

# Schools Can Influence Student Eating Habits Through Lunch Scheduling Practices

Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee

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Office of the  
Washington  
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# Concerns over childhood obesity prompted this performance audit

- Obesity rates have tripled nationwide since the 1970s
- Government responses
  - USDA and the National School Lunch Program
  - District policies
  - The Healthiest Next Generation Initiative in 2015
- OSPI requested a performance audit



Photo by: State Auditor's Office



# Schools can influence eating habits

- Concerns about the amount of time children have to eat lunch
- Many elementary school students eat at least one meal a day on school property
- Schools have leeway with scheduling



Photo by: State Auditor's Office



# The audit asked...

- What lunch scheduling practices could schools use to achieve better student outcomes, such as improved behavior and eating more healthy foods?
- What barriers might prevent elementary schools from using these practices?





# National research supports two leading practices around lunch scheduling

1. Students should have at least 20 minutes of seated time to eat lunch



2. Recess should be scheduled before lunchtime, not after



# Uncovering some answers

- Statewide survey of all 1,043 elementary school principals, returned 126 responses
- Visited 31 schools:
  - Interviews
  - Tours
  - Timing lunch periods





# Time to eat rarely followed recommended seat time for all students

- **82 of the surveyed principals** said none of their students had at least 20 minutes of seated lunch time
- **12 of the principals visited** thought their students had at least 20 minutes of seated lunch time





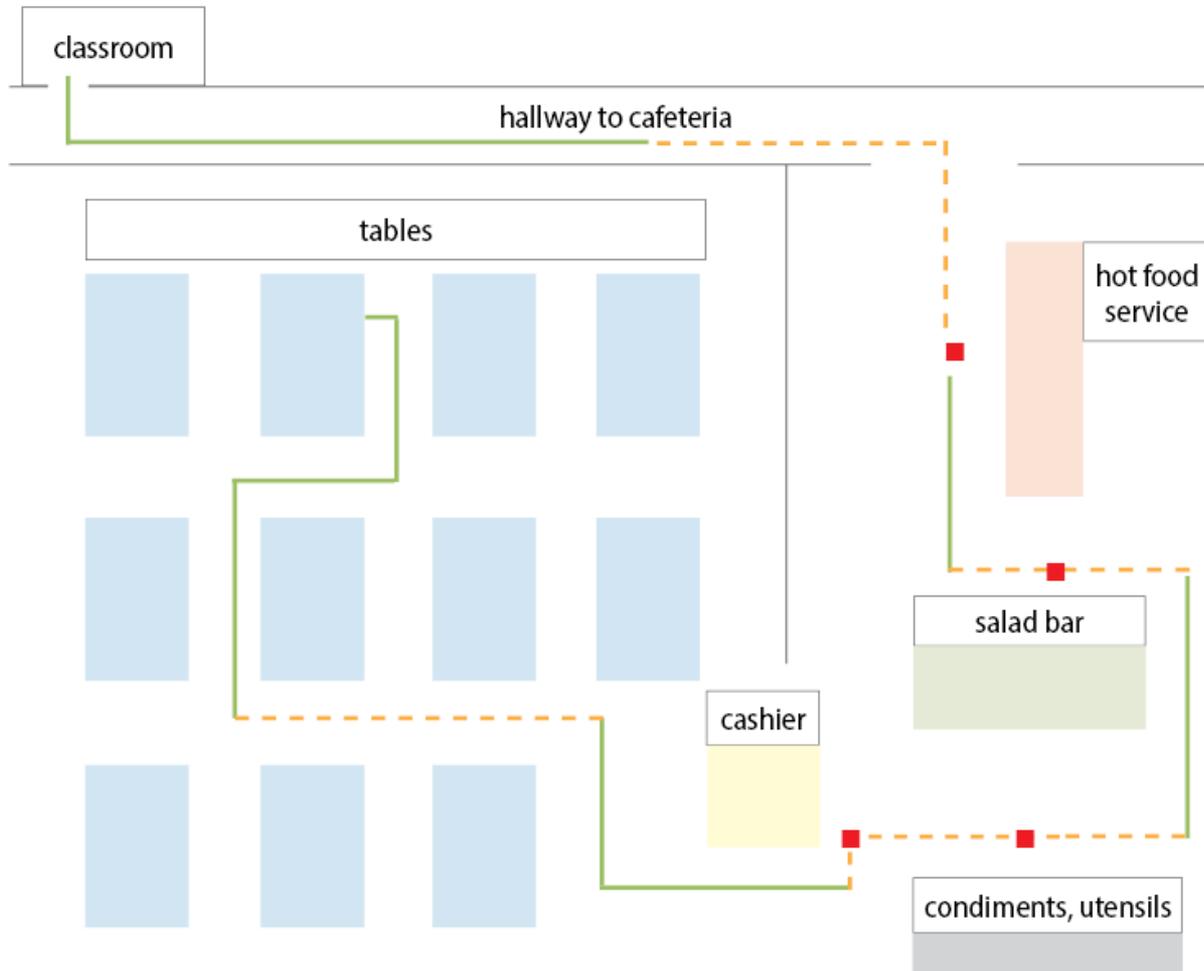
# What we observed

- 30 of 31 schools visited did not ensure at least 20 minutes of seated lunchtime
- Of these, 14 did not ensure at least 20 minutes of seated lunch time for any of the students we observed





# What takes away seated time at lunch?





# More than half of surveyed principals do not schedule recess before lunch

- **66 of the surveyed principals** said none of their students had recess before lunch
- **7 of the principals visited** scheduled recess before lunch for all students
- **1 of the principals visited** prioritized recess before lunch when creating schedule





# What prevents principals from following these two leading practices?



Limited facilities,  
including multi-  
purpose cafeterias

Insufficient staff

Problems scheduling  
around instructional  
time, mandated  
breaks, and special  
classes





# What prevents principals from following these two leading practices?



Scheduling conflicts

Limited staff to supervise children

Shared or inadequate facilities





# Some schools have found solutions



Making lunch a high priority

Willing to adjust schedules

Monitoring lunch lines for efficiency and making changes





# Some schools have found solutions



Making the practice  
a priority

Support from other  
advocates

Sharing research  
related to the  
practice





# Recommendations

## To the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

- ✓ Update the WAC to define minimum seat time
- ✓ Work with schools to overcome barriers
- ✓ Work with stakeholders to identify solutions

## Guidance to all Washington school districts

- ✓ Adopt lunch scheduling policies that align with best practices
- ✓ Monitor schools to ensure compliance
- ✓ Work with advocates and stakeholders

# Contact Information



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# We visited the following schools during our site visits:

Elementary school	County	Elementary school	County
Beverly	Snohomish	Purdy	Pierce
Carson	Pierce	Raymond	Pacific
Columbia Crest Academy	Pierce	Renton Park	King
Freeman	Spokane	Robert Gray	Grays Harbor
Garfield	Thurston	Roosevelt	Clark
Gilbert	Yakima	Sacajawea	King
Graham	Pierce	Soos Creek	King
Hallett	Spokane	Southworth	Thurston
Julia Butler Hansen	Thurston	Stevens	King
Hockinson Heights	Clark	Suquamish	Kitsap
Lacey	Thurston	Thompson	Pierce
Logan	Spokane	Toutle Lake	Cowlitz
Maple Grove School	Clark	Washington	King
Mountain Way	Snohomish	West Mercer	King
Mukilteo	Snohomish	Willapa	Pacific
Prosser Heights	Benton		



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