

**Date: December 2021**

**Source of Report:** [LD 655, \(Resolve 2021, Chapter 74\)](#), Resolve, Directing the Department of Education To Survey School Administrative Units and Review the Feasibility of a 30-minute Lunch Period for Students

### **Survey Results for 30 Minute Lunch Legislation**

As a response to the passing of [LD 655, \(Resolve 2021, Chapter 74\)](#), the Maine Department of Education Child Nutrition Team sent out a survey to Maine’s food service directors on the anticipated impacts of this legislation. The survey went out for 14 days and then was extended 10 more days so more directors could complete the survey. Questions in this survey aimed to gain a sense of the current length of lunch periods in districts across Maine, and broken down into elementary, middle, and high schools. The survey also included questions for directors to express how they perceive this legislation, the benefits and challenges that would result, and the support they would need for this legislation to move forward.

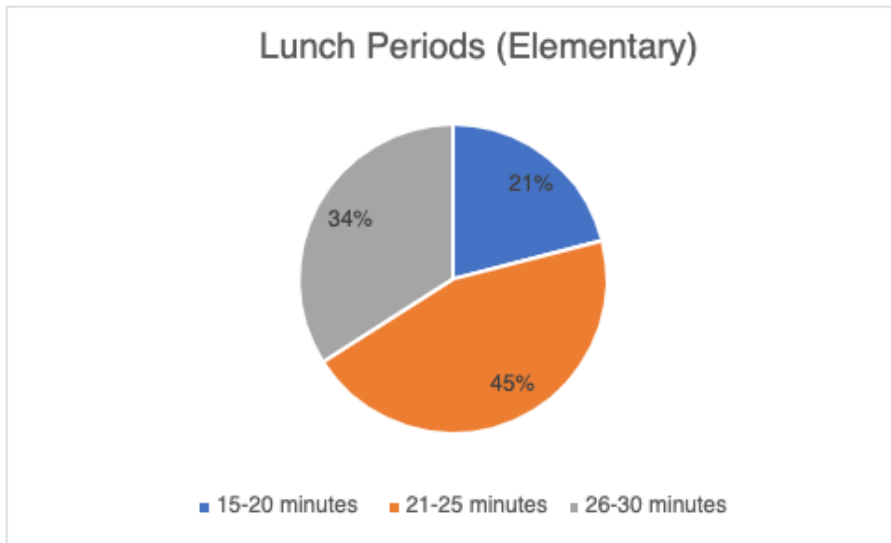
**Total responses: 87\***

\*Not all respondents answered all questions.

#### **Question 1: How long are the lunch period in your district, on average, in elementary school(s)?**

Respondents answered by using the drop-down options for lunch period times. Figure 1 shows percentages of how directors responded to Question 1.

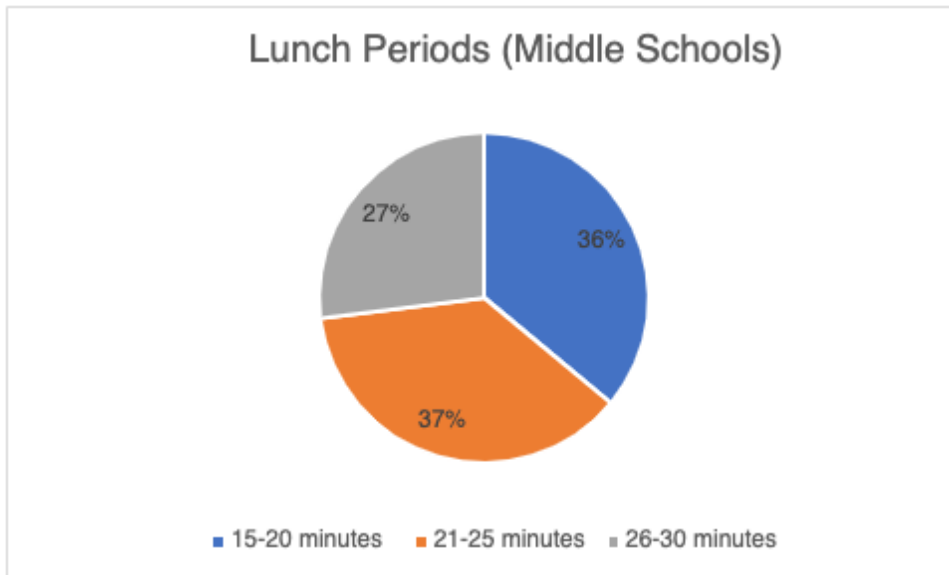
Figure 1.



