

# MEAL TIME!

State of School Meals:

San Mateo & Santa Clara Counties



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# Executive Summary

School meals play a crucial role in student success, impacting academic performance, nutrition, and overall well-being.<sup>1</sup> California has been a leader in expanding access to school meals, becoming the first state to permanently implement universal free school meals in 2021. However, with increased meal access and participation, a challenge has presented itself: students often do not have enough time to eat their meals.

This report focuses on the issue of meal time in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, highlighting challenges and opportunities to improve meal time policies. Through surveys and interviews with food service directors, key findings reveal that inadequate time to eat is a widespread issue. Observations of meal times at schools provided additional information on meal time challenges.

## Key Findings:

1. Widespread Insufficient Time to Eat
  - a. Many schools combine recess and meal times, often resulting in students rushing through meals or prioritizing play.
  - b. Some districts provide as little as **10–20 minutes** for meal periods, which includes time spent transitioning to the cafeteria and waiting in line.
  - c. This falls short of the **CDC’s recommendation of at least 20 minutes of seated eating time per meal.**
2. Impact on Meal Participation & Food Waste
  - a. **Meal participation rates have risen significantly** since the introduction of universal meals. In Santa Clara County, breakfast participation increased by over 500,000 meals from 2023 to 2024, and lunch by 375,000. San Mateo County saw increases of 245,000 breakfasts and 265,000 lunches in the same period.
  - b. However, rushed meal times **lead to more food waste**, as students discard unfinished meals. California's **SB 1383 mandates food waste reduction**, yet inadequate time to eat remains a challenge for compliance.
3. Disparities in Meal Participation
  - a. Schools with **lower Free or Reduced-Price Meal (FRPM) eligibility** served more meals than those with higher FRPM percentages, indicating a disparity in meal uptake among higher-need schools.
  - b. Schools classified as **“High” FRPM (66%+ of students qualifying)** showed the smallest growth in meal participation, suggesting additional barriers beyond cost, such as time constraints, lack of options for dietary preferences, or stigma.
4. Challenges in School Food Service Operations
  - a. **Long lines and staffing shortages** further limit students’ ability to eat within the available time.

- b. **Kitchen infrastructure remains outdated**, making it difficult to scale up meal programs or shift to scratch cooking, which can lead to improved meal quality and appeal.
- c. Many **Local School Wellness Policies (LSWP) do not specify required meal times**, leaving the issue unaddressed at the district level.

## Policy & Practice Recommendations

### Local Level:

- **Ensure a minimum of 20 minutes** of seated eating time in school schedules, accounting for transition and line time.
- Implement **recess-before-lunch policies** to improve meal consumption and reduce waste.
- Improve **Direct Certification processes** to maximize funding for school meals and expand meal access.

### State Level:

- Establish **mandatory minimum meal times** to ensure all students can eat their meals.
- Increase **Kitchen, Infrastructure, and Training (KIT) funding** to modernize food service facilities and support scratch cooking.
- Provide **technical support and funding** to help schools meet SB 1383 food waste reduction requirements.

### Federal Level:

- Pass a **Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR)** bill to:
  - **Increase meal reimbursement rates** to address food cost inflation.
  - Implement nationwide **minimum mealtime requirements**.
  - Expand **eligibility for free meal programs**, particularly in high-cost areas.

Universal school meals have been a transformative step for California students, but without adequate time to eat, their full benefits remain unrealized. Addressing meal time, food waste, staffing, and infrastructure challenges will strengthen the program's effectiveness and ensure that all students—regardless of income—have the opportunity to eat, learn, and thrive.

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## Introduction

School meals are more than just a source of nourishment – they are an essential component of student success, impacting everything from academic performance to overall well-being.<sup>1</sup> California has been a leader in recognizing the critical role of school meals, implementing significant policies to ensure every student has the opportunity to thrive.

In 2021, legislation establishing universal school meals in California was passed as part of the 2021-2022 state budget through AB 130. This made California the first state in the nation to provide free breakfast and lunch to all public schools students on an ongoing basis beginning in the 2022-2023 school year.<sup>2</sup> Today, students can receive a nourishing meal in schools regardless of their household income status. With more students having access to free school meals, meal periods have become even more crunched and lack of adequate time to eat is a significant issue.

This year, a key focus for our school meals report is ensuring students have enough time to eat during meal periods. In 2023 the California Senate Bill 348 was introduced to address improving school meal nutrition standards and ensuring students receive sufficient time to eat during school meal periods.<sup>3</sup> However, that bill was later changed from a requirement for time to eat to a list of recommendations by the California Department of Education. Sufficient mealtime allows students to fully benefit from the nutrition provided, leading to better focus and energy throughout the day. It also helps schools combat food waste—students are more likely to finish their meals when they aren't rushed, reducing discarded food.<sup>4</sup> This report explores the efforts and challenges of time to eat within Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. By spotlighting these initiatives, we aim to highlight the importance of thoughtful meal time policies and their impact on our communities.



