

CABINET REPORT

Trusted Source For What's News In Education



JUNE 26, 2014

Lawmakers: Students need 20 minutes to eat

by Alisha Kirby

(Calif.) A bill headed for a final vote in the state Senate addresses a problem many kids and parents would like to see resolved: Students not having enough time to eat lunch at school.

Twenty minutes, according to the California Department of Education, is considered the minimum “adequate time” to consume a meal once it has been served. AB 2449 would require schools not hitting that mark to coordinate with their district or county office of education on a plan to increase students’ time to eat beginning in the 2015-16 school year.

“If kids are buying lunch, they’re standing in line the entire time, and by the time they sit down to eat, they have to throw it away because lunch time is over,” said Tiffany Jensen, a parent of two who has volunteered in the cafeteria at Twin Lakes Elementary.

“If their class is one of the last ones coming into the lunchroom they’ve got probably less than 5 minutes,” she said in an interview with *Cabinet Report*. The kids that bring lunch get about 15 or 20 minutes,” she said.

With the passage in 2010 of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, greater focus has been placed on making sure kids are actually eating healthier foods. The goal of the law, which requires that more whole grain products as well as fruits and vegetables be served in schools, is to reduce childhood obesity by lowering calorie intake.

Research showing kids learn better when they’re rested and fed has prompted student and education advocates as well as law makers to focus on making sure that happens.

The CDE issued guidance in 2013 along with research suggesting that less time to eat discourages students from buying and eating complete lunches, and that waiting in line is the most common issue students have with lunches.

According to a staff analysis of AB 2449, less than 25 percent of elementary schools and 8 percent of middle and high schools have policies regulating the amount of time that students have to eat. The last student in line during the lunch period would only receive at least 20 minutes to eat at an estimated 28 percent of elementary schools and 45 percent of middle and high schools.

At Twin Lakes, the lunch period is 45 minutes, according to the school website. However, kids are allowed to leave the cafeteria early. Some students eager to be outside with friends spend the least amount of time they can in the lunchroom.

“[Schools] incentivize it,” said Jensen. “As soon as a kid is finished, they just sit there quietly and then [staff] lets them go to recess. Then the kids just dump their trays.”

Part of the problem, according to Denise Ohm, school nutrition specialist for the Enterprise Elementary School District, is what she calls “school lunch room culture.”

“It’s meal time – we’re here to eat, try new foods and take our time,” said Ohm, describing her ideal cafeteria, where an adult sits with children during the whole serving period encouraging them to eat.

“I don’t know where that kind of funding would come from,” she admitted, noting that schools would have to provide extra staff to supervise the lunchroom and playgrounds. “The intention of the bill is to ensure more eating time, but I don’t know if legislation can help us with that.”