

Food Policy Assessment: Erie's Public Schools Wellness Policy

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Abstract

Erie's Public Schools Wellness Policy aims to provide the environments and opportunities for students to practice healthy eating and other healthy behaviors throughout the school day. This policy impacts all children attending public schools in the Erie School District by ensuring that students are practicing wellness in their daily routines. The questions for this policy focused on school lunches in Erie public elementary schools. Some of the questions that were investigated include how long students have for lunch, and if the school offers options for kids who have allergies or who have dietary restrictions. In the interviews conducted, the faculty is focused on ensuring that every kid has enough food and that they can have options. In these interviews, it was discovered that all Erie City public schools ensure that students have thirty minutes to eat lunch, even though policy states they just need to have twenty minutes, and that the majority of children's dietary needs are accommodated by schools.

Introduction

School lunches are an essential part of student health and well-being because it provides the nutrition that students need throughout the day to learn. This is especially important for low-income students who may not receive the quality or quantity of food necessary to maximize their wellbeing. According to the Food Research & Action Center (2017), research has shown that “receiving free or reduced-price school lunches reduces food insecurity, obesity rates, and poor health”. When children have the time and capability to access foods that meet their individual needs, it reduces food insecurity, improves dietary intake, positively impacts health, and meets student’s needs to provide a better learning environment. (Food Research & Action Center, 2017).

Because the rate of poverty is high in Erie, all school kids get a free lunch under the National School Lunch Program. The city of Erie was allocated six million dollars under the Title I grants which are “supplemental federal funding to state and local education agencies to help schools with high concentrations of students from low-income homes acquire additional education resources” (Bachemin, 2020). These allow schools to provide free lunches to students.

Because schools in Erie participate in the National School Lunch Program, they are required by law to make substitutions for students that have a restricted diet due to disability. Erie’s Public Schools Wellness Policy (2017) states that the District accommodates students with special diets under the National School Lunch Program. According to the USDA (2019), “Accommodations generally involve substituting food items, but in some cases, schools may need to make more far reaching accommodations to meet the needs of children”. To make accommodations for students for the items included in reimbursable meals, schools must have information from a licensed physician that indicates the disability, what food the student cannot eat, and what food must be

substituted. Schools have the option to substitute meals for children who do not meet the definition of disability under law. In this case, the school needs a written note from a medical authority explaining what foods should be substituted. (USDA, 2019). The USDA (2019) states that “schools are encouraged to consider students’ dietary preferences, including cultural, religious, and ethical preferences, when planning and preparing meals”. While schools are not required to accommodate for some student preferences, it is encouraged that all student needs are met throughout the school day to promote a healthy environment. Monthly school lunch menus (Appendix A) are posted on the Metz website so students know what food to expect at lunch each day (*School District of the City of Erie Noble Lunch Menu*).

This policy is similar in other school districts across the US. In the Toledo school district, students are required to have at least twenty minutes to eat lunch. In addition, the schools in Toledo are required to provide options for children with special dietary needs (*Wellness Policy*). The food wellness policy is done in school across the US because it ensures that kids have enough time to eat at school and that everyone has something to eat.

Schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program are required to make accommodations for children who cannot eat school meals because of a disability. While there is national regulation for the nutrition of the food served, there is no regulation for how much time children get to eat. Because there is no national policy, it is up to the counties and states to decide how much time kids get to eat. Many health organizations recommend that students have around 20 to 25 minutes to eat lunch. The Erie Public School Wellness Committee was formed to ensure that children are provided with conditions that promote wellness every day, making an effort to provide children in public schools with enough time to eat. The goal is to (2017), “ensure environments and opportunities for all students to practice healthy eating and physical activity

behaviors throughout the school day while minimizing commercial distractions” (pg. 2).

According to the Erie Public Schools Wellness Policy (2017), “Students will be allowed at least 10 minutes to eat breakfast and at least 20 minutes to eat lunch, counting from the time they have received their meal and are seated” (pg. 8). In addition, lunch follows recess to ensure healthy eating and proper education.

Purpose

Erie’s Public Schools Wellness Policy outlines the District’s approach to ensuring that all students have the opportunity to practice healthy eating by accessing healthy foods, receiving nutrition education, and engaging in activities that promote wellness. This policy provides detailed guidelines for all 16 of the public schools in the City of Erie (see Appendix B) to comply with in order to promote wellness for the 11,000+ students they serve (Erie’s Public Schools Wellness Policy, 2017). All public schools in the Erie City School District are affected by Erie’s Public Schools Wellness Policy, so it is essential that it encourages wellness for students, taking into account the needs of each child. Because the goal is to promote wellness in every aspect to students, it is not only essential that students have enough time each day to eat their lunch, but also to have access to food that fits their individual dietary needs.

Stakeholders

The Erie School District is the main decision maker in this policy, but there are many other stakeholders involved. Erie’s Public Schools Wellness Policy is enforced by the Erie School District to ensure that it is being implemented as planned. The District conducts compliance evaluations once every three years and keeps compliance records at the District’s Financial Office, which is accessible by request. People have a right to request access to public records kept by Erie’s Public Schools under the Right-To-Know law (*Right-To-Know Law*). The District

annually announces the names and contact information of District officials that lead and coordinate the district wellness committee, notifying families and the public when any changes or updates are made to the policy. Because Erie schools participate in the National School Lunch Program, this policy also incorporates the requirements that these programs entail so that schools can receive reimbursements for meals.

