



Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
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PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Report Highlights

Elementary School Students Would Benefit If Schools Followed Lunch Scheduling Leading Practices

Obesity in school-age children is a growing concern across the nation. Obesity rates have more than tripled since the 1970s. Washington Governor Jay Inslee championed the Healthiest Next Generation Initiative in 2015, which encouraged state and local agencies to collaborate toward an objective “to help our children maintain a healthy weight, enjoy active lives and eat well.” In fiscal years 2017 and 2018, the state and federal government spent nearly \$240 million on various childhood nutrition programs designed to serve nutritious meals to school-age children and promote lifelong healthful living. The state’s Superintendent of Public Instruction, Chris Reykdal, has expressed concerns regarding childhood obesity, poor student health and the high monetary investment the state makes in these nutrition programs. After reviewing a list of potential performance audit topics provided by the Office of the Washington State Auditor, he asked for a performance audit examining these issues.

Ineffective lunchtime scheduling can present issues for younger students. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and school districts play a role in influencing student lunch practices. This audit examines lunchtime scheduling practices in elementary schools.

What lunch scheduling practices could schools implement to achieve better student outcomes, such as improved behavior and increased consumption of healthy foods?

Research shows that the way schools schedule lunch can significantly affect students’ eating habits. Students who have more time to eat their lunch consume more nutritious food and waste less food. Education and nutrition groups suggest a minimum of 20 minutes seated lunchtime. Furthermore, students who have recess before lunch also eat more fruits and vegetables and drink more milk, waste less food, and display better overall behavior. Several states have policies encouraging school districts to adopt recess before lunch.



Photo: State Auditor’s Office.

The time scheduled for lunch differs from the time actually available to sit and eat it, sometimes significantly.

What barriers might prevent elementary schools from using these practices?

Nearly all 31 schools visited during the audit did not give all students the recommended minimum seated lunchtime of 20 minutes. Principals are responsible for setting school schedules, often without specific guidance around lunchtime. Most principals did not realize the actual amount of time all their students had to eat lunch and tended to overestimate it. About half of principals interviewed who allocate less than 20 minutes of seat time believe students already have enough time to eat.

Principals cited many challenges to ensuring 20 minutes of seated time at lunch for every student, including limited facilities, schedule conflicts and resource constraints. However, other schools and states have found solutions to these challenges. Schools and students would benefit if OSPI more clearly defined the recommended seated lunchtime in state regulation.

More than half of schools surveyed or observed did not schedule recess before lunch. Principals cited multiple challenges to implementing recess before lunch, similar to those noted above for ensuring 20 minutes of seated time. It is possible to overcome some of these challenges with prioritization, organization and coordination.

State Auditor's Conclusions

Childhood obesity and poor nutrition among Washington's elementary school students have been areas of concern for the state's Superintendent of Public Instruction. We worked with the superintendent to identify options for a performance audit that could identify meaningful ways schools could address these issues.

Discussions of obesity and nutrition in schools tend to focus on ways to encourage children to be more active, or on the types of foods they are served at school. While those issues are clearly important, what this audit shows is that the way schools structure lunch time can also significantly affect children's eating habits and their performance in the classroom.

Research suggests that two leading practices — releasing children to recess before lunch and then giving them enough time to eat — increase the likelihood that children will eat more and healthier foods. Unfortunately, our results also show that most of the schools we looked at have not adopted these practices. There can be legitimate reasons for this, including facility limitations and fiscal constraints.

But we also saw that schools whose principals made lunch-scheduling practices a priority were better able to make these practices work. In our view, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction can play an important role by requiring schools to give students adequate seat time to eat, as well as encouraging and facilitating the practice of recess before lunch.



Photo: State Auditor's Office.

Recommendations

We made a series of recommendations to OSPI related to lunch scheduling structured around implementing leading practices. We also gave general guidance to all Washington school districts that can help them address the barriers that impede principals from following these leading practices.