

Is your child getting enough time to eat? Kitsap schools aim for 20 minutes <https://www.kitsapsun.com/story/news/local/2019/10/18/your-child-getti...>

## Is your child getting enough time to eat? Kitsap schools aim for 20 minutes

Chris Henry, Kitsap Sun Published 4:00 p.m. PT Oct. 18, 2019 | Updated 4:21 p.m. PT Oct. 18, 2019



Third-graders Landon Selph, 8, front, and Cayden Heath, 8, eat their lunches in the cafeteria at Crownhill Elementary School in Bremerton on Tuesday. Crownhill's principal said the school is successful most days in ensuring most students get a full 20 minutes to sit down and eat their lunch. (Photo: MEEGAN M. REID / KITSAP SUN)

**BREMERTON** — It's lunchtime at Crownhill Elementary School.

Third-graders who are buying lunch line up to punch their student IDs into the keypad. They stream on either side of the salad bar, loading their trays with lettuce, slaw, cut-up veggies and fruit. A food service worker dishes out hamburgers and waffle fries. Next stop, condiments and napkins.

As the last of the students sits down to eat, Jessica Delgado, kitchen lead, and her assistant move briskly to refill trays with burgers and fries, ready for the next group of kids shuttling through the cafeteria.

Crownhill is lucky, says Principal Teneka Morley-Short. It's the only elementary school of seven in Bremerton School District with a dedicated cafeteria. That's one less hurdle she has to clear when setting the master schedule so students have adequate time to eat.

Instructional time, enrollment per class, lunch prep time, custodial staffing and teachers' break time all get factored into the schedule.

"All of it's important. There's a lot of moving pieces. They move around a lot of times," Morley-Short said.

Having enough time to eat is especially important for students at schools like Crownhill, where 63.5% qualify for free- and reduced-cost meals. For low-income students, eating at school may be their main source of nutrition each day.

A recent performance audit of lunchtime scheduling practices in Washington elementary schools found that not all students get the recommended minimum of 20 minutes sitting-down time to eat lunch, although in about half of the 31 schools visited, at least some of the students get the recommended amount of time to eat.

"I would be pretty comfortable in saying everybody has 20 minutes of seat time," Morley-Short said.

## ***Recess before lunch a growing trend***

Crownhill is one of several schools in Kitsap County to schedule recess before lunch, another recommendation of the SAO's audit report and an emerging trend across the nation. Twelve states strongly encourage schools to adopt recess before lunch policies, according to the audit. Washington is not among them.

Those third-graders sitting down to their burgers and waffle fries had just come in from climbing, running, kicking a soccer ball and chasing each other around the playground.

"I like it," said Delgado, the kitchen lead. "I know they eat more because they work up an appetite playing so hard at recess time, so when they come in they're starving and they actually eat what's on their trays."

That's the idea, said Morley-Short, although Crownhill, now in its second year of recess before lunch, had to reverse the switch for kindergarteners this year. It was taking too long to herd the little ones in from the playground, cutting into their lunchtime.



Third-grader Victoria Elzinga, 8, left, swings during recess at Crownhill Elementary School in Bremerton on Tuesday. A state auditor's report on elementary students' lunchtime recommended recess before lunch to encourage students to work up an appetite before eating. (Photo: MEEGAN M. REID / KITSAP SUN)

Students at Crownhill have been trained to "freeze" when the recess whistle blows and make their way by groups to line up, which keeps the flow toward the cafeteria moving. Hand washing at first seemed like a big hurdle, but a large jug of hand sanitizer and a staff member at the doorway giving a squirt to each student proved a workable solution, Morley-Short said.

Third-grader Antonio Sanchez is one of several students at Crownhill who said they like the change.

"You get all your energy out, then you can eat so you get more education so you can learn and read," Sanchez said.

And there are practical reasons, he added. "Having lunch and then recess, you eat and then you go run a lot and then you might throw up. That's why I think you should have recess and then lunch."

### ***Kitsap schools aim for 20-minute lunch***

***The state audit found that principals at most schools visited overestimated the amount of actual seated lunchtime their students received.*** The state's regulation on school lunchtime is notably vague about how much is enough. ***Washington's Administrative Code states, "The school breakfast and school lunch periods shall allow a reasonable amount of time for each child to take care of personal hygiene and enjoy a complete meal."***

The audit calls for more clarity at the state and local level. ***"Without defining a 'reasonable' amount of time to meet requirements, schools may reduce seat time to accommodate other priorities, which may not align with leading practices," the audit states.***





Third-grader Nakaila Wray, 8, takes sip of chocolate milk during lunchtime at Crownhill Elementary School in Bremerton on Tuesday. (Photo: MEEGAN M. REID / KITSAP SUN)

The 20-minute minimum is already standard throughout Kitsap County, however, according to school officials representing each of the five districts.

"This is something our principals, district leaders and our school board have been looking at for some time," said North Kitsap School District spokeswoman Jenn Markaryan. "Schools have worked on ways to expedite the transitions to and from lunch."

"These recommendations are very much in alignment with our district's focus on social-emotional learning," said Lynn Johnson, Bremerton's child and nutrition services director. "Research shows — and we know from experience — that hunger negatively impacts a student's health, well-being, and ability to focus and learn at school.

### ***Principals: No new regs, thanks***

### ***Principals and nutrition officials say they welcome guidance from the state but they don't need more regulation.***

"Each school has unique challenges when it comes to scheduling lunch," Johnson said. "While we agree with many of the findings in the report, we believe that recommendations for research/evidence-based best practices would be more helpful to districts than legislated mandates."

Case in point: West Hills STEM Academy enrolls more than 600 students from preschool through eighth grade with no dedicated cafeteria (Crownhill has nearly 400). A curtain in West Hills' gym divides health and fitness classes from students on the other side eating lunch.

"I have one gym and a flex space in the middle school," Principal Lisa Heaman said. "All of these spaces are always in use."

Commandeering the flex space for lunch would mean cutting into instructional time. Having children eat in their classrooms is an option, but it would negatively impact the facilities department, Heaman said.

Heaman and Morley-Short said principals need flexibility and support to manage their own scheduling logistics.

"My hope is that a holistic approach will be taken to achieve the goal of more seat time," said Ariane Shanley, director of nutrition services for South Kitsap School District. "Additionally, if legislation and model policies are being developed, funding for sustainable change should be part of the discussion. This is a complex issue with many competing needs for time. Any regulatory mandate should keep the impact on the whole school day in mind."

