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DEFINING THE STANDARD



SEAT TIME DURING MEAL PERIODS

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We know that school administrators have a lot to consider when it comes to planning school schedules. Arranging lunch periods is just one part of the equation.

The time allotted for lunch encompasses much more than time spent eating.

It also includes time for travelling to the dining hall, using the restroom, handwashing, waiting in line, selecting food items, possibly waiting to pay, finding a seat, socializing with friends, bussing tables, and travelling from the dining hall to the next class — all of which is time consuming.¹ And that does not account for seat time, which is the amount of time within a meal period that students can spend seated, eating their food.²



How much seat time is ideal?

While there is not a federal policy in the U.S. for seat time, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) both agree that **students should have at least 20 minutes of seat time** as part of their meal period.^{2,4}



Having 20 minutes of seat time benefits students' entire well-being.

When it comes to nutrition, adequate seat time leads to increased food consumption, specifically important meal components like fruits, vegetables, entrées, and milk. It also leads to decreased plate waste since students have time to consume the food they have selected.^{5,6,7} Seat time impacts mental health, too. Students with adequate seat time experience increased happiness, reduced disciplinary issues, and improvements in focus and social-emotional learning.⁸ Sharing a meal is perhaps the most universally human act. Having time to socialize during meals enhances one's sense of community and allows students to develop conversation skills, foster empathy for their peers, and return to their afternoon classes feeling refreshed.^{1,9} Additionally, when back in class, students attain higher academic achievements.³

Benefits:

- Increased food consumption.
- Less food waste.
- Improved student well-being and performance.
- Reduced disciplinary issues.
- Enhanced sense of community.

How can school administrators maximize the amount of seat time students can enjoy?

There are many factors to consider, including:

- **Lengthening the overall lunch period.**

Consider your campus layout and your students' needs. Is a longer lunch period needed? Some studies suggest that a 30-minute lunch period will allow for the desired 20 minutes of seat time.²

Remember: To provide 20 minutes of seat time, a meal period will need to be longer than 20 minutes.

- **Staggering lunches.**

Staggering lunch periods creates a more efficient dining hall experience.¹⁰ Limiting the number of students in the dining hall in a given meal period allows students to spend less time waiting in line and more time sitting and enjoying their meal.

- **Scheduling recess first.**

For younger students, schedule recess before the lunch period, when possible.^{11,12} Not only does this prevent students from rushing through lunch to get outside faster, it also causes them to arrive hungry and less distracted.¹² Students who enjoy recess before lunch show increased calorie, calcium, vitamin A, and iron consumption.¹² If having recess before lunch is not possible, consider requiring a set amount of seat time for young students before they can go out and play.²

- **Managing the space.**

Work with your food service provider to adjust the menu to maximize the efficiency of students' meal selections. Consider the layout of the server. Create multiple, scattered stations to disperse the crowd and prevent "bunching."² Offer a complete meal at each station to minimize time spent assembling meals.¹⁰ Increase the number of cashiers in retail settings to speed the flow of guests through the point of sale.

In summary,

insufficient seat time can put students at a disadvantage nutritionally, academically, and socially. Conversely, **providing enough seat time during meal periods is advantageous to the well-being of the student body and the school's overall prosperity.** Therefore, we recommend that all school administrators adopt the guidance of the major professional organizations and provide at least 20 minutes of seat time for students during meal periods.

NOTES

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3. "Health and Academic Achievement," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), May 2014, [CDC.GOV/HEALTHYYOUTH/HEALTH_AND_ACADEMICS/PDF/HEALTH-ACADEMIC-ACHIEVEMENT.PDF](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/health-academic-achievement.pdf).
4. American Academy of Pediatrics and National Association of School Nurses, *Health, Mental Health, and Safety Guidelines for Schools* (2005).
5. Juliana F W Cohen et al., "Amount of Time to Eat Lunch Is Associated with Children's Selection and Consumption of School Meal Entrée, Fruits, Vegetables, and Milk," *The Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* (September 2015): [PUBMED.NCBI.NLM.NIH.GOV/26372337/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26372337/).
6. Xanna Burg et al., "Effects of Longer Seated Lunch Time on Food Consumption and Waste in Elementary and Middle School-Age Children," *JAMA Network Open* (June 2021): [NCBI.NLM.NIH.GOV/PMC/ARTICLES/PMC8220493/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34220493/).
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8. Juliana F W Cohen et al., "A Mixed-Methods Evaluation of a School Wellness Initiative: An Examination of Longer Lunch Periods and More Physical Activity Opportunities," *The Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* (April 2021): [PUBMED.NCBI.NLM.NIH.GOV/33888437/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33888437/).
9. Heather Harrell, "Children Need Sufficient Time to Eat School Lunch," *The American Journal of Public Health* (February 2017): [NCBI.NLM.NIH.GOV/PMC/ARTICLES/PMC5227952/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/279527952/).
10. "Time to Eat," Action for Healthy Kids, February 2022, [ACTIONFORHEALTHYKIDS.ORG/ACTIVITY/TIME-TO-EAT/](https://actionforhealthykids.org/activity/time-to-eat/).
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12. Ethan Bergman et al., "The Relationship of Meal and Recess Schedules to Plate Waste in Elementary Schools," *The Journal of Child Nutrition & Management* (2004): [DOCS.SCHOOLNUTRITION.ORG/NEWSROOM/JCNM/04FALL/BERGMAN/BERGMAN1.ASP](https://docs.schoolnutrition.org/newsroom/jcnm/04fall/bergman/bergman1.asp).