



# CREATING CAFETERIA ENVIRONMENTS THAT PROMOTE HEALTHY EATING

Compiled by the Whatcom Farm-to-School Support Team  
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The cafeteria is an important classroom where children can learn to develop healthy eating habits, nurture social relationships, and nourish their bodies in order to thrive. Research has shown that the cafeteria environment makes a difference in what students eat which, in turn, affects their physical well-being, academic achievement, and classroom behavior. This document discusses many features of the cafeteria environment, highlighting techniques, strategies and resources that can help promote healthy eating in school lunchrooms.

## CAFETERIA TEAM VALUES

- **Establish a Team** - Many schools across the country have found that efforts to create a positive eating environment are most effective when the process involves administrators, teachers, food service staff, recess/lunch supervisors, and custodians. The first step is to establish a team who will work to set goals, identify key values and expectations, and develop and implement a plan. Engaging parents and students at various points in the process is also helpful.



[Principal, not food experts, most influential in the school cafeteria](#) by Michele Leardo, Brookings Institution, 2016.

[Order in the Cafeteria: Tips for Improving Behavior and Supervision](#) by Gary Hopkins, Education World, 2010.

[The Cafeteria: Creating a Positive Mealtime Experience](#) by the American Occupational Therapy Assoc., 2013.

- **Reinforce School Values** - Establishing and expanding existing school values to the cafeteria can go a long way toward setting clear expectations for behavior in the cafeteria, as well as every other part of the school.

[A More Peaceful Lunchtime](#), Responsive Classroom, 2007.

[The Cafeteria is Your Classroom: How Principals Could Leverage Lunch Duty](#) by Mitch Center, Edutopia, 2016.

[Focusing on School Culture to Strengthen Farm to School](#) by Vermont FEED.

[How Mealtimes Can Set the Stage for Better Learning, Behavior and Health in Children: Handouts for Schools](#) by Montana Team Nutrition, 2011.

[The Value of Consistent Expectations](#) by Eric Hathaway, Kickboard Blog, 2016.

[Re-thinking School Lunch – A Planning Resource](#) – A Planning Framework from the Center for EcoLiteracy, 2010.

## SCHEDULING AND TRANSITIONS

- **Transitions** - Transitions to and from the cafeteria are important in setting the tone for behavior in the cafeteria and back to the classroom. Teaching transitions is like teaching any other activity - observing the skills that need to be taught, identifying expectations, demonstrating appropriate behavior, and allowing students to practice are key steps in assisting students with transitions to and from the cafeteria.

[Smooth Transitions in the Classroom](#) by Brandi Jordan, Really Good Teachers Forum, 2017.

- **Lunch Time and Schedule** - Allowing adequate time for students to eat ensures that students are consuming enough nutrients, which in turn affects academic achievement and school behavior. Research has found that giving students 20-30 minutes of seated time (after they have received their meal) is adequate for eating lunch at a good pace. Adequate lunchtime also affects how many healthful foods are eaten and reduces food waste. Decreasing the number of students in the cafeteria by increasing the number of lunch periods is also good practice for creating a calmer, quieter eating environment.

[In School Cafeterias, a Longer Lunch is a more Healthful Lunch, Study Says](#) by Karen Kaplan, Los Angeles Times, Sept. 11, 2015.

[Longer Lunches, Smarter Students?: The Controversy of the 10 Minute or 1 Hour Lunch Periods](#) by Grace Chen, Public School Review, 2017.

[Lunch Time at School: How Much is Enough?](#) Policy Brief, Seattle Public Schools.



- **Breakfast After the Bell** - Kids often do not eat a proper breakfast, offered either by the school or by their parents, because of the rush to get to class on time. Offering a simple nutritious breakfast to all students after school has started, helps students concentrate throughout the day and perform better academically, while reducing any stigma associated with breakfast before school in the cafeteria. In fact, many schools can fund free breakfast for all students with the federal “[Community Eligibility Provision](#),” and most schools find that a successful breakfast program improves their whole meal program.



[Making Breakfast Part of the School Day: What’s the right alternative breakfast service model for my school?](#) by Food Research Action Center (FRAC).

[Secondary School Principals’ Breakfast After the Bell Toolkit: Tips and Resources for a Successful Breakfast Program](#) by FRAC and National Association of Secondary School Principals (NAASSP), 2017.

[School Breakfast Program](#) by FRAC.

[School Breakfast: Start the Day Right](#) by Action for Healthy Kids.

- **Recess Before Lunch (RBL)** – RBL is just what it implies – the students go to recess first and then eat lunch. Schools have found that by implementing RBL, students have decreased behavioral problems in the hall and lunchroom, are more settled upon returning to class, and consume more food which yields less waste. A variety of resources are available to provide guidance in establishing a new schedule, evaluating RBL, and overcoming barriers to the transition.

[Recess Before Lunch](#) by Peaceful Playgrounds.

[Recess Before Lunch](#) by Lance Fuller for the National Education Assoc.

[Recess Before Lunch, A Guide for Success](#) by Montana’s Team Nutrition.

[Recess Before Lunch Can Mean Happier, Healthier Kids](#) by Education World.

[Recess / Recess Before Lunch Resources](#) compiled by the USDA.

## HEALTHY LUNCHROOM DESIGN

There are many physical features of the school cafeteria to consider in creating a healthy eating environment.

- **Physical Design** - Interest is growing in how the physical design of school buildings affects school policies and practices and the subsequent eating behaviors and norms among children. Guidelines and strategies have been developed to promote healthy eating behaviors in schools and more research continues to be done.

