

Do Students Have Enough Time to Eat?

An Observational Study of Lunch in MSAD 75 Schools

March 2019

The Healthy-Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010, requires local school administrative units to create Wellness Policies that include developing annual Action Plans. The Action Plans must contain measureable goals. When approving the 2018-19 Wellness Policy Action Plan for MSAD No. 75, the School Board requested the Health and Wellness Committee conduct a study to determine if students had enough time to eat their lunch. The concern stemmed from the increase in the amount of fruit and/or vegetable servings students are required to take as part of the USDA school meals program. The Board wondered if adding more food items that take longer to chew, might require more time to consume.

The District Food Service Director observed lunch service at Mt. Ararat Middle and Mt. Ararat High School. It was determined that with this older population, there is enough time to eat lunch and socialize. More emphasis was placed on observing the District elementary schools where younger students may need more time to eat. For consistency of observation, only two members of the District Health and Wellness Committee conducted the survey. Each individual visited all five elementary schools during the entire lunch service and then compared notes. Items observed included:

- Type of service (single or double line)
- Recess before or after lunch
- Exit policy (were students dismissed to recess from lunch)
- Menu on the day of the observation
- Time lunch period began and ended
- Time student entered the serving line
- Time student was seated
- Time student stopped eating
- Percent of time spent eating
- Percent of time spent talking
- Approximate amount of food on tray consumed

At Bowdoin Central School there were 3 lunch periods and students were given an average of 27 minutes to eat lunch. The menu on the day of observation was a choice of either a cheeseburger or a veggie burger and the fruit and vegetable bar. Students sat at tables and were called up to the serving line in an orderly fashion. They averaged 3 minutes in the serving line. Once seated with their food, the average time when they stopped eating depended on the grade level. Students in grades 4 and 5 averaged 10 minutes to eat. Students in grades 2 and 3 averaged 14 minutes to eat, and students in grades K and 1 averaged 20 minutes to eat. Students consumed an average of 76% of the food on their tray. They were encouraged to eat and given time to finish their food. Recess was after lunch and they lined up as a group and went outside together.

At Bowdoinham Community School there were 2 lunch periods and students were given an average of 27 minutes to eat lunch. The menu on the day of observation was a choice of either pizza or a tuna sandwich, the fruit and vegetable bar, and berry crisp. Students entered the cafeteria in staggered, orderly waves and stood in the serving line upon entering. There was a double serving line for the fruit/vegetable bar and then it merged into one line for the main entrée. They averaged 3 minutes in the serving line. Once seated with their food, the average time when they stopped eating depended on the grade level. Students in grades K, 1, and 2 averaged 16 minutes to eat. Students in grades 3, 4, and 5 averaged 13 minutes to eat. Students consumed an average of 70% of the food on their tray. They were encouraged to eat and given time to finish their food. Recess was after lunch for the younger students and before lunch for the older group. Students were treated to additional samples of vegetables that day as part of the 5-2-1-0 Let's Go Program. They eagerly consumed cucumber slices and soybeans.

At Harpswell Community School there were 2 lunch periods and students were given an average of 27 minutes to eat lunch. The menu on the day of observation was a choice of either pancakes and ham, or a turkey or ham and cheese sandwich, and the fruit and vegetable bar. Students entered the cafeteria in staggered, orderly waves and stood in the serving line upon entering. There was a double serving line for the fruit/vegetable bar and then it merged into one line for the main entrée. They averaged 3 minutes in the serving line. Once seated with their food both groups of students averaged 13 minutes to eat. Students consumed an average of 75% of the food on their tray. They were encouraged to eat and given time to finish their food. Recess was after lunch for the younger students and before lunch for the older group.

At Williams-Cone School there were 4 lunch periods and students were given an average of 20 minutes to eat lunch, with additional time available for any student that needed more time. The menu on the day of observation was a choice of either a hotdog, chili, or a chili dog, and the fruit and vegetable bar. Students entered and stood in one line for the main entrée and then merged into two lines in an orderly fashion for the fruit/vegetable bar. They averaged 3 minutes in the serving line. Once seated with their food, all students averaged 15 minutes to eat. Students consumed an average of 76% of the food on their tray. They were encouraged to eat and given time to finish their food in every lunch period. Recess was before lunch.

At Woodside Elementary School there were 6 lunch periods and students were given an average of 20 minutes to eat lunch, with additional time available for any student that needed more time. The menu on the day of observation was a choice of either pizza or a tuna sandwich, and the fruit and vegetable bar. Students entered and stood in lines in an orderly fashion. They averaged 2 minutes in the serving line. Once seated with their food, all students averaged 15 minutes to eat. Students consumed an average of 78% of the food on their tray. They were encouraged to eat and given time to finish their food in every lunch period. Recess varied and was before lunch for grades 3 and 4, and after lunch for grades K, 1, 2, and 5.

In general, at all schools students entered the cafeteria in an orderly fashion. They averaged about 3 minutes to go through the serving line and then sit down to eat. The time to eat averaged 15 minutes with the older students taking less time and the younger ones needing more time. Students spent 70% of their time actually eating and 30% talking and socializing. Students who

were socializing excessively were encouraged by staff to eat their food. Students averaged 2 minutes to clear their trays. Total time for entering the cafeteria, getting food, sitting down, eating, socializing, and clearing trays averaged 20 minutes. Currently the average lunch period for District schools is 24 minutes.

Students consumed an average 75% of the food on their tray. Students who did not eat certain food items said they “did not like the food”, so it is unlikely they would eat more if given more time. There was no predictability to the food thrown away. Some children preferred fruits and vegetables. Other children preferred protein items. And others preferred bread and milk. As previously noted at Bowdoinham Community School, when little samples of food items are offered, students tend to try something they may not have eaten before. It should also be noted the school fruit/vegetable bars contain a vast array of choices, including: mixed greens, sliced tomatoes, stewed tomatoes, onions, olives, pickles, carrot sticks, grated carrots, corn, peas, cottage cheese, cubed ham and cheese, celery, three-bean salad, coleslaw, applesauce, mixed fruit salad, kiwi, whole fruit and dried fruit.

In conclusion, the time allocated for lunch periods in the District schools is currently adequate.