

The Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Testimony from Heather Whitaker, 2020 Maine Teacher of the Year

In Support of
L.D. # 655
March 24, 2021

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Heather Whitaker, I am an alternative education teacher at Gorham Middle School where I have taught for 20 years. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of L.D. #655 An Act To Require at Least a 30 Minute Lunch Period.

In a recent article in the Public School Review, Grace Chen reported that when the USDA set new nutrition standards on food that is served in public schools, as a response to the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, more fresh produce and salad bars were added to the school nutrition program. Experts say that this more nutritious food also takes more time to eat, which means kids may be served fresher, healthier fare, without sufficient lunch breaks to enjoy their meals.

“It takes more time to chew a whole apple than applesauce,” Helen Phillips, former president of the School Nutrition Association, told USA Today. *“Eating an entrée salad takes longer than eating a cheeseburger or chicken nuggets, because of the crunching and chewing of the raw vegetables.”* Research suggests that when people consume meals faster, they tend to take in more calories and still feel hungry much sooner. Simply put, a hungry child can’t learn and shorter lunch periods make it challenging for a student to pay attention and be an active participant for the rest of the school day.

When surveyed, my students shared the following about their 29 minute lunch period:

“I have never felt like my lunch was too short. I wouldn’t complain if it was longer. It is the only time I can walk with my friends in other classes.” -8th grader Gorham Middle School

“I love the opportunity to also go outside with my friends after we eat. I feel more refreshed after being outside.” -8th grader Gorham Middle School

“I like our 30 minute lunch periods. You can take your time to enjoy your lunch rather than rushing. When I have to rush to eat, first of all it doesn’t let me enjoy my lunch. And then I don’t feel full when I eat fast.” -7th grader Gorham Middle School

“We actually get a chance to talk to our friends. This is important to me because it’s nice to talk to people outside of class.” - 7th grader Gorham Middle School

Longer lunches are better because we can eat AND go outside. This may be the only time we can go outside all day.” -7th grader Gorham Middle School

“It makes kids happy! When kids are happy they can learn better and live longer.” - 7th graders Gorham Middle School

As shared above, longer lunch sessions also provide students an opportunity to socialize with peers and take a brain break from their academic tasks. As adults, we know that these breaks help us focus better.

A 30 minute lunch period should be a consistent norm across the State of Maine, not a “luxury” afforded to just certain students. Supporting this bill promotes food accessibility and addresses issues of equity for ALL students in Maine Public Schools.

Thank you for your time.

Heather Whitaker
2020 Maine Teacher of the Year