## Methods

Data for this report was collected from school districts throughout Santa Clara (n=32) and San Mateo (n=23) counties through surveys and interviews, meal time observations, and a review of wellness policies and related webpages. School food service directors provided insights into various aspects of their school meal services, offering a detailed view of current practices and challenges. The survey and interview questions explored topics such as challenges in the meal service, the amount of time allocated for recess and seated eating time, and the implementation of the California Department of Education (CDE) recommendations to increase time to eat.

A total of 11 survey responses and 12 interviews were collected, representing nearly half of all school districts in the region. A common trend identified through these conversations was the widespread issues of inadequate time for students to eat during both breakfast and lunch periods. This recurring challenge emerged as a significant barrier to students fully benefiting from school meal programs.

To better understand time to eat, we also conducted meal time observations at seven local schools, including five elementary schools, one middle and one high school. Researchers noted how long it took for the first and last student in each meal period to get through the line, and how much seat time was available for the last student to exit the line. In elementary schools, where students are typically dismissed as a group, we also tracked total eating time before students were dismissed for recess.

## Landscape Review

Current policy affecting Universal School Meals

- **State funding :**
  - Meal reimbursement: California funds universal free meals in public schools by supplementing federal meal reimbursements. The state ensures all schools receive the maximum federal free-meal reimbursement rate for breakfast and lunch, regardless of individual student eligibility. Additional funding is allocated for operational cost increases.<sup>5</sup>
  - Kitchen, Infrastructure and Training (KIT) grants: Schools can apply for grants to improve kitchen facilities, purchase equipment, or receive staff training to support meal preparation and distribution (The 2024-25 California Spending Plan, n.d.)
    - **2021 KIT Grants:** \$150 million (available from July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2023).
    - **2022 KIT Grants:** \$600 million (available from July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2024).
    - **2023 KIT Grants:** \$100 million (available from July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2025).

- **State requirements for school meals times:** California currently lacks specific state-level mandates for minimum eating times for students, but the CDE has published a list of recommendations to extend time to eat for students.<sup>6</sup>
- **State requirements for school recess periods:** California Senate Bill 291, signed into law in 2023, mandates daily recess time for public school students throughout elementary grades. Starting in the 2024–2025 school year, schools must provide at least 30 minutes of recess on regular instructional days and 15 minutes on early release days. Recess must take place outdoors when weather and air quality allow, and alternative indoor spaces can be used if necessary.<sup>7</sup>
- **State requirements for food waste reduction:** California Senate Bill 1383 mandates schools to reduce food waste and participate in organic waste programs to combat methane emissions.<sup>8</sup> By 2025, schools must help recover 20% of edible food for donation to those in need, implement food waste separation systems, and promote sustainability through education and practices. Schools are encouraged to adopt practices to minimize food waste, such as share tables, donation of excess food, and offer-versus-serve policies allowing students to decline certain meal components.<sup>9</sup>
- **State requirements for nutrition guidelines:** Schools must meet federal nutrition standards as outlined in the federal “Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010”, which requires offering fruits, vegetables, whole grains, dairy, and limits on sodium and saturated fats.<sup>10</sup>

