



Time to Eat School Meals

School meals serve as a learning laboratory for developing healthy eating habits and acceptable mealtime behaviors. Enjoying good food with friends in a welcoming, safe environment can be a favorite part of the school day. It also shows that schools value the importance of mealtime.

There are no federal or state requirements for the amount of time students have to each lunch. USDA Food and Nutrition Services “encourages schools to provide sufficient lunch periods that are long enough to give all students adequate time to be served and eat their lunches.” The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that students get at least 20 minutes for lunch (sitting down and does not include waiting in line).

Consider the following strategies when looking to increase the amount of time for school meals:

Strategy	Pros	Cons
Serve pre-packaged or pre-portioned foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection is quick and easy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Added costs for packaging/ containers • More material waste
Stagger classes arriving to lunch by setting up a rotation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces amount of time students are in line • Potential to reduce behavior problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication challenges • If a class arrives early or late it can disrupt the flow • Can affect teacher break time
Increase the number of serving lines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moves students through lines faster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in staff (labor expenses) • Additional equipment
Of the serving lines available, offer a meal express line (reimbursable meal only, no a la carte)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faster line option • Encourages consumption of a reimbursable meal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication challenges with students • Potential overt identification of students certified for free or reduced meals
Offer “bundled” grab n’ go meals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faster line option • Includes cold items that can be made in advance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Packaging can be costly • Increase in material waste • May reduce student choice and could result in food waste
Implement Recess Before Lunch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can eliminate students rushing to recess • May increase student appetites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place to store students outdoor gear (i.e. jackets, hats, gloves, etc.) • Supervision and conflicts with teacher breaks
Students bring lunch from home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces the number of students in line 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces participation in school meals • Reduces federal reimbursement • Potential for lack of balanced meal
Serve students all components and do not implement offer vs. serve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serving time decreased as each students receives the same thing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential for large amount of waste • Students do not to get choose • Costly

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Tips

- School lunch provides the opportunity to talk, laugh and socialize with friends. Avoid the use of whistles, traffic lights or eating in silence.
- Students eat better when offered a choice, especially with fruits and vegetables. Offer at least two fruits and two vegetables each day. However, offering too many choices can make it hard for students to decide and can cause the offerings to be repetitive.
- Observe the mealtime from a student's perspective by joining the end of the line. How long are students in line? How much seated time is there to eat the meal? Talk with the students.
- Adjustments to the school day schedule do not happen often, but when they do, make sure there is ample time for school breakfast and lunch.
- Keep an open mind. There is not a one size fits all when it comes to the amount of time needed. There are many variables and each school is different.

Resources/References

- [Action for Healthy Kids](#)
- [Comfortable Cafeterias - Montana](#)
- [Iowa Recess Before Lunch Readiness Checklist](#) (Page 8)
- [Journal of Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#)
- [Journal of Child Nutrition and Management](#)
- [Bridging the Gap Research](#)

Questions? Contact schoolmeals@iowa.gov - January 2019

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