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Schoolkids starved for time to eat their lunches

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The green beans are portioned and displayed in orderly rows. The lasagnas are steaming up their plastic covers. The workers stand ready, their hair netted and aprons tied. The bell rings, and nearly 1,000 students stream into [Francisco Bravo Medical Magnet High School](#)'s cafeteria, barely slowing as they load cardboard trays with apple juice, chicken wings and sliced cucumbers.

Because lunch is free for all students at the Los Angeles school, no one pauses to pay. Still, during the lunch rush this day in May, food service worker [Rodelinda Gomez](#) stops a few.



"Hey! Hey!" Gomez hollers to students with no greens on their trays. "Come on and get your vegetables. You have to get them!"

For schools to receive federal reimbursement for lunches, they must serve - not just offer - each student at least a half-cup of fruit or vegetables. Lunches also must include servings of at least two other foods, such as a protein and a grain.

The requirement addressing fruit and vegetables, adopted in the last school year, is part of an effort to serve students healthier foods. And eating those foods takes time - more time than many students have.

"A student can eat a cup of applesauce in no time - you can practically drink that. But chewing through an apple takes a lot longer," said [Diane Pratt-Heavner](#), spokeswoman for the [School Nutrition Association](#), a national advocacy organization. "If we want our students to eat more salads, fruits and vegetables, we need to give them more time to consume them."

20 minutes to eat

National school and health organizations and some states - including California - recommend that students have at least 20 minutes to eat lunch after they're served. But "that's not happening in all schools," Pratt-Heavner said.

Nationwide, the average lunch period was 31 minutes in the 2009-10 school year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's most recent data available. Students waited in line an average of five minutes and as long as 30 minutes to get lunch, food service managers reported.

The [Los Angeles Unified School District](#) has touted the 20-minute standard since 1990. Yet a district analysis last year showed that 7 out of 10 high schools and nearly half of elementary schools missed the mark.

"What we find is, with the kids that don't have the time, they don't eat anything," said [David Binkle](#), the district's director of food services.

Across California, schools face a number of challenges in carving out enough time to eat.

Aging facilities can mean cramped cafeterias and long lines. And tight bell schedules that prioritize instructional minutes leave lunchtime with "the short end of the stick," said [Joanne Tucker](#), food services marketing coordinator for the San Diego Unified School District.

Still, schools are trying to find ways to allow students more time to eat.

When lines get too long, the San Jose Unified School District deploys extra staff to help serve lunch, said [John Sixt](#), the district's director of student nutrition.

The San Francisco Unified School District is piloting vending machines that sell full meals, allowing students to skip the cafeteria, said [Zetta Reicker](#), the district's assistant director for student nutrition services.

San Diego Unified used grant money to roll out mobile food carts at its high schools, creating more places to get food on campus. At [San Diego High School](#), where 2,700 students attend five smaller thematic schools, there are 22 service locations.

But even with multiple service locations, students say waits still can be too long.

Shortest line

Randy Saelee, a senior at [Oakland High School](#), said he decides what to eat based on which of the school's seven service areas has the shortest line. One Friday before school let out for summer, a horde of students blocked his view, so he couldn't see what his chosen cafeteria window was serving. "I guess tacos?" he said with a shrug.

Even with this approach, Saelee said he typically waits 20 to 25 minutes, because people cut in line.

At Oakland High, students punch in their ID numbers, so that staff can track free and reduced-price meals, in one line and then receive tickets they'll exchange for lunches in other lines.

"There's never enough time," said [Yvette Santos](#), who graduated in June. "You have to get in a line to get a ticket, then get into another line to get the food. Then your food's cold when you get it."

Schools short on time often serve grab-and-go meals and preportioned foods. Both options can be found at Bravo in Los Angeles, which has a 30-minute lunch period and serves 1,000 lunches per day.

As many as 200 students ate grab-and-go lunches when they took standardized tests this spring and could not leave their classrooms, said [Bob Milner](#), the school's cafe manager. The meals are also a popular choice for students who have tutoring or club meetings during lunch.

Some advocates say quick, portable meals are a step in the wrong direction.

"It's really not what we want to teach children to do - to grab their food and eat it in the car or eat it on the run," said [Zenobia Barlow](#), executive director of the [Center for Ecoliteracy](#), which has worked for school food reform. "To get a healthy meal and sit down and just eat it like a human being - (it) seems like we really need to take a look at that and try our best to preserve some quality in that experience."

To Sharelette Rodgers, a food services manager for Oakland Unified, time is not a problem. "The kids would just rather go to the fast food places," she said.

Complaints about food

Or they would rather not eat at all. "Sometimes, I don't eat because I don't like it," Cedric Bonsol, now a junior at Bravo in Los Angeles, said of school lunches.

In school after school, the primary complaint students have about lunch is not the time but the food itself. Binkle, of the Los Angeles district, said the issues are related. He likened the school cafeteria to a restaurant trying to serve 2,000 meals in 20 minutes.

"If you had 40 minutes, then we'd only have to prepare half and serve half at a time," he said. "You get much higher-quality food, you get much fresher food, because it's being cooked more to order than ... scrambled eggs on the buffet that have been sitting there for six hours. The longer you stretch it out, the more personalized the service, and the quality of food is improved."

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