

Appropriate Scheduling of Nutrition Breaks

Making the case for appropriate scheduling of nutrition breaks

Children need to be provided with the time to eat regularly throughout the school day to help them be active, feel good and reach their learning potential. Depending on the school schedule, the time between eating opportunities may be too long. For example, a child who boards a school bus at 7:30 am may not have an opportunity for a morning snack. Outside recess may limit the choices children can bring and some children may avoid eating their snack if it involves removing their mittens on a cold day. In other situations, the 20 minutes provided for students to eat lunch may be shortened. Children often need to go to the bathroom, get lunch and get dressed to go outside within the 20 minutes provided, leaving less time to eat lunch. A hungry child needs time to enjoy a healthy snack and lunch.



Nutrition Tools for Schools

- Maximizes students' learning potential
- Increases children's access to nutrient-rich foods such as vegetables and fruit
- Encourages children to practise healthy eating behaviours
- Reinforces the classroom healthy eating education
- Links with the 'whole school approach' to creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment
- Shows parents and the local community that the school takes the health of its students seriously

What are some school nutrition break options?

There are many ways for a school to schedule nutrition breaks. In addition to the lunch break, options include offering a universal breakfast or snack program, scheduling lunch or snack time after recess (to ensure that 20 minutes of eating time is provided), and/or allowing students to snack and drink water in the classroom.

Benefits of appropriate scheduling of nutrition breaks

Providing opportunities for children to eat during the school day:

Success to share

'At Pine Glen, we set up our balanced day school day for 2006-2007 with the plan of having outdoor recess first for 25 minutes followed by 20 minutes of eating. After the first two weeks, we heard from both parents and kids that the first nutrition break was too late. Kids were fading during the latter portion of first learning block. So we discussed with staff and changed our plan. We now have eating time first (10:45 - 11:05 am) followed by outdoor recess (11:05 - 11:30 am). This makes up nutrition break #1. Our second nutrition break is different. We go outside to play first, followed by eating time. Outside time is 1:00-1:25 pm and eating time is 1:25-1:45 pm. Our nutrition break #2 seems fine with having the recess break first. It was important in our case to listen to the school community to determine whether our new plan was working or not. Since reversing the eating and play time in the afternoon break, we have had positive comments from parents, staff and students.'

*Submitted by Andrea Gillespie, Principal,
Pine Glen School Huntsville*

Options for Increasing Student Eating Opportunities at School

| Option | Description | Rationale |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Breakfast Program | <p>All students in the school are invited to attend a breakfast program or club before the start of school. Breakfast programs may be run within the school or in a neighbouring church or community centre. They are operated by volunteers and may be offered up to five days of the week. Typically, only a fraction of the school population attends the breakfast program.</p> <p><i>(See the Student Nutrition Program Action Guide for additional information)</i></p> | <p>Increases consumption of healthy food choices among students</p> <p>Provides an eating opportunity for students who have not eaten before arriving at school</p> <p>Provides parents with an option for encouraging breakfast consumption</p> <p>Provides a social environment that may encourage children to eat breakfast where they otherwise may not</p> |
| Universal Snack Program | <p>All students in the school are provided with a healthy snack at a given time in the school day, usually mid-morning. Bins of food, prepared by volunteers, are delivered to each classroom.</p> <p><i>(See the Student Nutrition Program Action Guide for additional information)</i></p> | <p>Provides an eating opportunity for students who have skipped breakfast</p> <p>Increases consumption of healthy food choices among students</p> |
| In-Class Snacking | <p>Students are allowed the privilege to eat at specified times in class.</p> <p>Consistent school-wide guidelines for in-class snacking need to be developed. Refer to In-class Healthy Snacking Guidelines for guidelines for snacking in the classroom.</p> | <p>Allows students to eat when they are hungry and drink when they are thirsty, not just at scheduled nutrition break times</p> <p>Increases consumption of healthy food choices among students</p> |
| Water Promotion | <p>Water should be available in the classroom and in the school.</p> <p>An effective water promotion plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permits free access to water • Ensures that nobody is denied access to water | <p>Water is important for almost everything that happens in the body. By itself, the brain is made up of 80 per cent water. Throughout the day, children need to replenish with enough water to ensure that their bodies can work at maximum capacity.</p> |

