



HOW SCHOOL MEALS CAN SUPPORT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SCHOOL CLIMATES

Expanding participation in your school meals program can nourish students while simultaneously building social-emotional learning skills.

School meals are most recognized as a critical source of nutrition for students, however school meals also offer students vital social support. Especially now, when many students are experiencing trauma brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, students need time for connection, social interaction and building positive relationships. Meal time provides opportunities to help build relationships and trust among students and adults.

School meal time encourages:

- Establishing and maintaining positive relationships
- Better social interactions
- Communicating and hearing other perspectives
- Seeing strengths in others



School meals help meet students' basic physiological needs. Besides helping to ensure that students aren't hungry throughout the school day, offering meals at school establishes routines and provides stability, both of which contribute to needs of safety and connection.

Nourishing students helps support:

- Emotional regulation
- Reasoned judgment
- Responsible decision-making
- Stress management



The time spent eating together can also offer students teachable moments and life skills. There are opportunities during school meals to engage in formal social-emotional learning (SEL) practices; however, school mealtime practices themselves build SEL competencies¹:

Self-awareness

- Recognize how a healthy diet influences emotional well-being
- Identify how emotions may influence decision-making

Self-management

- How to thoughtfully accept or turn down food
- How to stop eating when satisfied



Social awareness

- Practicing self-advocacy around accepting or declining food
- Reducing stigma by being inclusive of all students
- Recognizing varying appetites require more or fewer servings



Responsible decision-making

- Use of share tables to help reduce food waste
- Self-serve options (like salad bars) encourage students to take only what they will eat
- Initiating clean up

Relationship skills

- The time during school meals allows students to socialize with peers
- Time to connect with teachers who eat meals with students
- Sharing in mealtime responsibility can promote social responsibility

The social-emotional aspects of education experiences are more likely to thrive if physiological needs, like food, are met by caring adults. Ultimately, school meals provide sustenance and stability. Mealtime can be spent developing community, communication and empathy as students listen and learn from one another.



¹School Nutrition Policies and Practices Can Support the Social and Emotional Climate and Learning, CDC: https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/nutrition/pdf/321123-A_FS_SchoolNutrition.pdf

School meals create community among students.

In a 2021 national series of discussion boards and surveys with parents and students in households that are low- and middle-income to assess their views of school meals, three-quarters of parents (77%) saw school meals as allowing their child “to build community and friendship with other students.”²

At a time when many students are feeling stress and anxiety brought on by the pandemic, the opportunity to spend time with their friends and fellow students could provide ease and comfort. That feeling of community- of sharing meals with a wide range of fellow students- could also help overcome some of the stigma faced by students experiencing food insecurity.

“As kids gathered together to eat in the mornings, there began to be a positive shift in unified classrooms and overall school culture. There were now no divisions between those who were eating and those who weren’t... We aim to do our part to make sure every student has a nutritious meal to start the day. We hope to provide a sense of consistency and a sense of security for our students.”

--Derek Voiles, 2017 TN Teacher of the Year

A role for educators & administrators:

Connect with your school nutrition staff to learn about current participation rates in the school meals program and work together to identify and create opportunities to nourish the minds and bodies of more students.



²Recommendations for Communicating with Parents and Students About School Meals, No Kid Hungry: <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/recommendations-communicating-students-families-about-school-meals>