

So Cal education, LAUSD, the Cal States and the UCs

Azusa elementary school found lunch after recess improves diet and concentration

Adolfo Guzman-Lopez | January 23rd, 2013, 6:00am

For years, students at **Murray Elementary School** (<http://murray-ausd-ca.schoolloop.com/>) were like most others, they saw lunch as an easy obstacle to overcome to get to the important part of the school day: recess.

But five years ago the school decided to move lunch – and the school's principal said it has paid big dividends.

“When we were doing recess after lunch – we can’t make the kids eat their food – so they were eating a bite or two, not drinking their milk and they were throwing the whole dish away so that they could go play,” said principal Saida Valdez.

And their next meal wouldn’t come for at least another five hours, said Valdez, which mean the kids were starving by 3 p.m.

Very little learning can happen on a mostly empty stomach, said Steven Mittleman, a pediatric endocrinologist at **Children’s Hospital Los Angeles**



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Murray Elementary says students eat more of the improved school lunches because recess comes before lunch.

(http://www.chla.org/site/c.ipINKTOAJsG/b.5207559/k.3E23/Childrens_Hospital_Los_Angeles_____LA8217s_first_and_largest_hospital_dedicated_specifically_to_treating_children_throughout)

“Kids who are hungry, first of all, have a hard time focusing and paying attention because they’re thinking of being hungry,” Mittleman said.

Now students in this San Gabriel Valley school play their hearts out during recess, mellow out as they sit down for lunch, and then go back to class.

Valdez says she made the change after reading about schools in other parts of the country that moved lunch and were reporting fewer discipline problems, more attentive students in the afternoon and less uneaten food in trash cans. She’s seeing the same results.

“Before we used to fill our salad bar just one time the entire lunch process,” she said. “And now we refill it three to four times.”

Markell Lewis of **California Food Policy Advocates** (<http://www.cfpa.net>) said there’s a lot of interest in the subject. Her group is teaming up with UC Berkeley researchers on a “time spent eating” study that’ll examine the merits of switching recess and lunch.

“Lots of partners statewide, including the Department of Education are very interested in this larger issue,” she said, “which is related to how much time a student has to eat a meal and making sure they get the most they can out of their meal.”

And part of that involves eating the right things, Mittleman said.

“If you feed them a meal that’s high in say simple carbohydrates, these sugary foods and beverages, then what tends to happen is their blood sugars can drop somewhat rapidly later on which makes them sleepy and a have a hard time focusing,” he said.

The federal government has tried to address that. This year, it began requiring schools to serve lower calorie meals with more whole grains and a wider variety of fruits and vegetables.

At Murray Elementary in Azusa, kids are now eating healthier, said cafeteria worker Maria Barrios, who listed the selection on a recent visit: spaghetti, mixed vegetables, green salad with tomatoes. The salad bar included celery, apples, pears and kiwi.

The kids are even asking for seconds and thirds. Barrios passes around an “extras cart” with milk, apples, and other untouched food. On most days, it goes back to the kitchen picked clean.

Advocates said getting kids to eat a healthier lunch will pay dividends beyond the bell. Especially in working class communities like Azusa, with high rates of obesity and diabetes, it could have a lifelong impact.

A previous version of this story misspelled Markell Lewis's name. KPCC regrets the error.