| Option | Description | Rationale |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| Water Promotion (cont'd) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures that clean water sources (eg, water fountains) are available and maintained • Promotes good habits of drinking water throughout the day and in particular, following exercise (eg, physical education classes, sporting events) and in warm conditions • Listens to complaints and suggestions regarding the provision of water | <p>Providing and promoting water consumption:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a plentiful source of a low-cost refreshment • Promotes adequate fluid intake as part of a healthy, active lifestyle • Prevents headaches, bladder and bowel problems • Improves brain performance and concentration • Reduces feelings of being thirsty, tired or irritable <p>By ensuring water is available and accessible to all students, it is possible that consumption of unhealthy beverages will decline. Where schools have improved water provision and have an effective strategy for promoting water, students consume more water on a regular basis.¹</p> |
| Lunch Recess Scheduling | Schedule lunchtime recess <i>before</i> eating lunch as opposed to after eating lunch. | <p>The placement of recess in relation to the lunch-eating period can influence student eating. Students who eat their lunch first and then have recess could anticipate recess and not focus on eating.² As a result, students may not eat as much of their meal when compared to students who have recess scheduled before lunch. This may contribute to lack of energy in the afternoon, resulting in poor attention and an inability to learn.</p> |

Options for Increasing Student Eating Opportunities at School (cont'd)

| Option | Description | Rationale |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Balanced School Day | The Balanced School Day is an alternative to the traditional school schedule. The timetable consists of three blocks of instructional time, each about 100 minutes long, and two nutrition breaks of 40 to 50 minutes. Each nutrition break offers at least 20 minutes for students to sit and eat a nutritious mini-meal. | Surveys done in schools that have tried the balanced school day have shown some positive results. Schools and parents say that the change has meant less food is going home uneaten, children are not as hungry when they get home from school, and there is a greater focus on healthy food choices coming from home. |

¹ British Nutrition Foundation and Design and Technology Association. 2005. Food in Schools Toolkit. Food in Schools programme, Department of Education and Skills, Department of Health. UK. Accessed on May 5, 2005
<http://foodinschools.datacenta.uk.net/home.asp?idTopic=0&idPage=1>

² National Food Service Management Institute. 2004. Relationship of Meal and Recess Schedules to Plate Waste in Elementary Schools. *Insight*: No. 24 (Spring, 2004).



Does your school have a Healthy School Nutrition Environment?

A Healthy School Nutrition Environment exists when a school promotes healthy eating through words *and* actions. Students get the same message about food, nutrition and healthy eating wherever food is served – in the classroom, in the school and at home. The following nine Essential Elements¹ are recommended for a school to have a healthy nutrition environment.

| Whole School Approach | Essential Elements |
|---|---|
| In the School | <p>Does your school offer healthy, reasonably priced and culturally-appropriate food choices? For example does your school have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • healthy fundraising? • a school milk program? • a healthy tuck shop? • healthy 'special food' days? • non-food rewards in the classroom? • healthy classroom celebrations? • healthy refreshments at school meetings and events? |
| | Do parents, teachers and volunteers role model healthy eating and body image behaviours at school? |
| | Does your school have a Student Nutrition Program (eg, breakfast, snack and lunch)? |
| | Does your school practise safe food practices and have an allergy-safe environment? |
| | Are nutrition breaks at school appropriately scheduled? |
| | Does your school have a food and nutrition policy? |
| | In the Classroom |
| Do teachers have up-to-date nutrition resources to support the healthy eating expectations in the curriculum? | |
| In Homes and In the Community | Does your school provide student, parent and community education about healthy eating? |

¹ Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health School Nutrition Workgroup. 2004 *Call to Action: Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment*.

Need more information?

Public health offers *Nutrition Tools for Schools - a toolkit for elementary schools*. Whether you're a teacher, parent, school administrator or volunteer, this toolkit will lead you through a step-by-step process to creating a healthy nutrition environment in your school. *Nutrition Tools for Schools* contains a variety of resources and tools to implement the nine Essential Elements listed above. For more information about this toolkit, please contact your public health unit/department.

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