



bridging the gap

Research Informing Policies & Practices
for Healthy Youth

Research Brief
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Most US Public Elementary Schools Provide Students Only Minimal Time to Eat Lunch

Introduction

Providing sufficient time to eat lunch is crucial for promoting healthy eating behaviors among children.¹ Organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics² and the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity³ recommend that

students have at least 20 minutes to eat, beginning from the time they are seated with their meal. Because students often wait for several minutes to receive their lunch, scheduled lunch periods of longer than 20 minutes may be needed to provide adequate time for eating. Research shows that elementary school students who were given 30 minutes for lunch consumed more foods with nutrients such as calcium and vitamin A, than did those with a 20-minute lunch period.⁴ However, despite the importance of adequate time for lunch, some barriers exist to providing the recommended 20 minutes of time to consume lunch after students receive their food.

Research also shows that the timing of the lunch period impacts students' eating behaviors, and that scheduling recess before—rather than after—lunch can reduce plate waste.⁵ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the US Department of Agriculture recommend that recess be scheduled before lunch in elementary schools.³ However, in 2006, only 10 percent of schools scheduled recess before lunch.⁶

The current brief reports on nationally-representative survey data provided by administrators at US public elementary schools, regarding the duration and timing of school lunch periods. As part of the *Bridging the Gap* research program, surveys were gathered annually between the 2008-09 and 2012-13 school years. Data were weighted to allow for inference to practices in elementary schools nationwide, and analyses controlled for school demographic characteristics. Survey items asked how long students have to eat lunch, and whether lunch was scheduled before recess, after recess, or neither prior to nor after recess. Because school day scheduling varies by grade, these questions were asked with regard specifically to 3rd grade students.

Key Findings

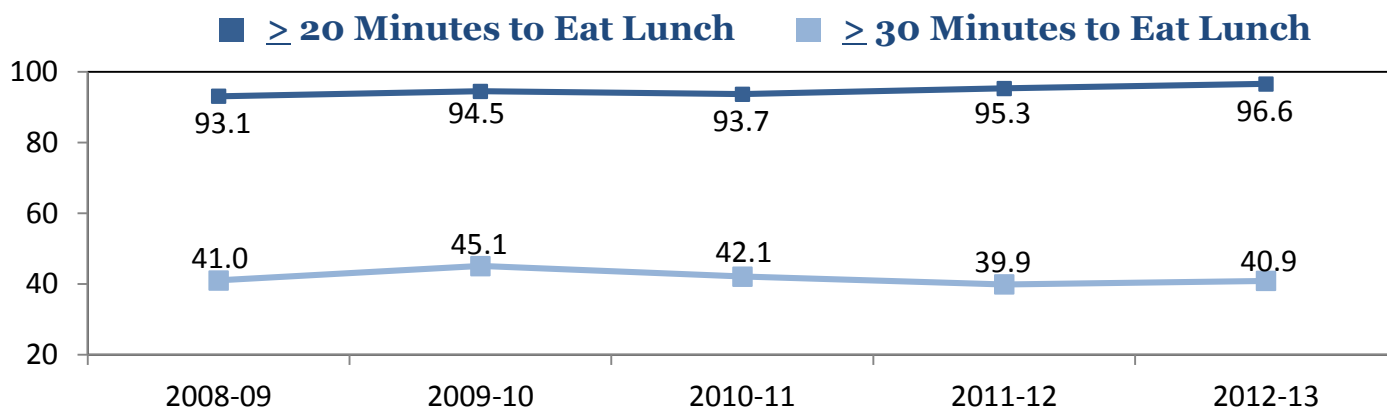
Respondents at most schools reported that students had at least 20 minutes of scheduled time to eat lunch. The percentage of schools providing students at least 30 minutes to eat lunch remained consistent over time, with approximately two in five schools providing at least 30 minutes. In the most recent year surveys were conducted (2012-13), schools in the South fared best and schools in the West fared worst with regard to providing students sufficient time to eat lunch.