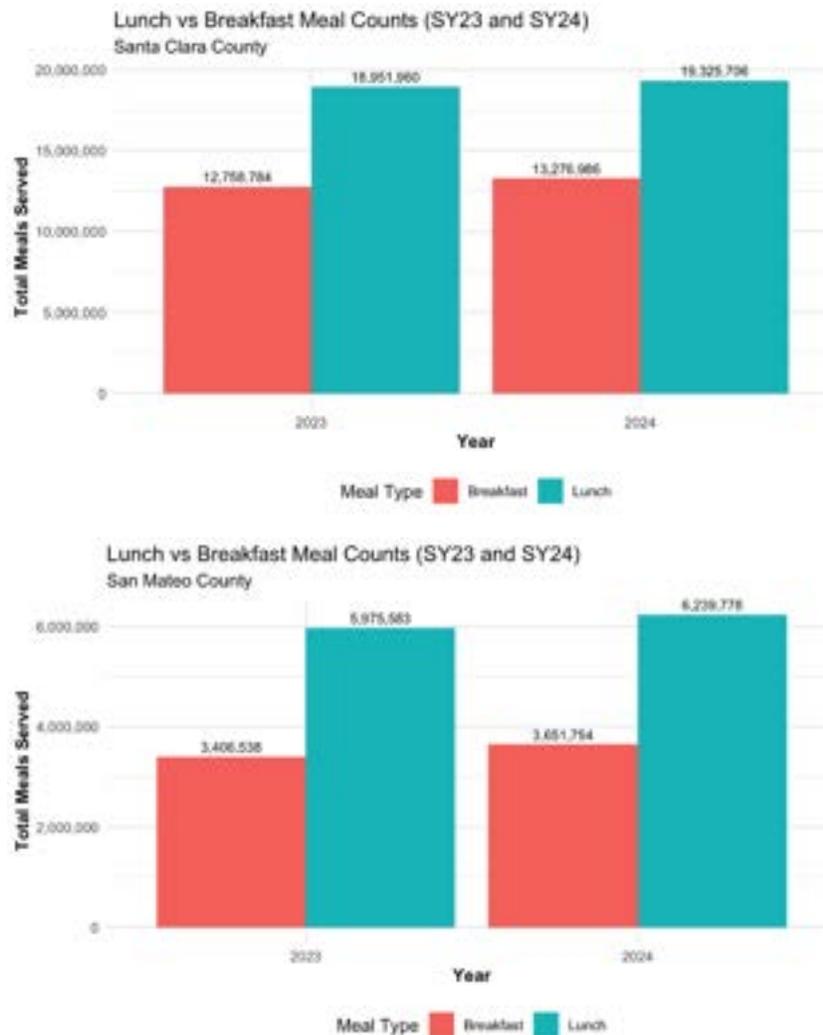
In addition to federal guidelines, California has specific state requirements to further improve the nutritional quality of school meals:

- **Added Sugar Limits:** California imposes stricter limits on added sugars in school meals, aligning with state efforts to reduce childhood obesity and related health issues, this was first proposed by Senator Nancy Skinner.<sup>11</sup>
  - **Expanded Variety of Fruits and Vegetables:** State requirements ensure schools offer an even greater variety of fruits and vegetables, including fresh, seasonal, and culturally appropriate options.<sup>12</sup>
  - **Beverage Restrictions:** California mandates limits on sugar-sweetened beverages and encourages water, low-fat milk, or 100% fruit juice.<sup>13</sup>
  - **Whole Grains:** Beyond federal standards, California requires all grains served to be whole grain-rich, ensuring students consume more fiber and essential nutrients<sup>14</sup>
- **State requirements for instructional minutes:** The California Department of Education (CDE) sets minimum required instructional minutes for schools based on grade level and calendar type, which directly impacts how schools structure their daily schedules, including meal times. For example, Kindergarten requires 36,000 minutes, Grades 1-3 require 50,400 minutes, Grades 4-8 require 54,000 minutes, and Grades 9-12 require 64,800 minutes annually.<sup>15</sup> These requirements limit flexibility for longer or additional meal breaks, as schools must prioritize meeting the mandated instructional time.

- **State requirements for TK expansion:** Transitional Kindergarten (TK) expansion is a significant initiative, aiming to provide all four-year-olds access to TK by 2025–2026. This includes funding for maintaining a 1:12 adult-to-student ratio and accommodating additional students. These requirements also offer opportunities to integrate breakfast into the classroom as part of instructional time, ensuring young students meet meal participation needs while adhering to the state's instructional time guidelines.<sup>16</sup>



