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Lunch will be served, but how? Schools weigh options to crowded cafeterias

By: Christopher Placek



How do you socially distance at lunchtime? That's one of the biggest challenges facing suburban school administrators as they gear up for students' return next month. Among the solutions: outdoor dining in tents and courtyards, meals in the classroom and assigned seating in cafeterias. *Paul Valade | Staff Photographer*

School-aged children who are eating outdoors with their families on patios and sidewalks outside restaurants this summer may still be dining al fresco if and when they return to school next month.

Among the ways schools will try to keep students socially distant at lunchtime is by having them eat their meals in outdoor courtyards and large tents installed on campus, according to some suburban school districts' preliminary reopening plans.

But unlike the patrons of some outdoor restaurant spaces, students won't get white tablecloths or fine china -- let alone a hot dish. What's more likely is they'll have to bring their own brown bag, or get a prepackaged one from the school.

Some students will be allowed inside the traditional school cafeteria, but to prevent large gatherings of more than 50 people, officials plan to spread out students in a variety of places, such as hallways, available rooms, or "pop-up" locations scattered throughout buildings. In many cases, elementary school students will eat at their homeroom desks.



Packed cafeterias won't be an option for suburban schools when students return next month, so administrators are weighing options such as al fresco dining, using field houses for lunchtime and students dining at their classroom desks. - Associated Press

How to manage lunchtime is one of the many challenges school administrators face as they make plans to welcome back at least some of their students as soon as a month from now.

"First and foremost, it's ensuring student safety, and within that instructional content and quality delivering instruction," said Mary Fergus, spokeswoman for Elgin Area School District U-46. "It's making sure it's safe and students are safe emotionally, socially and physically."

Seth Chapman, assistant superintendent for business services in St. Charles Unit District 303, said making lunchtime safe is a "key issue" for schools.

"It's not an easy question to answer, but one we'll work through," he said.

District 303 high schoolers likely will eat lunch in common areas, including cafeterias and outdoor courtyards, while maintaining social distancing regulations, Chapman said. That's because students are expected to return to a blended learning model, meaning only half the students will be in the building at a time, while the other half learn remotely.

At elementary schools, administrators are recommending students eat lunch outside as weather permits or in their classrooms, where food would be delivered each day.

Logistics are a bit more complicated for middle schools, which don't have as much common space as high schools. So, officials are working to designate certain lunch areas within the buildings.

A special District 303 task force committee is expected to discuss the plans and iron out details Thursday.

Glenbrook High School District 225 plans to install rented, all-season tents in courtyards at Glenbrook North in Northbrook and Glenbrook South in Glenview to accommodate an overflow of students. Smaller classes that use large spaces are being relocated to other spots to open up more space for lunch. Other pop-up lunch stations will be placed throughout the buildings, officials say.

And students will have assigned seats at lunch, just as they do in classes, as part of the district's contact tracing program.

Glenbrook administrators say they could also expand "open lunch" privileges -- now available only to upperclassmen -- to all grade levels, allowing more students to leave campus during midday hours.

Even if cafeterias will be open for limited seating at some suburban schools, many cafeteria lines won't.

Districts such as Glenbrook plan to serve only prepackaged or "grab and go" items. In Palatine Township Elementary School District 15, meals will be delivered to classrooms.

Some schools will forbid cash payments. Indian Prairie Unit District 204 in Naperville and Aurora is handling all lunchroom transactions on PushCoin, an online student wallet system for meal and school fee payments.

Other districts are trying to figure out exactly what they might do at lunchtime, though much depends whether all students will be back at the same time.

Libertyville-Vernon Hills Area High School District 128 Superintendent Prentiss Lea told his school board this week that social distancing in cafeterias would be "very, very challenging, if not impossible."

Libertyville High School would need eight or nine locations per lunch hour if all students attend school daily, while only four or five locations would be needed if students attend in-person classes in daily shifts, Principal Tom Koulentes said.

District administrators are looking into the use of outdoor tents, field houses, gymnasiums, dance facilities and other large, indoor spaces for lunch periods at both Libertyville and Vernon Hills high schools.

School districts might look to Schaumburg Township Elementary District 54 for guidance on how to handle lunchtime in classrooms. It is one of the few districts that doesn't have cafeteria service -- save for the brown bag lunches provided to students in the free and reduced lunch program.

District spokeswoman Terri McHugh said students bring lunches in the morning, leave them in cubbyholes or their backpacks, then eat at their desks in the afternoon. Junior high school students eat in cafeteria rooms, and a committee is talking about how to do social distancing there, McHugh said.