

Lunch Eating Times and Environments in BC Elementary and Middle Schools

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Background

School lunches are vital for children's nutrition and social connectedness^{1,2}. Adequate time to eat lunch improves behaviour, focus and well-being^{2,3}. The recommended minimum eating for school aged children is 20 minutes seated eating time, excluding transitions (washing up and collecting food)^{3,4}. This gives students enough time to eat their food, increases their consumption of fruits and vegetables, and wastes less food^{2,4}. Best practices also encourage a 'Play First' model, where students have outdoor activity before lunch^{1,5} (see [Schedule A](#) for a summary of these recommendations).

In Canada, daily school schedules are generally set by local school districts and individual schools, except in Nova Scotia⁶ and Prince Edward Island⁷, which have provincial policies around minimum lunch eating time. While British Columbia (BC) does not have a formal policy, the [BC School Food Toolkit](#) recommends providing children adequate time to eat lunch, noting that at least 20 minutes of seated eating increases food intake and reduces waste⁴.

Purpose

This policy scan aims to answer the following question: What are the current policies and practices regarding elementary and middle school lunch eating times locally, across BC and Canada?

Methods

Vancouver Island school district, elementary and middle school websites were reviewed for publicly available information on lunchtime policies, lunch eating duration and daily bell schedules in local, nearby or similar sized communities. Seven Vancouver Island school districts provided additional information on eating policies, environments and programs by email or phone (see [Schedule B](#) for more details). In addition, information from 29 mainland BC school districts (sampling the lower mainland, interior and northern communities) and all Canadian provincial and territorial websites for policies and recommendations on school lunch eating times and environment was also reviewed. The

POLICY SCAN

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review focused on school and district lunch eating time policies and daily schedules. It did not include an examination of the planning or timing of meal programs or constraints on eating spaces or other resources, although these topics were occasionally mentioned during discussions with school district administrators.

School and District Policy Scan

Summary of Elementary and Middle School Lunch Eating Times by Region

Region	School Websites Reviewed	Eating Length (mins)	Eat Before or After Outside/Play
Vancouver Island			
South Island	60	15-30	Majority before
Central Island	12	10-15	Varied
North Island	7	15-20	Varied
Other BC Regions			
Lower Mainland Schools	14	12-16	Varied; Majority after
Interior/ Northern Schools	13	10-40	Varied; Majority before

General Trends

Lunch Timing: Most schools have a lunch break between 45-60 minutes, with eating times ranging from 10-30 minutes. On Vancouver Island, the average lunch eating time of schools with schedule information (54) is 18 minutes, with 26 schools providing 20 minutes or more for lunch eating time. School websites did not specify whether the scheduled eating times included time for hand washing and collecting and putting away food.

Recess: Most schools offer two recess periods each day, typically a mid-morning snack and recess, followed by a lunch eating time and a second recess around noon. To ease transitions, some schools use bells to clearly separate lunch eating time from outdoor play. Some schools cap lunchtime outdoor recess at 45 minutes to reduce the likelihood of student conflicts.

Eating Location: Most students eat at desks in the classroom. However, in a small number of schools (< five), students eat in cafeterias or did not have restrictions around eating location (i.e. allowing students to eat outside). School space constraints limited the options of most schools in providing eating space outside of classrooms.

Lunch Programs: Most schools offer hot lunch or food programs daily or weekly (e.g. breakfast clubs, salad bars etc.). Some additional planning was needed to ensure programs did not impact seated eating time, including delivering food to the classrooms.

Supervision: Teachers, older students, lunch supervisors, educational assistants and support staff monitor lunch eating periods.

Screen Use & Work During Lunch: Most schools do not provide information regarding screen usage; some allow students to eat while listening to a teacher read.

School District Policies and Practices

Three school districts had publicly available policies or procedures related to minimum lunch time lengths. Several other districts did not have documented policies on lunch length but did share that they have practices or procedures related to healthy eating and break times.

Variations: Some schools/districts included in-class eating as instructional time. While the Provincial Collective Agreement between the BC Public School Employers' Association and the BC Teachers' Federation was sometimes cited as influencing lunch durations, no clear evidence supporting this influence was found. For example, lunch lengths may be based on minimum travel time required for substitute teachers to move between schools. Some schools consulted with their Parent Advisory Committees to set break times.