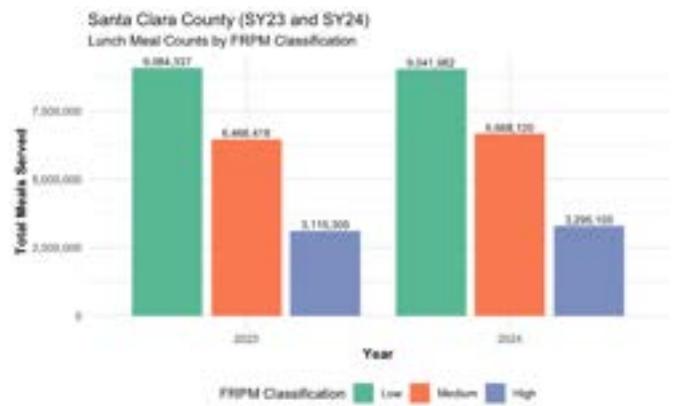
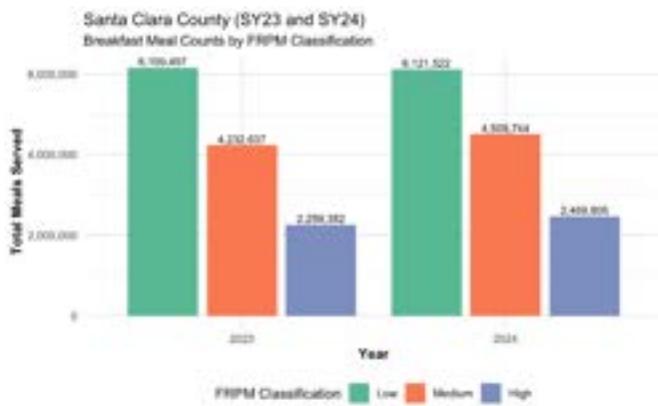
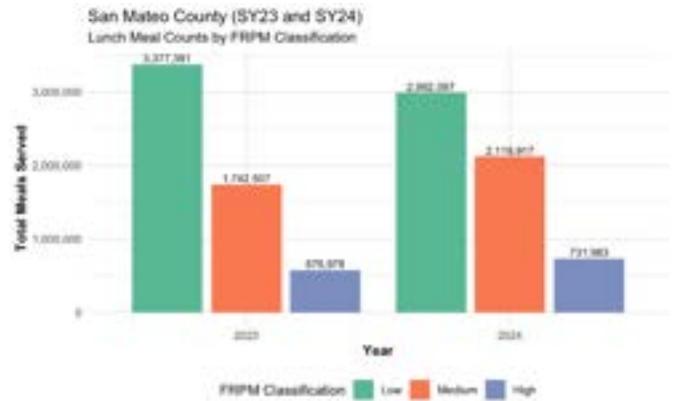
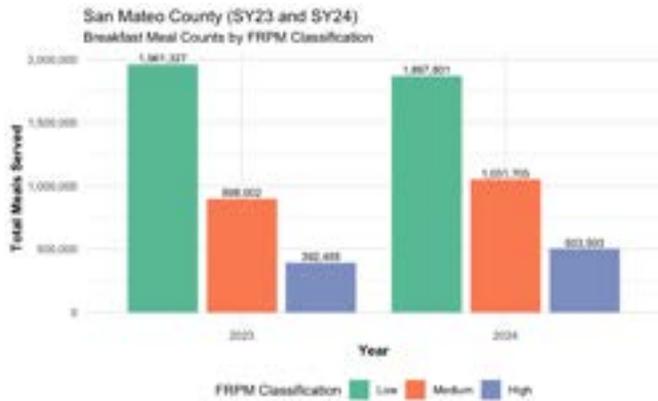
## School Meal Participation



The figures above display the meal counts for breakfast versus lunch in San Mateo and Santa Clara County.

During the 2023 school year, 12,758,784 breakfasts were served and 18,951,960 lunches were served in Santa Clara County. 3,406,538 breakfasts were served and 5,975,583 lunches were served in San Mateo County. Moving into the 2024 school year, visually the amounts of breakfasts and lunches served look relatively similar; however, in Santa Clara County breakfast increased by over a half million meals served, and lunch increased by around 375,000. In San Mateo County, breakfast increased by around 245,000 and lunch increased by around 265,000.

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The FRPM Classification “Low” includes schools with less than 33% of students qualifying for Free or Reduced Priced (FRPM) meals, “Medium” includes 33%-66% of students qualify for FRPM, and “High” includes schools with greater than 66% of students qualifying for FRPM. It is important to note that the trends we see displayed on this graph are meal counts, and not meal participation rates. Therefore, the higher amount of meals served in the “Low” FRPM group just may also just show that there are more students in “Low” FRPM” schools.

In both counties, schools classified as "Low" FRPM consistently served the highest number of meals. Schools with "Medium" FRPM classifications also experienced substantial increases in meal counts, although not as pronounced as in "Low" FRPM schools. The "High" FRPM schools exhibited the smallest increase in meals served.

## Survey Findings

After conducting 12 interviews and collecting 11 survey responses with school food service directors, success, challenges, and opportunities for school food service and meal times were highlighted.

There were several successes that could be attributed to the implementation of universal school meals as well as improved school food service operations. Many school food service directors

reported growth in meal participation, particularly for breakfast after the implementation of universal free meals. As far as meal service innovations, many districts introduced grab-and-go carts, additional point of sale (POS) systems, and barcode scanning for smoother service. Additionally, some districts transitioned to scratch cooking or partnered with local food vendors, improving food quality and sourcing locally.

Despite these successes, there were several challenges that many of school districts faced. For many schools, there was an insufficient amount of time given for students to both eat and enjoy recess. Some meal periods were as short as 10-20 minutes which may lead to unfinished meals. Furthermore, food service directors expressed how, with increased meal participation, long meal lines further exacerbated time constraints. Another shared challenge amongst many school districts includes staffing shortages which they attribute to low wages and demanding workloads. It is difficult to hire and retain qualified food service staff, limiting the expansion of meal programs and the adoption of scratch cooking.



