

THE REVERSE LUNCH HOUR: THINKING OUTSIDE THE (LUNCH) BOX

Simon Blakesley | Canadian Council on Learning

For generations, elementary school lunches have followed more or less the same routine. After spending most of the morning behind a desk, students are hustled into the lunchroom where they are expected to sit again and eat their lunch before going to play. This has been the standard operating procedure in our schools for so long that few have ever questioned it.

Yet with the increasing societal focus on nutrition and well-being, more schools are starting to reconsider the traditional approach to lunchtime. Too often, the urge to get outside and play takes precedence over the child's need to eat well. The result? Hastily eaten or half-eaten lunches, hungry kids and less-than-ideal learning for the rest of the day.

Analyzing the Effects of the Reverse Lunch Schedule on Student Nutrition and Performance". As the Northern Coordinator for the Canadian Council on Learning's (CCL) Health and Learning Knowledge Centre, and a school administrator in the Yukon, the article offered a possible approach to improving health and learning in our schools.

Following the CAP conference, the reverse lunch hour concept was presented to Yukon school administrators. Four elementary schools (K-7) in Whitehorse decided to implement the reverse lunch hour for the 2007-2008 year (since then, four more have done so). Informal contact with the principals of these schools once the year was underway indicated that this initiative seemed to be generating positive results. In order to examine the initial experiences of the four schools in greater detail, I met with each principal to discuss the usefulness of the program in their schools.

A Simple Transition

Principals in all four schools indicated a very smooth implementation that was well accepted and supported by staff, students, and parents. Students in particular appear to have bought in to the concept very quickly. As one principal commented, "The kids figured it out easier than the adults." This remark referred to the change in supervision patterns which required teachers to be in a different place and at a different time than may have been traditional. Another described the simplicity and ease of its implementation as "switching around two small things (the play and eating part of lunch)." All of the principals indicated that there were no substantive parental issues arising as a result of the change of the lunch hour schedule.

In addition, three of the schools specifically indicated that there were no changes to the supervision schedule required. Two principals described the organizational change of moving two blocks of time without adjusting the timetable itself.

One school alleviated any potential implementation challenges by introducing the reverse lunch hour for a one-week period in May of the previous school year. This approach put the concept on the ground where it could be evaluated by school staff. One principal indicated that their school's music appreciation time, which was



One solution that is emerging is the "reverse lunch hour." Piloted and implemented in a number of American schools, the idea is simple: Children play first, burn off some accumulated energy, and then come indoors for lunch. I first ran across this "Play first, Eat later" approach at the 2007 Canadian Association of Principals (CAP) Conference in Vancouver, B.C. organized by the British Columbia Principals and Vice-Principals Association. The latest copy of their journal, *Adminfo*, included an article by Peggy Antifaeff and Janet Porowski; "Thinking outside the lunchbox:

scheduled at the end of lunch/play period, further alleviated any timetable issues as the students did not have to be called in from the playground at that time.

This principal further added that the nature of change at elementary schools is such that things “just take time for people to get used to”.

A principal at another school identified an issue with student busing to afternoon activities, stating that the reverse lunch made it difficult for children to eat lunch in time to catch the bus. This problem was alleviated by having the teacher eat lunch with the affected students in order to ensure that they were all finished in time.

Positive Health Impacts

A number of examples of health effects were shared by school principals. Some had been identified by students themselves; in one instance, a student commented that he no longer experienced stomach cramps as a result of having to eat his lunch quickly in order to get outside in time to play. Some students indicated to their principal that they had a better appetite as a result of some fresh air and physical activity prior to eating lunch.

From a food consumption perspective, three principals specifically indicated that there appeared to be less food wastage in classrooms. This presents an important point: whereas with the traditional lunch hour students must gobble food before the bell rings, with the reverse lunch hour students have the opportunity to finish any remaining lunch while the afternoon’s classroom activities resume.

Academic Effects

Although it is too early to attribute specific learning gains (in a quantitative manner), principals did indicate a number of observed student behaviours that appeared to be more conducive to learning.

