

Make Eating Enjoyable

Federal law requires every school district to have a local wellness policy. These policies address nutrition education, physical activity, school meals and all other foods and drinks available at school. Since foods and drinks are a part of every school day, local wellness policies can build healthy school environments that support successful students eating smart and moving more. Research shows that children and teens who eat smart and move more focus better and have fewer behavior problems. They also have better math, reading and writing test scores. As families, educators and administrators, you have the chance to put the policy into practice. You can make a difference by changing the dining scene to promote a pleasant eating experience, encouraging healthy options for à la carte and competitive foods, as well as healthy food and drink choices brought from home.

Allowing time for meals and creating a pleasant eating environment are two important ways to support healthy eating, for healthier bodies and minds. Your local wellness policy can state a specified time allotment for eating and determine the dining environment in schools. Students deserve enough time to enjoy their meals and may try more healthy choices if they are not rushed. Studies show that with a longer lunch period, students eat more of their school meals and receive better nutrition. It is also important to give time for students to relax and talk with their friends. This allows students to build important social skills, provides a break in routine and lets them return to the classroom more refreshed and ready to learn. Students also deserve a clean and safe school eating environment. Dining areas that are pleasant let students focus on what they are eating and take pleasure in the sensory and social parts of a healthy meal.

Take Action Now

School Board Members

- Are school meal times and the eating environment covered in your district's local wellness policy? If not, include in your policy these important issues.
- Show your support for the local wellness policy.

School Health Advisory Council/School Wellness Committee Members

- Raise the need to provide an adequate lunch period and pleasant environment for students to enjoy eating school meals.
- Encourage the use of the strategies in this handout to make school meals enjoyable.

Principals

- Enforce the district wellness policy for the right amount of time and a pleasant place to eat school meals.
- Encourage all school staff to support school meals and be good role models.

PTA Members and Families

- Advocate for enough time for students to enjoy eating healthy foods with friends in pleasant dining areas.
- Pay a visit to your child's school to assess the school dining area.

Change the Dining Scene

Dining Environment

- Provide enough space and serving areas so that all students can get school meals with minimum wait time.
- Make sure tables and chairs are the right size for students.
- Provide an adequate number of tables and chairs to prevent overcrowding.
- Consider the shape of tables (round tables encourage more conversation and a sense of family).
- Use an accounting system to protect the identity of students who eat free and reduced-price school meals.
- Provide hand washing supplies and equipment in convenient places so students can wash their hands before eating.
- Clean tables and floors between lunch periods and remove offensive smells.
- Consider lighting, temperature and humidity in school lunch rooms.
- Enforce rules for safe behavior.
- Use creative ideas to keep noise levels appropriate - avoid 'eat in silence' rules, whistles or buzzing traffic lights.

Time to Eat

- To figure a school meal period of appropriate length, add the traveling time (to and from the cafeteria) to the service or wait time, time at table (eating and socializing) and time returning trays for clean-up.
- Give at least 10 minutes of eating time for students to finish their meals, and allow at least 10 minutes for socializing for a total of 20 minutes.
- Schedule lunch time as close to the middle of the school day as possible (for example, between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.).
- Schedule recess for elementary schools before lunch so that children can come to lunch less distracted and more ready to eat. Research shows that this leads to students eating more of their school meals, resulting in better nutrition intake.
- Do not schedule activities that may distract students during meal times (examples are pep rallies, club and organization meetings or tutoring).

Other

- Ensure drinking fountains in all schools so students can get water at meals and at all times during the day.

Example Eating Environment Policy in North Carolina

Alleghany County Schools:

- The National Association of State Boards of Education recommends that students should be provided adequate time to eat lunch, at least ten (10) minutes for breakfast and twenty (20) minutes for lunch, from the time the student is seated.
- Cafeterias should have sufficient serving areas, so that students do not have to spend an excessive amount of time waiting in line.
- Water should be available for students during meals and snack/break time.

For more information on local wellness policy...

www.nchealthyschools.org
www.nutritionnc.com
www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com

