

ADEQUATE TIME TO EAT

Recommendations to Maximize Student Nutrition



In school year 2022–2023, the state of California initiated a series of historic investments in multi-layered approaches to improving food security and diet quality among students in transitional kindergarten through twelfth grade by becoming the first state in the nation to establish a [Universal Meals Program](#).

In addition to ensuring access to meals, and in the time since, the state has invested over \$1 billion in school kitchen infrastructure, workforce training and career pathways, and farm to school supports and programs to increase fresh, local, minimally processed ingredients in school meals.

To ensure that students are able to enjoy the meals provided, Education Code 49501.5(a)(1)(A) requires local educational agencies to allow adequate time for students to eat. This fact sheet provides an overview of existing research and recommendations regarding what constitutes adequate time to eat, the influence it has on nutritional intake, and best practices schools can implement to ensure their students make the most of their meals.



Once served and seated,
students should have at least:

**20 minutes
to eat Lunch**

**10 minutes
to eat Breakfast**

National Positions

- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) per their [School Meals](#) web page, last updated in 2024.
- The National School Nutrition Association, per their paper entitled [Keys to Excellence: Standards of Practice for Nutrition Integrity](#), revised in 2024.
- The National Association of State Boards of Education per their policy guide Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn (2007).

Benefits of Adequate Time to Eat



Improved Nutritional Intake

In a review of articles addressing the association of time to eat and food consumption at schools, research indicates that students consume more of their meal and have better intake of entrees, vegetables, and milk when they have at least 20 minutes to eat their lunch. (2, 4, 5, 7, 10)



Improved Cognitive Function and Academic Performance

Students experiencing hunger and food insecurity struggle with concentration and with learning at the same rate as their peers. Adequate seat time allows students to maximize their nutritional intake at meals. When students are well-nourished and focused, they are more likely to perform better academically. (1, 6, 9)



Social and Emotional Benefits

The success of meals should not be measured in consumption alone but also enjoyment. Students report the perceived benefits of longer lunch periods as greater levels of satiety and higher levels of happiness in the cafeteria. (5, 8)



Reduced Food Waste

When students are rushed during meal times, they may not have enough time to finish their meals. This can lead to food waste, which is not only environmentally harmful, but also financially wasteful. Both the CDC and the USDA recommend that schools schedule recess before lunch to reduce food waste. (2, 3, 11)

RECOMMENDATION



As a result of the review of existing research and national position papers, as well as the physical, social and emotional benefits of adequate time to eat, districts should ensure that students have:

- 20 minutes once served and seated to eat lunch
- 10 minutes once served and seated to eat breakfast

District Strategies to Ensure Students Have Adequate Time to Eat Their Meals

- Include meal time allowances as a part of district policy.
- Ensure adequate seating is available for students to enjoy their meals.
- Institute alternative “Breakfast After the Bell” strategies such as breakfast in the classroom, second chance breakfast, and grab-and-go breakfast to ensure students have access to breakfast—a critical factor in student health and achievement.
- Schedule recess before lunch: garner input from administrators, educators, paraeducators, custodial, nutrition staff, meal time supervisors, and community members when drafting school schedules.
- Provide education, training, and support to all levels of staff detailing the commitment to student nutrition and the role that adequate time to eat plays in learning and social emotional development.
- Raise awareness and cement commitments through marketing and communications strategies.
- Periodically evaluate the time to eat for breakfast and lunch at all school sites to ensure the schedules allows for adequate time.

References

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