- Schools in the West were least likely to provide students at least 30 minutes to eat lunch, as well as being least likely to provide even the minimum recommended time for lunch (at least 20 minutes).
- Providing at least 30 minutes for lunch was not related to other school characteristics such as locale (urban, suburban, townships, or rural areas); school size (number of students); student race/ethnicity; or socioeconomic characteristics (percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-priced meals).
- Duration of the lunch period was not associated with the length of the school day.
- Approximately one in five schools (21%) provided students recess before lunch, and this percentage did not change significantly over time.

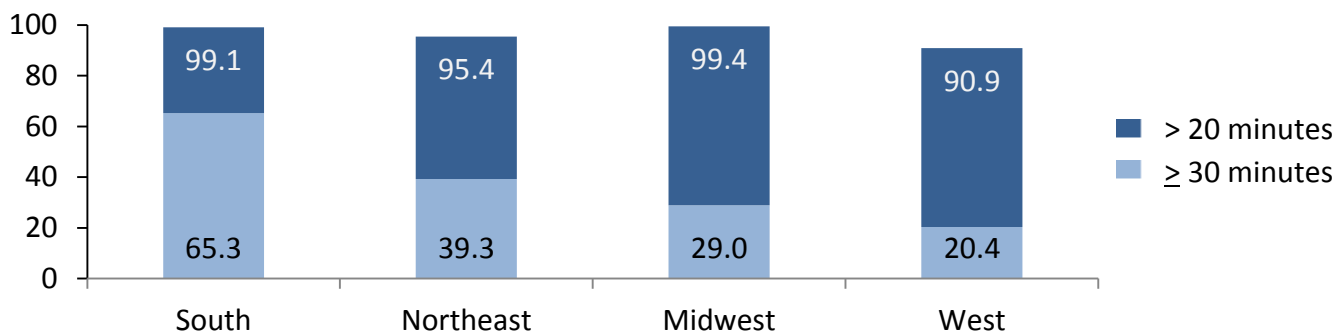
Conclusions and Policy Implications

Most elementary schools provide students with the minimal recommended amount of time to eat lunch, but given the documented nutrition and health benefits of providing more time for lunch, understanding what barriers exist to increasing this practice may be useful. A deeper understanding of the logistical requirements and policies within public schools that may impact the use of 30 minute lunch periods is needed. The total length of the school day was not associated with lunch duration, suggesting that other strategies may be needed to increase to help schools offer students more time to eat lunch. Related issues that may be associated with length of the student's lunch duration include the teacher's contracted lunch time, human resource policies that impact staff members' availability for lunch duties, and the lunch server's work schedules. More work is needed to understand barriers to engaging in best-practices in schools.

Percentages of US Public Elementary Schools Providing Students:



Regional Differences in Percentage of Elementary Schools Providing Students ≥ 20 Minutes or ≥ 30 Minutes to Eat Lunch, 2012-13 School Year



Endnotes

1. Changing the Scene - Improving the School Nutrition Environment. A Call to Action. 2000. www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/CalltoAction.pdf
2. American Academy of Pediatrics, National Association of School Nurses. *Health, Mental Health and Safety Guidelines for Schools*. 2005.
3. National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity. *Model Local School Wellness Policies on Physical Activity and Nutrition*. 2005.
4. Bergman EA, et al The relationship between the length of the lunch period and nutrient consumption in the elementary school lunch setting. *J Child Nutr Manage*, 28(2): October 2004.
5. Bergman EA, Buergel NSETF, Englund TF, et al. The relationship of meal and recess schedules to plate waste in elementary schools. *J Child Nutr Manage*, 28(2): October 2004.
6. O'Toole TP, Anderson S, Miller C, et al. Nutrition services and foods and beverages available at school: results from the School Health Policies and Programs Study 2006. *J Sch Health*, 77(8): 500-521, 2007.

For more on this Research Brief, contact:

Lindsey Turner

LindseyTurner1@boisestate.edu

www.bridgingthegapresearch.org

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