[Healthy Eating Design Guidelines for School Architecture](#) by Tuang, T.T. et al, Preventing Chronic Disease, 2013.

[A Cafeteria Designed for Me](#): How Ideo Helped the San Francisco Unified School District Redesign its Food System.

[Lunch’d](#) – A video about implementing Smarter Lunchrooms strategies in school cafeterias.

[Washington Smarter Lunchroom Toolkit: Making the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice](#) – Tools for implementing Smarter Lunchrooms strategies in school cafeterias.

- **Lunchroom Atmosphere** - Lunchroom atmosphere is gaining attention among researchers in how the physical environment affects student’s food choices and consumption in school cafeterias.

[Best Practices for Lunchroom Atmosphere](#) – Strategies included on the Smarter Lunchrooms Scorecard.

[Ideas to Make an Elementary Lunchroom Quieter](#) by Annabelle Brown.



- **Table arrangements** - How the tables are arranged in the cafeteria, how many students per table, the style of table, and configuration of seating are all important factors in giving students opportunities to experience positive social interactions in the cafeteria and the nutrition they need to succeed.

[Cafeteria Tables Can Change the Whole School Atmosphere](#) by Carroll Seating, 2016.

- **Music in the Cafeteria** - Some schools play relaxing music, or invite musicians to perform, in the cafeteria during lunch to create a calming atmosphere.

[The Cafeterias Are Alive with the Sound of Music](#) by Cheyenne Meyer, PrimeroEdge, 2016.

## MANAGING CAFETERIA BEHAVIOR

- Setting Expectations** - Setting clear expectations early on in the school year helps to create a positive cafeteria environment. Make sure that recess/lunch supervisors have the training they need to do this well. Employing older students or “student monitors” to model and monitor behavior is also advantageous, as is having additional certified staff on lunchroom duty. Soliciting feedback from students, as well as enlisting students to create solutions, is a positive approach to help with cafeteria behavior.
 

[Appropriate Lunchroom Behavior](#) by Kenneth Shore, Education World.

[A Lunchroom Solution: Positive Behavior Support](#) by Lori Korinek, The Positive Classroom, 2008.

[Bringing Calm to the Cafeteria – A Success Story](#) by Emily Morecock, et al., 2009.

[Controlling Cafeteria Behavior](#) by Kenneth Shore, Education World.

[Order in the Cafeteria: Tips for Improving Behavior and Supervision](#) by Gary Hopkins, Education World, 2010.
- Teaching Table Manners** - Teaching table manners in the cafeteria can set a positive expectation where everyone shares the same respectful rules. Think of the cafeteria as your favorite dining room where students are treated as customers and respect and table manners are part of the expectation.
 

[3 School Cafeteria Etiquette Rules Every Kid Should Know](#), Smart Kids 101.

[How Mealtimes Can Set the Stage for Better Learning, Behavior and Health in Children: Handouts for Schools](#) by Montana Team Nutrition, 2011.
- Roles of Adults in the Cafeteria** – Having adults in the cafeteria to engage and interact with students during lunch promotes the social-emotional growth of students and a positive eating environment. It is important to have a clear and consistent understanding of staff roles in the cafeteria. In some schools, teachers are contracted to eat with students in the cafeteria a specific number of days per week. This has been reported to significantly enhance social interactions and community-building at the lunch table, as well as teacher-student relationships.
 

[Comfortable Cafeterias: Positive, Pleasant Mealtimes in School](#) (a video)

[Cafeteria Management](#), Education World, 2009.

CAFETERIA EXPECTATIONS		
BE SAFE	BE RESPECTFUL	BE RESPONSIBLE
 Be patient and wait your turn	Use kind words, like “please” and “thank you”	 Clean up your area
Stay seated during the meal	Listen to adults and respond quickly	Use a “Level 2” voice (quiet conversation)
Eat only your own food	 Be inclusive of others	 Take time to recycle/compost

## WASTE MANAGEMENT

The many strategies designed to reduce food waste in the cafeteria are also intended to increase the amount of fresh and healthy food that students consume. Encouraging students to “take what they want and eat what they take,” will help reduce food waste. Food Service staff also can reduce food waste by effectively managing the quantities of food that must be thrown out each day for food safety reasons. A related goal is to reduce the amount of food packaging that is generated in school food service. Utilizing bulk condiments, metal utensils, washable trays, and limiting use of plastic serving cups and straws are some ways to reduce waste in the cafeteria. Recycling bottles and cans and food composting are more environmentally friendly ways to manage waste in school cafeterias. Raising awareness among students and parents about how to pack a waste-free lunch from home with reusable containers also will help reduce waste.

[Reducing Food Waste: What Schools Can Do Today](#) – USDA infographic.

[Schools Strive for Waste Free Lunches](#), Education World, 2010.

[Waste Free Lunches](#) – WasteFreeLunches.org

- **Functional Waste Disposal Systems** - Setting up a waste station in the cafeteria requires a commitment from a team of school staff. Factors to consider when setting up a system are: Where the waste station is located, how the students access it, and how the flow of traffic moves through it. Employing older students to help younger students separate waste into correct bins is a way to increase student engagement with waste management in the cafeteria.

[Reducing School Cafeteria Waste](#), Get Energy Smart! Now! 2010.

[Creative Solutions to Ending School Food Waste](#), USDA 2017.



- **Clean up Expectations** - Establish expectations early in the school year about the importance for students to take responsibility for cleaning up their eating area and disposing of waste properly. This teaches respect for the cafeteria environment and the other students who share the eating space.