

**New lunch feels more like second breakfast**

Parents express concerns over early dining hours for students.

**BY HELEN FREUND**

*Times Food Critic*

By now, Meredith Pericles knows that packing just one meal for the school day isn’t enough. Her son, a fifth grader at Shore Acres Elementary School in St. Petersburg, starts school at 7:35 a.m. His **lunch** is two hours later — at 9:40 a.m. “I pack him **lunch** food, but it’s basically second breakfast,” Pericles said.

The kids are allowed to bring a snack from home to eat at 12:45 p.m. Pericles packs her son things like apples and peanut butter, Goldfish crackers or a granola bar. But even with the added treats, by the time she picks him up at 1:45 p.m., he’s ravenous.

“He’s about to be an 11-year-old boy and he plays competitive sports,” she said. “He’s definitely hungry when I pick him up.”

Pericles said she’s surprised at how early her son’s school is doing **lunch** this year — and she’s not the only one. Discussion groups on Facebook are full of comments from parents surprised at the changes in their children’s lunch hours. Some are from parents of students engaged in virtual learning, perhaps hearing about the early **lunch** hour for the first time because it’s now happening in their homes

Some are curious about the length of **lunch** hour, while others are concerned about the social distancing efforts taking place in cafeterias.

While the coronavirus pandemic has thrown a curveball at educators, early lunches are for the most part nothing new, said Lynn Geist, the director of Food and Nutrition for Pinellas County Schools. But with school officials across the Tampa Bay area trying to mitigate the risks of the coronavirus pandemic, some **lunch** times have been stretched and spaced out, extending lunches both earlier and later in the day than they have been in previous years. With smaller classroom sizes, everything takes a little longer now, Geist said.

Though the federal rules according to the National School **Lunch** program mandate that school lunches be served to children between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., a nationwide waiver issued by the Department of Agriculture during the COVID-19 pandemic is allowing for some flexibility for the 2020-2021 school year. The USDA also recently extended the Summer Food Service Program, which will allow all students to receive free school meals through the end of December.

By far the most drastic change has been for Pinellas County high school students, whose **lunch** periods have in many cases been moved to the end of the school day. The school district allowed schools to opt in to an end-of-the-day, grab-and-go **lunch** program, meaning the students don’t get a formal **lunch** break in the middle of the day.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, having hundreds of kids packed into a cafeteria is problematic, Geist said. “With high school, the challenge was how to keep the students safe and socially distant during meal times,” she said.

To lessen the chances of packed hallways, long lines and crammed cafeteria tables, the high schools that opted in are now serving **lunch** after the last period has let out, around 1:20 p.m. The hope is that some students might choose to take it home with them instead, thereby avoiding a bottleneck. So far, it appears to be working.

Free breakfast is offered to students at many schools in the Tampa Bay area. For high schoolers in Pinellas County, that’s been extended to 10 a.m. what Geist called a “second chance breakfast.” To make up for the lost **lunch** period in the middle of the day, snack periods are allowed during some passing times where mobile carts are set up throughout the school. Bags with snacks like yogurt and granola or apples and peanut are sold for $1. Some teachers are allowing students to eat some of their snacks during class, too, Geist said, though not all of them are. “They’re adjusting and they understand,” she said. “I think everyone is just getting used to it.”

The response from parents has been varied. “My kids go to two separate high schools in Pinellas County and they love **lunch** being at the end of the day,” said Lisa McNew, a mother of two who lives in Largo. “Even if they offer a midday **lunch**, my kids do not want to remove their mask to eat and do not want others removing their mask around them to eat,” she said.

Parent Christie Bruner said that with the current **lunch** schedule her teenage daughter is exhausted by the end of the day. Her school begins at 7:20 a.m. and gets out around 1:20 p.m. “It’s not healthy, any way you look at it,” Brunner said. “She’s starving and she’s super tired because she’s been working on zombie mode. Because **lunch** is also a mental break.”

Hillsborough County students have in some cases had their **lunch** times extended and moved around a little bit, but unlike Pinellas County schools, their **lunch** times are all still in the middle of the school day, not at the end, said Shani Hill, the general manager of Student Nutrition with Hillsborough County Schools.

Despite the changes, experts said that developing a healthy and regular meal pattern is more important than the time of day a child eats. “Consistency, regularity and timing is just way more important,” said Theresa Crocker, an assistant professor at the University of South Florida and the director of Nutrition and Dietetics Program.

“Depending on their age, all children need three meals today and one to three snacks, depending on how active they areand to make sure that they get the nutrients that they need to sustain their activity, to promote health and support growth.”

Crocker said parents worried about their children eating **lunch** too early or late shouldn’t worry as much about the clock, but rather make sure to pack a nutritious snack in case they get hungry in between. “I really think, like with everything we’ve experienced since March, we have to be flexible and we have to adapt to the situation we’re in,” she said.

Crocker recommended that children eat every three hours, if possible, to keep their brain function and energy levels high. She suggested high-protein snacks like string cheese and apple slices or hummus with pretzels and carrots as good in between meals to help tide hunger cravings.

“Look for clues,” she said. “If the **lunch** box is coming home full every day, then I would be more concerned with that, rather than (if) my child is eating at 10 o’clock. Or if it’s empty and filled with the wrappers from three other kids’ lunches, then you’ll learn that maybe you’re not sending enough.”

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