Furthermore, outdated kitchens and insufficient storage space further hinder the ability to implement scratch cooking, while ongoing construction and reliance on temporary cooking sites further disrupt meal services. Resistance to change from principals and teachers, particularly regarding initiatives like recess-before-lunch, staggered schedules, or extended meal periods, adds another layer of challenge to improving school meal programs.

Extending meal times through policies for structured seated eating or longer meal periods can address time constraints, while expanding recess-before-lunch district-wide may improve food consumption and reduce waste. Investments in infrastructure and staffing, supported by grants and funding, can improve school kitchens and offer competitive pay in order to retain staff.

## Deep Dive: Time to Eat

In California, public and charter schools serving TK-12 grade students are required to “make available” two meals each day at no cost to students.<sup>17</sup> However, there are no requirements determining the length of an adequate meal period. In practice, schools are not providing adequate time for all students to eat the meals available to them.

## Local School Wellness Policy

After reviewing 55 district websites within San Mateo and Santa Clara, there were very few districts that included well-documented policies accounting for timing for school meal or recess

periods. While many districts had their wellness policy available on their website, many wellness policies had not been updated for many years or were challenging to find on their website, and some districts did not include any wellness policies available on their district's website.

Of the 55 district websites reviewed, 16 were found to have no wellness policy available. Among the remaining 39 districts where some form of a school wellness policy was identified, at least ten, though some policies did not indicate the date of their last revision, had not been reviewed or updated in over five years. Of the wellness policies that were examined, only nine included any mention of the timing of meals or recess. However, this often took the form of vague language. For example, the Santa Clara Unified School District LSWP states that students will be given "adequate space to eat meals in pleasant surroundings as well as adequate time to eat, relax and socialize." Additionally, the Mountain View - Los Altos Union High School district states that they "will ensure that students are served meals at an appropriate time of the day" and that they'll "provide adequate time for student meal periods." There is no specification as to what constitutes "adequate" time or an "appropriate" time of day.

Out of the 55 district websites reviewed, only three districts could be identified, Gilroy Unified School District, Moreland School District, and Ravenswood City School District, that explicitly outlined the minimum number of minutes students would be allotted for meals. Their wellness policies state that students will be provided with "at least 10 minutes to eat after sitting down for breakfast and 20 minutes after sitting down for lunch". In most cases, meal schedules are only available through individual school websites as part of the bell schedule.

For the 16 districts where no wellness policy could be identified, some provided a dedicated wellness or child nutrition tab with information about meal programs, though the content varies widely in detail and clarity. A few districts have adopted comprehensive wellness policies that incorporate USDA nutrition standards and address logistical aspects, such as timing and environment for meals.

Most districts referenced participation in federal meal programs such as the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, with some including provisions for universal school meals. However, explicit mentions of meal times, such as lunch periods or recess scheduling, are less common, with only a few policies detailing time allocations or providing adequate time for students to eat.

## Example Bell Schedules

With the passage of SB 291 in 2024, schools - typically elementary - offering recess periods are required to ensure students have 30 minutes of unstructured play time on a regular school day.<sup>18</sup> Many districts in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties have combined meal and recess periods, making it challenging to determine how long students have for each activity. SB 291 does state that recess should be a "separate and distinct" activity from meal periods. Further, when evaluating a bell schedule it is important to note that the time block for meals typically also

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includes transition and line time - it is not only time to eat. Additionally, for schools with enrollment that is larger than the capacity of their cafeteria/eating space, it is a common practice to split the meal period in half so that some students are at recess while others eat, and vice versa. This is not reflected on the bell schedule.

Below are a few examples of bell schedules from schools in San Mateo and Santa Clara County with commentary:

Baldwin Elementary, in the Oak Grove School District in San Jose, CA had an enrolled population of 478 students in the 2023-2024 school year.<sup>19</sup> Their SY2024-2025 bell schedule does specify times for meals and recess.<sup>20</sup> Their breakfast period is only 5 minutes, while their lunch period is only 20 minutes. Taking into consideration the time to transition to the cafeteria and receive their food, this does not meet the CDC’s standard of 20 minutes of eating time per meal period:

MORNING RECESS SCHEDULE			
GRADE	REGULAR DAY	EATING TIME	PLAYING TIME
TK, K, K/1	9:30 – 9:45	9:30 – 9:35	9:35 – 9:45
1 – 3, 3/4 combo	9:50 – 10:10	9:50 – 9:55	9:55 – 10:10
4 – 6	10:15 – 10:30	10:15 – 10:20	10:20 – 10:30
1 – 3	--	--	1:50 – 2:00
LUNCH SCHEDULE			
GRADE	REGULAR DAY	EATING TIME	PLAYING TIME
TK & K	11:15 – 12:00	11:15 – 11:35	11:35 – 12:00
1	11:45 – 12:30	11:45 – 12:05	12:05 – 12:30
2	12:05 – 12:50	12:05 – 12:25	12:25 – 12:50
3	12:25 – 1:10	12:25 – 12:45	12:45 – 1:10
4	11:50 – 12:30	11:50 – 12:05	12:05 – 12:30
5	12:10 – 12:50	12:10 – 12:25	12:25 – 12:50
6	12:30 – 1:10	12:30 – 12:45	12:45 – 1:10