School District Policies

Delta (SD37)	The Delta School District Nutrition and Healthy Lifestyle Admin Procedure (2017) ⁸ requires that “students will be provided adequate time to eat their lunches, a minimum of 15 minutes. ”
Coast Mountains (SD82)	Coast Mountains School District’s School Nutrition Standards (2023) ⁹ allows schools to decide when and where food is offered. It defines the school’s role to: “provide consistent mealtimes and access to nourishing foods, ensure enough time to eat, aim for at least 20 minutes of seated time so that all types of eaters have time to enjoy their meal, and ensure students have a pleasant and safe eating space.” More information is available the Coast Mountains Food Programming website.
Cariboo-Chilcotin (SD27)	The Cariboo-Chilcotin School District Health Promoting Schools Policy 5141.1 (2006) ¹⁰ encourages schools to review their lunch time procedures to provide an eating environment that is conducive to a healthy mealtime, including adequate supervision and sufficient time to eat in clean and comfortable surroundings.

Provincial Policy Scan

Ensuring students have adequate time to eat and socialize during lunch is a priority for many Canadian provinces. While some have clear policies mandating minimum eating times, others provide general guidelines, leaving decisions to individual school districts or schools. This summary highlights publicly available policies and guidelines across all provinces and one territory. Two provinces, Nova Scotia⁷ and Prince Edward Island⁷, have enacted specific policies for primary schools that mandate a minimum of 20 minutes of seated eating time, while Ontario¹¹ recommends 20 minutes of seated eating time, but it is not mandated. See [Schedule C](#) for more details.

Prov	Policy/Guideline	Year	Eating Time	Other Recommendations
BC	BC School Food Toolkit ⁴	2025	Adequate time to eat	Notes children given at least 20 mins of seated eating time eat more and waste less, but it does not directly recommend an eating time.
AB	Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth ¹²	2012	Provide appropriate time	Notes students should have at least 20 mins to eat
SK	Nourishing Minds: Eat Well – Learn Well – Live Well ¹³	2019	Consider amount of eating time	Advises against screens during eating
MB	Moving Forward with School Nutrition Guidelines ¹⁴	2014	Students to have enough time to eat	Play first recommended for early years
ON	Student Nutrition Program Nutrition Guidelines ¹¹	2020	Recommends at least 20 mins	Advises against screens during eating
QC	Basic school regulation for preschool, elementary and secondary education ¹⁵	2024	No specific recommendations	Requires two 20-minute recesses and a 50-minute lunch period
NB	Healthier School Food Environment Policy (711) ¹⁶	2018	No specific recommendations	
NS	School Food and Nutrition Policy ⁶	2024	Requires at least 20 mins seated eating time	Eating time includes washing-up time Play first recommended
PEI	Nutrition in Schools Procedure (602.1) ⁷	2016	Requires at least 20 mins seated eating time	Play first recommended
NFL	Provincial School Food Guidelines ¹⁷	2023	Sufficient time	
YK	School Nutrition Policy (1025) ¹⁸	2008	Sufficient time	

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Schedule A: Supporting Healthy Lunch Eating in Schools: Summary Recommendations & Sample Schedules

Summary of Recommendations for School Lunch Practices¹⁻⁵:

1. **Minimum 20-Minute Seated Eating Time**
Provide at least 20 minutes of uninterrupted, seated time (excluding transitions) for lunch.
2. **Adopt a “Play First” Model**
Allow students to have outdoor time before eating lunch to support appetite and calmness.
3. **Use Bells or Announcements to Signal Transitions**
Separate play and eating time clearly to reduce confusion and support smoother transitions, which can aid in focused seated eating time and outdoor play.
4. **Consistent Lunch Practices Across Grades**
Standardize lunch duration and structure across school divisions (e.g., K-7, OR K-3,4-7).
5. **Enhance Lunch Supervision**
Use a mix of teachers, EAs, lunch supervisors, or trained student monitors to ensure safe and calm lunch environments.
6. **Minimize Screen During Eating Time.**
Keep lunch a screen-free time to support social connection and mindful eating.
 - **Optional** **To meet the requirements for 878 minutes of instructional time for K-7 students, teachers can use part of the seated eating time to focus on age-appropriate discussions/lessons on nutrition and healthy eating topics with the class**
7. **Engage the School Community in Decisions**
Involve PAC, staff and students in planning and evaluating lunch practices. What's working well? What isn't?
8. **Coordinate Food Programs with Lunch Schedules**
Align breakfast and lunch programs to maximize seated eating time.
9. **Improve Eating Spaces Where Possible**
Use multipurpose rooms, outdoor areas, cafeteria spaces or collective eating spaces in classrooms to enhance comfort and collaboration.
10. **Track and Report Lunch Time Practices**
Include lunch duration and environment in school improvement plans or wellness goals.