**Question 2: How long are the lunch period in your district, on average, in middle school(s)?**

Respondents answered by using the drop-down options for lunch period times. Figure 2 shows percentages of how directors responded to Question 2.

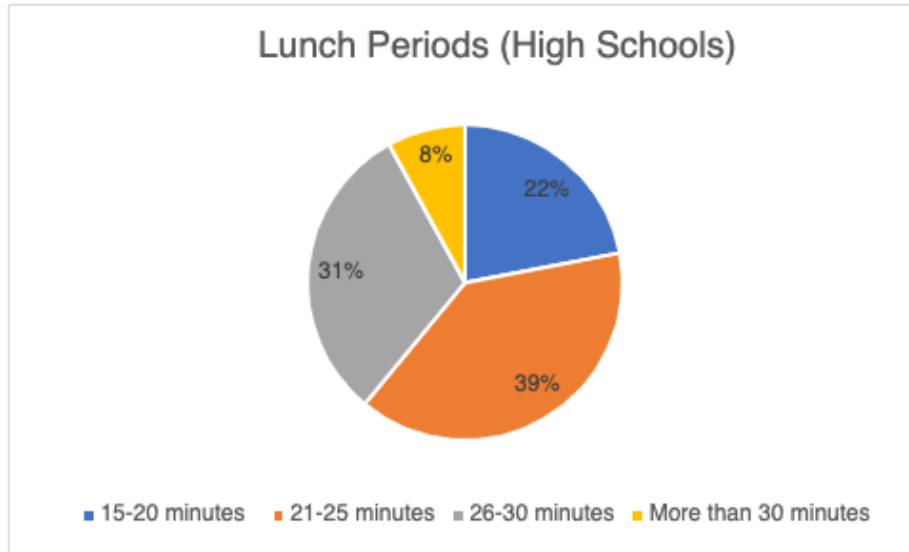
Figure 2.



**Question 3: How long are the lunch period in your district, on average, in high school(s)?**

Respondents answered by using the drop-down options for lunch period times. Figure 3 shows percentages of how directors responded to Question 3.

Figure 3.



**Takeaways for questions 1 through 3:**

Overall, the majority of respondents indicated that lunch periods in their districts’ elementary, middle, and high schools are 21-25 minutes long. It should be noted, however, that over 20% of elementary and high schools, and 36% of middle schools in these responses have lunch periods that are only 15-20 minutes long. Another interesting observation is that high schools were the only schools with more than 30-minute lunch periods (8%). This could be because of off-campus lunch privileges, or more schedule flexibility at the high school level. Much of the discourse on the topic of lunch period time is centered on how younger students would benefit from a 30-minute lunch period.

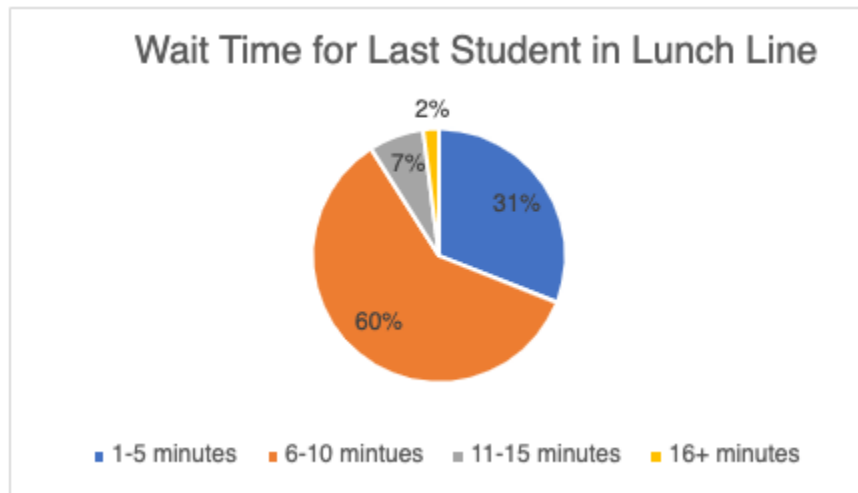
**Question 4: How long is the wait time for last student in line (estimate)?**

