimum of 20 minutes of seated TTE during lunch periods, or 30 minutes total, require breakfast to be served after the bell, and require recess to be scheduled before lunch.
- Provide scheduling and logistical support to teachers and school foodservice personnel to implement policies around minimum TTE, recess before lunch, appropriate lunch times, and breakfast before the bell.

School Food Authorities (SFAs)

- Train staff on 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.

| Community recommendations

Parents, guardians, and community

- Join the school or district wellness committee and advocate for sufficient TTE, recess before lunch, and appropriately timed lunch periods.

| Additional resources

- [Seven Proven Strategies to Increase Students' Time to Eat \(Center for Ecoliteracy\)](#)
- [Time to Eat \(Action for Healthy Kids\)](#)

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

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