

AB 2449 (Bocanegra) Adequate Time to Eat: Lunchtime Supports Learning

Contact: Tracey Patterson at tracey@cfpa.net or 510-433-1122 ext. 101



Opportunity

Lunch is an essential part of the school day. The National School Lunch Program makes nutritionally balanced, low or no-cost meals available to all students. For many low-income students, school lunch may be the most nutritious meal of the day. Schools serve lunch approximately 180 days per year, making school lunchtime a prime opportunity to shape healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime.

Unfortunately, millions of California students miss out on the full benefits of school lunch, often because they don't have enough time to eat. Time pressures at lunch can result in food waste and poor nutrition. The California Department of Education recommends that students have 20 minutes to eat after receiving their lunches, but many schools are not meeting that recommendation.

Several factors impact time to eat, such as:

- Busy lunch periods with too many students to serve in the allotted time
- Long lines due to insufficient points of service for school meals
- Scheduling recess after lunch, causing young students to rush through their meals in order to play
- School activities that conflict with lunch, such as disciplinary action, club meetings, etc.



There are a variety of low or no-cost ways to provide students with adequate time to eat -- even within tight scheduling constraints. By recognizing that sufficient lunch periods are an essential part of the school day, we can help ensure that students have what they need to learn, grow, and achieve.

Research shows that the length of lunch periods and the amount of time students spend waiting in lunch lines can both impact participation in the school lunch program. When students are not given enough time to eat during the school day, we have failed in our responsibility to support student health and achievement. When students have enough time to eat a complete lunch at school, we support their ability to focus and learn.

Schools operating the National School Lunch Program receive a federally funded reimbursement for every meal served. California schools receive a small state-funded reimbursement for meals served to low-income students. By ensuring that students have adequate time to eat, California has the opportunity to more effectively spend critical state and federal resources that support school lunches.

Action

CFPA requests that the legislature:

- Amend the existing State Meal Mandate to ensure that students are given adequate time to eat after being served.

For more than 20 years, CFPA has been the state's trusted food policy advocacy organization dedicated to increasing low-income Californians' access to healthy food at home, at school, and throughout entire communities. CFPA's advocacy agenda draws on the anti-hunger, nutrition, and health movements. Working as both a policy leader and supportive policy ally, CFPA continues to build on its long history of success.

Why This Matters

The National School Lunch Program is an essential component of the school day. Lunch periods provide a much-needed time for students to take a break and refuel their bodies. California's implementation of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 has greatly improved the nutritional quality of foods served in schools. School districts are working hard to make school lunches more healthful and appealing to students. These efforts are hindered when students don't have enough time to eat during their lunch periods. Food is not nutritious unless it's actually eaten!

The National School Lunch Program provides a valuable resource to all students: free or low-cost, healthy, balanced meals. Students must be well nourished to be ready to learn. Teachers and principals commonly report differences in student behavior and performance as a result of nutrition. Studies have found clear relationships between food insufficiency and academic and social development, including differences in grades, test scores, and social skills.

Increased participation in the National School Lunch Program brings the health and academic benefits of school meals to more students, while drawing additional federal funds (per-meal reimbursements) into California. These funds can be used to purchase higher-quality food and to improve the operation of school meal programs, while bolstering local economies.

Research definitively links nutrition with student behavior and performance. Common sense points to a wide range of benefits for students who are adequately nourished throughout the school day. Efforts to improve school nutrition must ensure that every student has time to eat at least one healthy meal during the school day.

History

California's State Meal Mandate (Ed Code §49550) dates back to the Child Nutrition Facilities Act of 1975. In recognition of the link between nutrition, health, and academic success, the meal mandate requires public schools to provide a nutritious, free or reduced-price meal to each needy student every school day. A 'needy student' is one who qualifies for free or reduced-price meals by federal income standards, and a 'nutritious meal' must meet the National School Lunch Program standards.

In recent years, numerous legislative actions, both state and federal, have improved the nutritional quality of school meals. California has been on the forefront of improvements to school nutrition, ensuring that school campuses are healthier places for students. For instance, in 2005 California enacted landmark legislation establishing the most rigorous state nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold on K-12 public school campuses (SB 12 and SB 965). State efforts to address child nutrition through school meals were bolstered by the federal Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which greatly improved the nutritional quality of school food and increased the federal per-meal reimbursement for districts meeting the new nutrition standards. In 2013, AB 626 aligned California's state school meal standards with the new federal standards.

Nine other states and the District of Columbia already have policies that require schools to provide students with adequate time to eat. California currently has no statute that establishes an adequate meal break for students, yet state labor law (Labor Code § 512) ensures a minimum 30-minute, uninterrupted meal break for employees working shifts of 5 hours or more. California should ensure that its hard-working students are given the time they need to eat during the school day.