The District has assembled a representative district wellness committee that is composed of school representatives on all levels, including parents, students, teachers, and administrators. Members of this committee also include health professionals, mental health and social services staff, school administrators, school board members, the general public, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education coordinators. If there is a change that needs to be made, the wellness committee would be involved in the decision. In addition, the Erie school district would get together to come to a decision.

Interviews

To learn more about the impact of this policy on food systems in Erie City Schools, several of these stakeholders were interviewed (see Appendix C). Dennis Carner, the assistant principal at Grover Cleveland elementary, stated that the school's food service is provided by Metz Culinary Management, a company that provides lunch to public schools in the City of Erie. "Metz has secured numerous grants to feed the students with fresh produce from local farms and provided meals to students and their families during the shutdown of schools during the COVID pandemic," he said. According to Dennis, the school takes the dietary needs of their students very seriously and has programs in place to ensure that meals are appropriate. Students have several options for lunch and have the choice to get PB&J, yogurt and a cheese stick, or other options besides the featured meal. "Special dietary needs are met by Metz for students with a

need for specific lunch such as no protein, gluten free, and blended meals that are drinkable,” said Dennis. (D. Carner, personal communication, October 29, 2021).

Jenny Johns, general manager of Metz, stated that the Community Eligibility Provision provides every public school in Erie with free breakfast and lunch according to the National School Lunch Guidelines because these schools are located in low-income areas. Metz does their best to accommodate every student, providing alternate meals to children with special dietary needs. In order to do this, she says, parents communicate with the school nurse and fill out a form to confirm their child’s needs. One type of food that Metz does not accommodate is for halal meats because there has not been a significant demand for it in Erie’s public schools. For those who do require a halal diet, Metz is able to provide alternatives to students such as vegetarian options. (J. Johns, personal communication, October 29, 2021).

In order to gain a better understanding of how school lunches work for students, a parent of students at Collegiate Academy High School was also interviewed. According to her, student lunches begin at 1:46 PM and end at 2:16 PM, giving students 30 minutes to eat lunch every day. All students qualify for free lunches and the meals are portioned so that students receive one serving of fruit, 2 two servings of vegetables, one serving of dairy, and one serving of protein. She said Collegiate ensures that lunches are appropriate for each student, but that a friend of her children’s who has special dietary needs is limited to a salad bar every day. It seems that some children with special diets may be lacking variety in the foods they are offered at lunch. (M. Lustic-Long, personal communication, November 1, 2021).

Gregory Baker, a parent with children attending Erie’s city schools, was also able to offer his perspective on this topic. He said that students have a 30-minute lunch period which includes travel time to and from the cafeteria, leaving students with about 20 minutes to eat their lunch.

“This usually works ok for them,” he said, “ but sometimes they tell me they did not get enough time to eat their lunch”. Erie’s Public Schools give free lunch and breakfast to all students without checking for eligibility because the 16501 zip code in Erie is one of the poorest in the country and the majority of students qualify for free lunch. Greg stated that schools do accommodate dietary needs and that his daughter who has lactose intolerance has been offered daily alternatives for meals. (G. Baker, personal communication, October 28, 2021).

Conclusion

Erie’s Public Schools Wellness Policy is effective in addressing the needs of children attending public schools by ensuring students have enough time to eat and are provided with the foods they require. This policy ensures that children are eating enough healthy foods throughout the day. Giving students at least thirty minutes to eat lunch is a good policy because it makes sure that they have enough time to eat and digest their food without having to throw it away. In addition, providing dietary accommodations to students due to allergies or cultural preferences makes sure that they are provided with the meals that fit their needs. While it could offer more options for children who are on dietary restrictions, the policy ensures that children eat something for lunch. Based on our interviews there were some indications that a 30-minute lunch period could be slightly extended and that there may need to be more variety for the students with special dietary needs, but the majority of our interviewees came to a common consensus. Erie’s public schools have implemented policies that aim to support the wellness of their students and provide them with the services they need to succeed in the classroom and outside of school. It seems that the amount of time allotted for lunch and the accommodations made for students’ dietary needs are appropriate for students and provide an environment that promotes student wellness.

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Appendix A

Metz School Lunch Menu

Appendix B

Erie City Public Schools

- Elementary Schools: Diehl Elementary, Grover Cleveland Elementary, Edison Elementary, Harding Elementary, Jefferson Elementary, Joanna Connell Elementary, Lincoln Elementary, McKinley Elementary, Perry Elementary, Pfeiffer-Burleigh Elementary
- Middle Schools: East Middle School, Woodrow Wilson Middle School, Strong Vincent Middle School
- High Schools: Erie High School, Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy
- Non-Traditional Programming: EPS Cyber Choice Academy

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. How much time do students have for lunch? Is the time allotted for lunch regulated by a school policy set by the state of Pennsylvania?
2. Has the school applied for community eligibility to provide free school lunch to all students?
3. Does your school have a goal to reduce obesity, and chronic illness or to improve condition?
4. Are all of the students on a free lunch program or reduced lunch program?
5. Do Erie's public schools have any regulations to make sure that school lunches are appropriate for each student?
6. Are there meals available to meet the needs of students from different cultures and those who have dietary restrictions?