## School Site Observations

Observations conducted at seven local schools demonstrated that even when meal periods are scheduled for longer than the minimum recommendation of 20 minutes, transition and line time reduce the seated eating time available to students.

These observations highlight the challenges students face in maximizing their eating time due to transition and line delays, even when lunch periods are scheduled to be longer than the recommended 20 minutes.

School Site	Lunch time observation notes:
<b>Laurelwood Elementary</b>	During our visit, the last student in line for lunch (a 1st grader) had only <b>7 minutes</b> to sit and eat their meal, out of the allotted 22-minute lunch period.
<b>Homestead High School</b>	While students were served for the entire 15-minute brunch period, <b>those who received their meal right as the bell rang had only a 10-minute passing period to eat</b> on their way to class. The cafeteria operated efficiently with 10 student lines and a grab-and-go system, but some students still had limited eating time due to line movement.
<b>Scott Lane Elementary</b>	The last group of 2nd and 3rd graders in line had only <b>12 minutes</b> of seated eating time before being released for recess. Similarly, 4th and 5th graders had a maximum of <b>12 minutes</b> to eat after getting through the lunch line, which averaged 1 minute per group.
<b>Sutter Elementary</b>	While TK students had a <b>15-minute seated eating time</b> , older students were dismissed as they finished eating. The last group of 2nd and 3rd graders to go through the line had minimal eating time before recess, and 4th and 5th graders had no required seated time.
<b>Collins Elementary</b>	On a rainy day visit, where students eat and play in the classroom, the last student to receive lunch was at 12:33 PM. With the daily lunch period running from 12:10 PM to 12:50 PM, some students had limited time to eat before lunch ended. On especially busy days, lunch service extends to 12:45PM, leading to even shorter eating time for some students.
<b>Miller Middle School</b>	The lunch line moved quickly, with most students taking 2-3 minutes to receive their meals. However, during the height of the rush, some students took over 2 minutes to get their food, potentially reducing their eating time in the 30-minute lunch period.
<b>Murdock-Portal Elementary</b>	The last 1st-3rd grader in line had only about <b>9 minutes</b> left to eat before the required seated eating time ended. For 4th and 5th graders, the last student in line had roughly <b>15 minutes</b> remaining in the lunch period, though they were not required to remain seated.

## Policy & Practice Recommendations

School meal stakeholders - including school food professionals, school administrators and teachers, parents, families, students, and advocates - should all continue to work together to increase funding and support for school meal programs, at the local, state and federal levels.

## Local Recommendations

- **Increasing time to eat:** The CDC recommends a minimum of 20 minutes of seated eating time for school meal periods.<sup>21</sup> When developing bell schedules, districts should take into consideration transition time between the classroom and cafeterias, time for students to move through a POS system if needed, and ensure students are not feeling pressured to finish their meals quickly before heading out to recess.
- **Recess before lunch:** School districts should consider adopting a recess before lunch approach to support children’s consumption of healthy foods. Research has shown that this simple scheduling shift increases the amount of fruits and vegetables that children eat, reduces food waste, and improves classroom behaviors.<sup>13</sup>
- **Maximize identification of students eligible for Direct Certification:** School districts can partner with their local Social Services Agency to complete a local data match to identify students eligible for Direct Certification. That is - those students who are receiving CalFresh, CalWorks, who are unhoused, and who are foster youth.<sup>22</sup> This is important to increase the Identified Student Percentage for school districts to draw down funding for school meals reimbursement, as well as a host of other funding opportunities. Additionally, identified students are eligible for SUN Bucks, a federal summer nutrition benefit program.<sup>23</sup> The local data match should use a probabilistic matching process to best identify students across the different data systems. This is especially important for identifying students who may have moved during the school year, or who have multiple first or last names and are often unmatched by the CDE process. In Santa Clara County, the spring local data match coordinated by Second Harvest of Silicon Valley, the Santa Clara County Office of Education, and participating school districts often identifies as many as 6%-8% additional students as eligible for Direct Certification.

