



## **Position Statement: Mealtime Management**

The California School Nutrition Association (CSNA) supports legislative efforts to improve the well-being of the children of California. Child Nutrition Programs work as partners in the education community to provide healthy meals to all children in order to improve student health and academic achievement. It is the intent of CSNA to work to secure the best possible environment for learning, physical health and safety within the school setting.

### **Position Statement**

*CSNA supports collaborative efforts to ensure that students have an adequate amount of time to consume meals in order to encourage consumption of healthy meals by the children of California. CSNA recommends that schools ensure that students have a minimum of 15 minutes, after they are seated, to consume a meal at school.*

### **Rationale**

CSNA is aware of the limitations involved in serving nutritionally adequate meals to children including poor facility design, limited space, and lack of supervision personnel. However, every child is entitled to an adequate amount of time to eat a meal in an unhurried manner. Every effort should be made to provide adequate space in a clean and attractive facility that promotes a positive lunch time experience for children.

Concern about allocating adequate time for students to eat has been a significant issue for many years. In 1998, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) encouraged Congress to impose guidelines on the issue, but the matter was determined to be better left to the discretion of local authorities.<sup>1</sup>

### **Time Spent to Eat**

When determining the amount of time students need for an ideal lunch period, the following factors must be considered: average travel time to the cafeteria; time for service, including travel to the eating area; time to consume the meal; and removal of trays after the meal.<sup>2</sup> A study published in 2000 in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association investigated how much time students spent waiting for lunch, eating, and engaging in social activity. The study compared students in two school districts with lunch periods ranging from 22 to 44 minutes. Researchers found that 22 minutes to eat lunch was adequate for high school and middle school students, but elementary school children needed more time. Younger children spend more time in non-eating activities while at the table, but researchers theorize that older

students have been taught to eat faster as a result of learned responses to stimuli such as the ringing of the bell to signal the end of the lunch period.<sup>3</sup>

In a series of studies sponsored by the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) to measure the average time for students to consume a school lunch was between 7 and 10 minutes, including eating time only. The authors also measured other timed elements of the dining experience including socializing, service, and clean-up activities. The total time to eat at school ranged from 13 – 35 minutes; service time varied the most for all schools; time spent by students at the dining table ranged from 74-81% of total lunch time; eating time was consistent among students of all ages at 10 minutes; time spent socializing seemed to vary directly with the length of the meal period.<sup>2</sup>

The Partnership to Promote Healthy Eating in Schools has identified providing enough time for students to choose meals and sit down with friends to enjoy them as one of ten factors associated with the development of healthy eating habits in school aged children. The coalition also recommends that lunch periods should be scheduled as near the middle of the school day as possible.<sup>4</sup>

### Inadequate Meal Periods

In an attempt to provide additional classroom time during the school day, schools frequently reduce the length of meal periods. In addition, many schools schedule tutoring, club meetings and other extracurricular activities during meal times. Students tend to choose foods they can access and consume quickly – or skip meals.<sup>1</sup> School meal programs must respond to these issues and provide additional choices and multiple serving lines to reduce waiting time for students.

Many large schools have relatively short meal periods, resulting in inadequate time to feed students, even with multiple points of sale. Schools are occasionally forced to schedule lunch periods at the end of the teaching day. In some cases, transportation schedules require that busses leave school only a few minutes after the meal period begins. Many students are forced to miss the meal period in order to facilitate transportation home at the end of the day.

### Food Service Preparation and Service Areas

With the expansion of student populations and the decline of state funding, schools must give higher priority to classroom space than expanding kitchen and cafeteria eating facilities. Food service facilities are often inadequate for optimum preparation and service of foods that are nutritious and appealing to all students. In many schools, seating is inadequate and rotating meal periods must begin early and end late. With inadequate dining facilities and insufficient time to eat, many students turn to foods that are readily accessible in vending machines and snack bars.<sup>1</sup>

Factors that influence service time include (1) the number of serving lines, (2) whether all food choices are available on each line, (3) training of service staff and cashiers to provide efficient service, (4) the designation of a “runner” to replenish food on the line, (5) an automated point of sale system,<sup>2</sup> (6) staggered release times for meals, (7) provision of adequate adult supervision to enforce orderly and efficient line assembly, and (8) bus schedules.

## **Federal Requirements for the Lunch Period**

7 C.F.R. 210.10 states that schools must offer lunches meeting federal meal program requirements during the period the school has designated as the lunch period. Schools must offer lunches between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.

## **Recommendations by Allied Organizations**

The School Nutrition Association's *Keys to Excellence: Standards of Practice for Nutritional Integrity* recommends allowing a minimum of 20 minutes for students to eat lunch and 10 minutes to eat breakfast.

The National Association of State Boards of Education's *Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn* recommends students be given at least 20 minutes after sitting down to eat lunch and 10 minutes after sitting down to eat breakfast.

The Food and Nutrition Section of the United States Department of Agriculture encourages schools to provide sufficient lunch periods that are long enough to give all students enough time to be served and to eat their lunches (7 CFR 210.10).

## **Response for Change – CSNA Recommendations**

In order to foster a healthy nutrition environment and provide adequate time for students to consume meals in California schools, the California School Nutrition Association proposes the following recommendations:

1. Ensure that children have adequate time to eat. CSNA recommends that students have a minimum of 15 minutes – after the student is seated with their food – to consume a meal.
2. The lunch meal should be served as close to the middle of the school day as possible.
3. Provide financial assistance to schools for the purchase of food service equipment. Food service equipment is often inadequate for optimum preparation and service of foods that are nutritious and appealing to students.
4. Include funding for cafeteria and dining areas for school meals in state and federal school construction legislation. Dining areas in many schools are inadequate due to expansion of student populations and priority given to classroom space over common facilities construction.
5. To decrease the amount of time students wait in line, increase participation, and improve the efficiency of the lunch service line:
  - Offer additional service lines
  - Use remote self-service bars
  - Offer alternate lunch periods to reduce the number of students at each meal period.<sup>2</sup>

## **References**

1. USDA. *Foods sold in competition with USDA school meal programs: A report to congress*. January 2001.
2. Conklin MT, Lambert LG. Eating at school: a summary of NSFMI research on time required by students to eat lunch. *J Child Nutr Mgmt*. Issue 1, Spring 2002.
3. Bergman, EA, Buerger, NS, Joseph E, Sanchez A. Time spent by schoolchildren to eat lunch. *J Am Diet Assoc*, June 2000.
4. *Prescription for change: ten keys to promoting healthy eating in schools*. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Healthy/calltoaction.html>.