

**Thinking Outside the Lunchbox:
Analyzing the Effects of the Reverse Lunch Schedule on Student Nutrition and
Performance**

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Electronic copies of a short article on the study and of the complete graduate paper are available from either of the authors.

Abstract

School administrators are feeling increased pressures to improve student nutrition in the face of widespread concern and criticism about children's health. The variety of school lunch schedules being implemented across the country highlights administrators' quest for the "silver bullet" of school lunch schedules that solves all student nutrition problems without increased budgets or reduced academic performance. The reverse lunch schedule, where students play first and then eat their lunches, is one such strategy being implemented by some enterprising British Columbia educators.

Current literature on the reverse lunch schedule is scarce and mainly limited to administrators' anecdotal comments on their experiences in mostly American schools. In an attempt to fill this void, local data were gathered and analyzed in order to examine the effectiveness of this lunch schedule locally. This study examined the effects of reverse lunch schedules on student nutrition, behaviour and academic performance. It also analyzed approaches to implementing the new schedule and the suitability of a reverse lunch schedule for all students and all schools.

First, the current literature on lunch schedules was analyzed. We then studied two local schools that are currently configured around the reverse lunch schedule. Data were gathered from two schools in the Langley School District using staff questionnaires, administrator interviews and school data, including school growth plans. A strong level of staff commitment to the study was reflected in the 70% return rate of questionnaires. Additionally, we were able to access data from a survey of students, parents and staff that was conducted by one of the schools participating in our study at the end of a three-month reverse lunch trial period. Students comprised 127 of the respondents, with 57 parents and 15 teaching and support staff also responding to this school-conducted survey.

We found strong support for the reverse lunch schedule in both schools included in our study. While there were mixed opinions about the nutritional benefits of a reverse lunch, the stakeholders overwhelmingly endorsed the reverse lunch schedule. School staff identified many positive behaviour effects of the reverse lunch schedule in calmer eating environments, improved student manners, and fewer discipline concerns. While some staff identified a loss of instructional time as one of their concerns, others believed that the improved quality of afternoon instructional time more than made up for any minutes lost to the extended eating period.

We identified staff commitment as the main contributing factor to the successful implementation of a reverse lunch schedule and adopting the schedule on a trial basis to start was strongly recommended by the administrators. Both schools in our study felt that the reverse lunch schedule needed to be coupled with social responsibility programs that address noon hour concerns. They also recommended that each site tailor the program to meet individual school needs with continual "tweaking" of the schedule as needed. We hope that this study will help inform administrators who are revisiting their school lunch schedules with the aim of providing a better educational experience for the students in their care.