This question aimed to gain a sense of the true amount of time students have to eat. The reality is that while school nutrition programs work hard to get students through the lunch line quickly, the last students in line will have a significant amount of eating time taken away due to waiting in line.

Most respondents answered giving a range (i.e. 5-10 minutes), so I broke the responses into four categories:

- 1-5 minutes
- 6-10 minutes
- 11-15 minutes
- 16+ minutes

Figure 4.



**Question 5: What systems are in place to ensure every child has sufficient time to eat?**

Responses were clustered into the following categories:

- Staff efficiency
- Pre-portioning menu items
- Food delivered to classrooms
- Teacher support (monitoring the cafeteria and letting students know when there are 5 minutes left)
- Students at end of line can finish meals in office or classroom
- Flexibility—students can stay until done (unless gym is needed right after lunch), beyond lunch period (separate periods for students with special needs/sensory disorders)
- Multiple lines and points of sale
- Staggered lunch periods
- No talking for the last 5 minutes of lunch

Survey respondents indicate that regardless of the length of the lunch period, all students are permitted additional time in order to finish their lunches.

Highlighted responses:

“Those decisions are made at the building administrator level. We have attempted to address this at administrative meetings, but with little success.”

“Students in K-3 are given 30 minutes and 4-8 are given 25-26 minutes. Our cook is ready and prepared to serve the minute students line up, which is the minute they enter the lunch area. Our point of sale (POS) attendee is ready to enter students into the system and our student body is so small that we have plenty of time to serve and for them eat in the time allotted.”

“The school nutrition department tries to get students through as fast as they can in order to give students adequate time to eat. They do this by pre-portioning menu items for fast grab-n-go meals.”

“The teachers monitor the lunchroom. The last 5 minutes is no talking, it is time to finish eating.”

**Question 6: Are there any anticipated challenges to shifting to a 30-minute lunch period specific to your district (if applicable)?**

Identified challenges:

- School scheduling
- Social distancing (COVID rules to be considered)
- Behavioral issues (students unable to sit for 30 minutes)
- Staffing issues (longer lunch—more staff needed)
- Cafeteria space needed for gym after lunch period

Highlighted responses:

“Elementary specials would have to be moved and adjusted. The high school would not be an issue.”

“If some kids are done in 10 minutes and then they sit for 20 minutes, it could be challenging because kids get restless.”

“Building admins report that they would need additional lunch room staffing, which is not available, and they are concerned about management issues if kids are done eating but sitting in the cafeteria with nothing to do. Since the additional time would need to come from somewhere else in the schedule, they worry about a cut in recess time. Longer lunch periods will interfere with phys. ed at two schools due to shared space. Food service program staff would likely need longer shift times, might experience complications in production and food quality (e.g., if time between meals is cut in order to lengthen the lunch period), and share the building admins’ concern about too much idle time in the lunch room/cuts to recess once students are done eating and can’t leave.”

**Question 7: What kind of support would you need to combat these challenges (if applicable)?**

Identified support needs:

- More schedule flexibility
- Longer school day
- A state mandate
- A post-COVID world
- Child nutrition support
- More space
- Extend kitchen staff work day

- Support from superintendents/principals/staff
- Funding (mainly for staffing)
- Awareness of importance (for administration)
- Fine with current length of lunch period

Highlighted responses:

“We need adults & children to get the vaccine or someone needs to find more "space" for distance" eating in the schools.”