Sample elementary school bell schedules:

Instructional time required per week: 23 hours, 45 minutes = 4.75 hours per day
878 instructional time for students grade 1-7 ([BC Laws, 2012](#))
~37.5 weeks on average for elementary schools (doesn't include Pro D days, etc.)

9:00	Morning begins
9:00-10:50	Instruction
10:50 – 11:10	Morning recess
11:10-12:05	Instruction
12:05-12:30	Outdoor play
12:30 – 12:52	Indoor eating
12:52 – 3:03	Lunch ends / Instruction begins
3:03	Dismissal

= 4.96 hours of instructional time, 25 minute outdoor, 22 minute eating, 20 minute recess

8:40	Morning begins
8:40 - 11:14	Instruction
11:14 - 11:44	Outdoor play
11:44 - 12:14	Indoor eating
12:14 - 1:30	Instruction
1:30 - 1:45	Afternoon recess
1:45 - 2:48	Instruction
2:48	Dismissal

=4.93 hours of instructional time, 30 minute outdoor, 30 minute eating, 15 minute recess

8:30	Morning begins
8:30 – 10:20	Instruction
10:20-10:35	Morning Recess
10:35-12:25	Instruction
12:25-12:45	Eating time
12:45-1:10	Outdoor Play
1:10-2:26	Instruction
2:26	Dismissal

=4.94 hours of instructional time, 25 minute outdoor, 20 minute eating, 15 minute recess

Points to consider:

- Supervision required during both lunch and play periods.
- Consider an additional buffer built into the lunchtime block for handwashing & food distribution.

Schedule B. Lunch Eating Time and Environment Topics

As part of the policy scan of lunch eating time and environment in BC elementary and middle schools, team members connected with seven school districts to discuss a range of general questions, including:

- Whether there were any district or school level policies on lunch eating time, location or eating environment/space.
- Whether there were defined or scheduled seated eating times for lunch.
- How schools structure their daily schedule and if this is determined at district or school level.
- Eating time relative to outside/play time (i.e. before or after) and if there were related policies regarding this.
- Students eating location(s), classrooms or elsewhere.
- Supervision provided during lunch eating time.
- Use of classroom or lunchroom distractions (e.g. screens) during eating time.
- Whether eating time is scheduled as part of instructional class time.
- For schools with 20 minute or longer lunch breaks, how the schedule is structured to allow for longer eating time.

Schedule C: Provincial Policy Scan Details

British Columbia: Released in early 2025, the updated provincial BC School Food Toolkit - Building Healthy Inclusive School Food Environments⁴ now includes recommendations on eating time and eating environment.

Saskatchewan: The 2019 Saskatchewan school eating policy, Nourishing Minds: Eat Well – Learn Well – Live Well¹³, recommends that schools consider the amount of eating time provided and to reduce distractions like screens

Manitoba: The Moving Forward with School Nutrition Guidelines (2014)¹⁴ is a tool to assist schools to create nutrition policies. Although it doesn't suggest specific eating times, the tool recommends that students have enough time to eat and that elementary schools follow a 'play before food' approach.

Ontario: The Ontario Student Nutrition Program – Nutrition Guidelines (2020) recommend at least 20 minutes for meals in schools and advise against screen use during eating. The province-wide School Food and Beverage Policy (2011) reinforces the importance of providing students with adequate time to eat and socialize, however fails to enforce specific recommendations.

Quebec: The Education Act (updated in 2024)¹⁵ requires two 20-minute recesses and 50-minute lunch periods province-wide but does not specify how much time must be dedicated to eating.

New Brunswick: The Healthier School Food Environment (Policy 711, 2018)¹⁶ aims to create a safe and pleasant eating space, though it does not specify a set lunch duration.

Nova Scotia: The School Food and Nutrition Policy (2024) is applied to all students and pre-primary children attending a public school, ensuring a minimum 20-minute seated lunch period, which includes handwashing time. The province also encourages physical activity before eating whenever possible.

Prince Edward Island: The School & Workplace Health and Safety Policy includes the Nutrition in Schools Procedure (2016)⁷, which guarantees a minimum of 20 minutes eating time and promotes a "play first" policy, encouraging students to engage in physical activity before lunch.

Newfoundland and Labrador: Released in 2023, the Provincial School Food Guidelines¹⁷ does not mention a specific lunchtime eating length. The guide does state that students should have "adequate time to eat".

Yukon: The School Nutrition Policy¹⁸ states that "schools should give students sufficient time to eat", without setting a guideline number of minutes. Additional policy exists around role modelling and promoting healthy eating behaviours, without further explanation.