



Viewpoints: Students need time to eat

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As parents, we all want the very best for our kids. We do everything we can to help them grow into happy and healthy adults. Some things – like having enough time to eat during the school day – seem so essential to our children’s success that we assume they’re guaranteed. But that is not the case.

Too many kids are rushed through lunchtime as if eating is not a necessary part of the school day. Fifteen- or 20-minute lunch periods are now the norm in public elementary schools. Middle and high schools often have a single 30-minute lunch period for the entire campus. That means school cafeterias have just half an hour to serve hundreds or thousands of students. Students at these schools commonly face long lines that don’t end until the very last minute of the lunch period. When students don’t have enough time to eat, they throw away parts of their lunches; buy snacks instead of a nutritious meal; or skip lunch entirely.

Hungry students struggle at school. We parents know that a child who hasn’t eaten is prone to misbehaving. Even children who are well-nourished at home lose concentration and focus if they don’t eat lunch at school. When children don’t have access to nutritious meals at home, missing out on school lunch is even more detrimental. For any student, a missed lunch can derail the rest of the school day. Students who aren’t given adequate time to eat lunch head into their afternoon classes lacking energy – they’re more likely to act out, be off task and make mistakes.

In today’s schools, time is a scarce and valuable commodity. Students, teachers and administrators alike feel pressure to make the most of every minute. Schools are busy preparing students for exams, reports and standardized tests throughout the year. When we cut lunches short, we miss out on an opportunity to have students who are focused and ready to learn.

Child nutrition experts recommend that children have at least 20 minutes to eat lunch after being served. Based on these recommendations, the Los Angeles Unified School Board passed a School Lunch Schedule resolution in 1990 calling on the superintendent to ensure that the last child in a school lunch line has no less than 20 minutes to eat. Yet, in 2012, Los Angeles Unified

found that only 49 percent of elementary schools and 29 percent of high schools met this goal. In December 2012, the district reconfirmed its commitment to student success by calling on schools to re-evaluate their bell schedules and the efficiency of service in school cafeterias.

While not perfect, the experience in L.A. Unified has shown that with the right expectations in place, progress can be made – and there are many ways to help ensure that students have enough time to eat during the school day. For instance, schools have provided students with adequate time to eat by serving meals from multiple locations, staggering lunch periods, scheduling recess before lunch or adding a few minutes to the lunch period. Many strategies for increasing time to eat are no- or low-cost approaches that improve efficiency while benefiting student well-being.

Since 2006, the California Department of Education has also recommended that schools provide students at least 20 minutes to eat after being served. However, a recent statewide survey found that only one-third of public schools are meeting this recommendation. The frenzied pace of school lunch periods makes it harder for our children to learn, grow and achieve at their full potential. Students who don't have enough time to eat cannot perform at their very best.

Assemblyman Raul Bocanegra, D-Pacoima, has introduced a common-sense solution to this problem. Assembly Bill 2449 would ensure that California's students have enough time to sit down and eat a nutritious lunch during the school day. Our children deserve every opportunity to reach their full potential. At the very least, we must meet their most basic needs.

California labor law guarantees that employees working five hours or more will have, at minimum, an uninterrupted 30-minute meal break. We make no similar promise to our children. The state recognizes that adults need a break to eat during the work day. California should also ensure that its hard-working students have the time they need to eat during the school day.

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