## State Recommendations

- **Continue KIT Funding:** In Fiscal Year 2021 & 2022, the State of California set aside \$750M to support the implementation of Universal School Meals through Kitchen, Infrastructure and Training Funds.<sup>24</sup> These dollars were vital to schools’ ability to quickly upgrade their facilities to serve an increased number of student meals, shift to a scratch cooking model, and in some cases begin meal services entirely. Though this has been a welcome investment, school districts continue to report that their facilities are inadequate to serve their full student population and also meet the state’s desire to see 40% of meals prepared from scratch. Additional, ongoing funding is needed to continue to upgrade school facilities.
- **Support schools implementing SB1383:** In 2024, California schools became required to meet food waste reduction and recovery requirements under SB1383.<sup>25</sup> These requirements include: putting into place organics composting, student education on food waste reduction, partnering with local food recovery organizations to maximize edible food recovery leftover in school cafeterias, and more. Schools need technical support and funding to put these requirements into place.
- **Develop requirements for minimum time to eat school meals:** In FY24, SB348 created a requirement that each “school district, county superintendent of schools, and charter school to provide pupils with adequate time to eat, as determined by that school

district, county superintendent of schools, or charter school in consideration of the recommendations provided by the department.”<sup>26</sup> Without specific guidelines or requirements for determining adequate time for students to eat school meals, there is a wide range of scheduling occurring, as evidenced by the survey and interviews covered by this report. The state can and should take this a step further by establishing requirements for meal periods, as has been done for recess time.

## **Federal Recommendations – Child Nutrition Reauthorization:**

At the federal level, there is an opportunity to significantly update school meal standards, operations, and reimbursement rates. Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) has not been renewed since 2010 with the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.<sup>27</sup> The meal pattern was substantially updated with the adoption of the final rule, Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent With the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans<sup>28</sup> and we urge USDA Food and Nutrition Service to continue to support implementation of the final rule. Many of the operational challenges faced by the food service directors we spoke with could be addressed with a new CNR bill, including:

- Increase meal reimbursement rates to match food cost inflation.
- Meal pattern adjustments to accommodate minimum days and school breaks, as well as allowing fruit and vegetables to be offered vs served to reduce food waste.
- Set standards for minimum time to eat.
- Lowered Free and Reduced Price Meal eligibility requirements for programs like the Summer Seamless Option and the Child and Adult Care Food Program so that schools can serve additional children meals when schools are closed. Current income eligibility for the Free and Reduced Price Meal program does not take into consideration our area’s high cost of living and does not reflect the reality of poverty that many families experience.
- Increasing the reimbursement rate multiplier for Community Eligibility Provision would reduce bottlenecks at the point of sale system, as well as streamline administrative work to operate the meal programs at schools. Additionally, at the national level it would bring us nearly to true Universal Free School Meal

# Appendix: Advocacy Toolkit- Time to Eat

## How to Use this Resource

School bell schedules are established at a local level. If you are a parent, caregiver, teacher, or other school meals advocate, here are some sample items you can use to improve the school meals experience.

1. **Review your local bell schedule.** Published on your district's/school's website, the school bell schedule should provide you with information on how long your school's meal and recess periods are. Often you will see the recess and meal period combined into one time block - ideally, the school district should be separating these out. You may have to do some mental math to remove the 30 minutes of required daily recess (CA State requirement) to determine how long meal periods are. Keep in mind this usually also includes transition time while students are moving to and from the cafeteria.
2. **Join your School Wellness Committee.** Every few years, a school district recruits members from the local community to review and provide input into the district's Local School Wellness Policy. It is through this policy that length of meal and recess periods are set. Talk to your local principal to learn when your district is up to renew its policy.
3. **Ask your district food service director to share the results of their latest time study.** Food service staff often monitor the speed at which students are moving through the lines. This is a good indicator to understand how much of the meal period is available for kids to actually eat their meals.
4. **Talk to your local superintendent and school board.** Below you will find research articles and a sample letter to send to your district's leadership to inform them of the importance of students having adequate time to eat. [There is power in numbers](#) - recruit other parents, PTSO/PTA, teachers, wellness staff, and other interested parties to join you in sending a letter. Make sure to know when your district sets its bell schedule - this usually happens in the Spring. Time your advocacy to occur before this.

## Sample Local School Wellness Policy Language

Excerpts from Anchorage Public Schools, Board Policy 5040, adopted December 7, 2023

"Schools shall provide students with a positive eating environment that encourages appropriate socialization and time to eat. Elementary schools shall provide a minimum of 20 minutes of eating time, after being served, for lunch and 10 minutes for breakfast. Secondary schools shall provide a lunch period of no less than 30 minutes, which may also include time for unstructured physical activity. Exceptions will require supervisor approval. Administrative regulations, including best practices with respect to breakfast and lunchroom management, ambience, noise, traffic flow, and sanitation shall be developed."