With the traditional school lunch hour, the transition from the playground to the classroom can at times be frenetic. After lunch, classroom activities are often structured to settle the children. It appears that this is not the case when the reverse lunch hour is in place. The transition from lunch to academic activities was characterized as smoother, calmer, and more seamless by all four principals. Students used their lunchtime as free reading time, or as an opportunity to get ahead on homework. In some classrooms, teachers read quietly to the children while they were eating, further reinforcing a smooth transition to the afternoon’s academic activities.

Cleaner, Calmer Schools

In one school, the principal indicated that an unanticipated consequence was increased hallway and playground cleanliness. This was attributed to the fact that students no longer had to carry portions of unfinished lunch out the door with them to the playground. At this particular school the cleanliness of the classrooms also seemed improved, which was attributed to a calmer, less rushed atmosphere.

In contrast, another school noticed a short-term increase in the amount of garbage in the playground which eventually decreased. The principal of this school attributed this development to the fact that children started taking snacks out with them at recess until they were used to the reverse lunch hour format.

One principal observed that the implementation of the reverse lunch hour brought the school lunch more “in sync” with the sports programs offered at the school, and simplified the supervision needs. Since the new lunch hour coincided better with sports activities – which were typically taking place before the traditional lunch hour – supervision and staff were much easier to coordinate, since all the students were eating at the same time.

At another school, an unanticipated benefit was also indicated with respect to parents who had sent their child to school without a lunch. By having the eating portion of lunch occur later in the noon hour, parents had more time to deliver a lunch to school for their child.

A perceptual observation was made in regards to the dispositions of teachers and students. One school principal stated that both groups seemed happier. Overall, there appeared to be less rush, less peer conflict, and less commotion in the hallways and playground at lunch hour, translating into fewer behaviour referrals to the principal’s office. Another principal confirmed this, indicating that there had been no after lunch office referrals of students by teachers during the first two months of the school year. This principal further stated that although it was not likely to be solely attributable to the reverse lunch hour, student behaviour had improved and that this initiative could well be a contributing factor.

Advice to Other Schools

“Don’t fear it,” was an example of the positive advice offered by one principal. “It’s a simple change and the kids will adapt sooner than the adults.” “Do it, for sure,” another principal emphatically stated. Another principal said “This is a common-sense initiative that escaped us for a while”.

While it was acknowledged that each school community is different, one principal strongly suggested that their colleagues should discuss the concept with their respective School Council

prior to implementing a reverse lunch hour. This principal added that the smoothness of implementation could be attributed in part to the prior discussions with the staff and careful planning through each phase.

Another principal described how a letter explaining the concept was sent home on the first (half) day of school so that parents would be aware of the change occurring the following full school day. This communication gave parents the opportunity to let the school know of any particular student needs. For example, one principal remarked that once informed by parents of a student's needs resulting from diabetes, the school was able to make any required adaptations to ensure the student's well-being.

One piece of advice shared by a principal was the need to consider the community (human) traffic patterns around the school. For example, if the school is located in proximity to another school, changing the time children were on the playground could bring students in contact with those from the other school. If the students from the other school are older and are allowed to leave their property for a cigarette, supervisors need to prompt the visiting students to return to their own school.

Finally, one principal suggested that having a good research and evidence base to share with staff and community helped with the implementation of the reverse lunch hour. This could be done at a

professional development day to help set the stage. Stressing the health effects of the approach was considered very important to its successful adoption.

In closing, it is important to note that there are few more traditional institutions in our society than the public school. The structure of the school day and the design of classrooms has largely remained unchanged for over 100 years. Perhaps we have come to a point where we've done the same thing for so long, and are so rooted in tradition that we lose touch of the fact that there are perhaps better ways of approaching our most fundamental of processes – even something as simple as how our students eat lunch.

About the Author

Simon Blakesley is the Northern Coordinator for the Canadian Council on Learning's Health and Learning Knowledge Centre at the University of Victoria. Simon has been a teacher and school administrator for the past 18 years and resides in Whitehorse, Yukon. Prior to this he served as a jet engine technician with the Canadian Air Force. He is completing the research phase of the Ph.D. (Educational Studies) program at UBC, examining education in northern Canadian and rural contexts.

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