“A State mandate would go a long way. Without it, principals continue to chip away at the lunch period in order to accommodate other programs.”

“Unless it is made mandatory, I am not sure what anyone can do.”

“It would need to be a mandate; lunch is always behind scheduling of classes in importance.”

“Honestly, I think we do fine with the 25 minutes that they have.”

“Additional physical education space for two of our six schools and additional staff to cover the lunch rooms - both of which are impossibilities at this time.”

**Question 8: What are the anticipated benefits to shifting to a 30 minute lunch period?**

Identified benefits:

- Decreased complaints from parents
- Students will be able to enjoy mealtime without rushing
- More time to eat, especially for younger kids
- Helpful for students waiting in line the longest
- Fewer kids hungry; better learning outcomes
- More time for staff to connect with kids
- No benefits (small district, would interfere too much with schedules)
- Social time
- Food waste reduction
- Time to digest
- Ease for nutrition staff (cleaning and prep time between lunch periods)
- Higher participation (a la cart purchases)
- Opportunity to serve healthier items (raw carrots—take longer to eat)
- Calmer, less rushed lunch space

Highlighted responses:

“Yes, we have had complaints from parents that their students come home hungry and that they did not have adequate time to eat. The longer lunch time will also decrease food waste, the size of a reimbursable meal takes time to consume, students should be able to sit, relax and enjoy their meal without feeling rushed.”

“I think 25 minutes is better. 30 minutes is too long for too many k-8 graders.”

“We could conduct more one-on-one interaction with students, we could introduce sample or tasting sessions. We could introduce an educational component to meal time. Most importantly, though, it would prevent students from feeling rushed to consume their meals.”

“We are a small district and we see no benefits. All schools have a 25-minute lunch period.”

“Increased student consumption, less waste from student not consuming meals.”

“Children would be able to finish their meals and not be so rushed to do so and end up not finishing. They would also not have to choose between socializing and eating. They would have time to do both.”

“Kindergarten, first, and second graders will have more time to eat. These are the age groups that I feel would benefit the most from having longer lunch period. From what I observed being in lunchrooms, the younger students in K - 2 needed more time to just get used to going through the line, let alone time to eat. Then there is the dumping of the trays, which adds to the time the little ones need. The students in the middle from grades 3-6 - these students like to eat but they also like to use a lot of their time socializing, which uses up time they would have to eat. This group overlaps a little with the next in that the next group will eat really fast and horse around at the end of the lunch, making them hard to handle while they are sitting waiting for 10 minutes before they can go on to the next thing. If the schools had a way to let the last two groups move on to their next thing when they were done eating, there would be a lot less trips for some students to the principal’s office. You would need more staff so you could accommodate for students who are ready to go on to the next thing after they are done eating.”

“If we had staffing to run a la carte we could have time allotted for that, more time to clean in between, would make it easier to stagger batch cooking.”

“None... students already have spare time to fill. Any longer will lead to misbehavior.”

“I see no benefit. The last 5 min. of our lunches are mostly spent with kids waiting for the bell and starting to get antsy.”

“I don't see one at the lower levels; it is hard enough to get them to sit for 15-20 minutes at a time.”

“Less chaotic rush to get through lunch lines, more time for students to adequately pick out their choices.”

“The kids do not have enough time to eat so a lot of times when it's time to pack it up, they are shoving food into their mouths. Our kids would very much benefit for more time.”

“Students would have more time to eat their meal and maybe offer more healthy options as they take longer to eat, and we would have more prepping time in between lunches.”

“There are no benefits for our school. We only have 20 students K-8. 20 minutes is plenty of time.”

“None - the consensus is that the district and/or each individual school already has the ability to decide on and revise appropriate lunch periods and does so on a regular basis.”

“Eliminating food waste, more time to consume all meal components, alleviate stress of time to grab meal and consume, social time with peers, can be more creative with menu options.”

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