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“The Anchorage School District acknowledges the importance of providing adequate time for students to eat lunch and socialize, as well as the expected outdoor recess time each day. This Administrative Regulation (AR) seeks to guide school administrators in scheduling lunch and recess times.

The principal in charge of each unit, in collaboration with his or her scheduling or leadership team, shall create and provide a lunch and recess schedule of no less than a 45-minute block, exclusive of passing time.

In the matter of student lunch schedules:

- A. Lunches will include a minimum of 20 minutes seated eating time to eat and socialize.

In the matter of scheduling outdoor recess:

- A. The required minimum of 30 minutes of outdoor recess may be split between midday recess with lunch and another regularly scheduled outdoor recess at another time during the school day.”<sup>29</sup>

## Sample Letter to a Superintendent

*Thank you to Dr. Juliana Cohen for sharing this sample letter to a Superintendent. Please feel free to edit with your own experiences/add information specific to your district.*

Dear [Superintendent]

I hope you're doing well. I was hoping to speak with you about increasing the lunch period lengths in our school district. I've spoken with the food service department, many parents/PTA members, multiple teachers at different grade levels, and principals. Here is a summary of those conversations. I've also included our research highlighting the benefits of longer lunch periods as well.

1. There is strong support for this change within our school district. Teachers felt as though they could easily find time during the existing school day to increase the lunch period length (different grade levels had different specific suggestions as to when they could easily find the time). I also had teachers offer to create a proposed schedule with the new lunch period lengths/times to ensure it would have internal support.
2. The primary concern is children's behavior among those who finish their meal quickly. According to both teachers and parents, they felt this could be addressed by the following:
  - a. Recess before lunch
  - b. Composting in the lunchroom with children who finish early assisting with the sorting

- c. Educational activities for students available in the cafeteria (purchased by the PTA)- i.e. sudoku, word searches, etc. to occupy those who eat quickly)
3. Some parents suggested initially piloting the longer lunch period times at one school first this coming fall. If it is successful, they thought it would be great to have a local news story highlighting you, Principal X, and our teachers regarding this change, which could also create excitement about the expansion to other schools in our district. This change could garner some great positive attention for our district being at the forefront of this important issue and thinking innovatively about how to improve academic performance.

### **Information Regarding the Amount of Time Students Have to Eat Lunch (EDIT PER YOUR OWN DISTRICT)**

Current Status in [School District]: Both elementary and middle school students have XX minute lunch periods (high school students have XX minutes). These lunch periods include time waiting in the lunch line, and therefore children may have substantially less than XX minutes of seated time to actually eat their lunch. According to the food service director, this is a challenge for both students and for his/her staff in the cafeterias.

**Research:** Research in cafeterias examining both elementary and middle school students has found that shorter lunch period lengths (i.e. 20 minutes) significantly impacts both the selection and consumption of healthier school meals compared with longer lunch periods (please see attached research). Shorter lunch period lengths are associated with students consuming significantly less of their meal (i.e. entrée, milk, and vegetable) and decreased likelihood of selecting a fruit due to insufficient time to eat. Not only does healthier meal consumption have important health implications for children, it likely has academic implications as well. Research has found that healthier food consumption among children is associated with better executive functioning, which is associated with improved behavior and academic performance (please see attached research). It is important to note that exercise also appears to benefit children similarly and therefore reductions in recess or PE to achieve a longer lunch period is not recommended.

**Best Practices/Conclusions:** Students will benefit the most from 25 minutes of seated time in the cafeteria (which typically can be achieved for most students with a 30 minute lunch period). This potential change has the enthusiastic support of the cafeteria staff and in the past has also had strong parent support in XXX Public Schools. While there may be concerns about reductions in class time as a result of longer lunch periods, research suggests that longer lunch periods will benefit student academic achievement.

## **Research on Time to Eat**

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## Best Practices Guides

[Making Time for School Lunch](#), US Dept. of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[Seven Proven Strategies to Increase Student Time to Eat](#), Center for Ecoliteracy

# Suggested Citation & Acknowledgments

University of California Cooperative Extension and Second Harvest of Silicon Valley. (Meal Time! State of School Meals: San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties), School Year 2024-2025.

This report was written by Jenny Dang, Rachel Monaco, MSW, Romi Takara, MPH, and Laura Vollmer, MPH, RD. We are deeply grateful to Dr. Juliana Cohen for sharing her longtime expertise in evaluating meal period best practices. We also want to acknowledge the many food service staff who shared their on-the-ground experiences with implementing California's first-in-the-nation Universal School Meals programs and invited us to observe their meal periods, Lucy Diekmann for providing oversight and guidance, and to Jazmin Vargas for getting this report to the finish line.

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