Switching from multiple lunch periods to one lunch period for the nearly 2,000 students at James Hubert Blake High School in Silver Spring, MD, has contributed more to a positive school climate than any other single factor in the eight years since the school opened.

Lunchtime is rarely considered a scheduling or instructional component, but that is exactly what it has become at our large suburban high school.

Blake High School opened in 1998 with 725 students in grades 9 and 10 who entered a school with a signature program in fine arts and the humanities. The school was built to relieve overcrowding in neighboring schools, and a federal grant provided the resources to develop exciting programs in each of three area high schools and give students their choice of schools so they could avoid boundary changes. Although many students chose Blake for its program potential, many were looking for a fresh start. Blake’s suspension rate...
the first year was an alarming 19.5%. The school had a rotating A/B block schedule and two 30-minute lunch periods, during which students were restricted to the cafeteria unless they had a pass. Administrators and security officers were sentries. The following year, Blake had 1,100 students in grades 9–11 and kept the same lunch structure in place. The bell schedule was adjusted to include one 7-period day as well as four block days.

By the school’s third year, Blake had students in grades 9–12 and needed to either go to three lunch periods or explore a different model. Some schools in the district had “open lunch”: students were allowed to leave the campus at lunchtime with permission. This was primarily intended to relieve overcrowding in the cafeteria. Before a school could implement open lunch, however, it had to receive approval from the community, and one stipulation was that there be restaurants within walking distance. Blake is located on a busy but isolated road with no easily accessible commercial areas, so open lunch was not even an option. But the thought of one longer lunch period, with many internal options for students, was enticing and seemed worth exploring. Meanwhile, there was dissatisfaction with the current class schedule and other models were being considered.

A Different Idea
When one lunch period of 50 minutes was proposed to staff members, most were opposed to the idea, primarily because of their preconceived ideas of what lunchtime looked like in a high school. They argued that the cafeteria could not possibly accommodate the nearly 1,600 students expected the coming year; that there would be pandemonium, fights, and no control; and that the building would be filthy. The only people who saw any merits were those who had previously worked in schools with open lunch and had enjoyed the longer lunch period (often free from students) and the reduction of interruptions that frequently occur with multiple lunch periods. In addition, having only one lunch period eliminates a class-cutting opportunity, so attendance is improved.

A committee composed of students, parents, and staff members—including building service workers, cafeteria workers, and other support staff members who had strong opinions—was formed to discuss the options. Some of the greater concerns came from building service workers who felt there would be trash throughout the building and their workload would increase dramatically. The cafeteria manager was concerned that he could not possibly serve lunch to all of the students at one time. Teachers were split but concerned. Many staff members were excited by the prospect of having more time to work with students and began formulating ideas of how a longer, single lunch period would benefit the instructional program and student achievement and promote positive social interactions. The committee researched lunch models in other schools, made school site visits, and reported back to the staff with recommendations.

After making several school visits, many of the original skeptics reversed their opinions. They saw the possibilities of using a longer lunch period to engage in meaningful activities with students and positively influence the school climate. The building services staff, after speaking to peers at other schools, soon realized that one sweep of the building after lunch was more productive than cleaning and re-cleaning the same compressed cafeteria mess. The cafeteria manager looked into multiple satellite food distribution areas as a means of reducing congestion, as well as training students to stagger going to lunch lines throughout the lunch period. After seeing a model at another school, students loved the idea, although they were concerned that younger students would not be responsible enough to
handle the increased freedom and some worried about territory issues.

Before any option could be put into place, the union requirement for a 30-minute duty-free lunch for teachers had to be addressed. In the district, teachers teach five classes and have one planning period and one loosely-defined “instructionally related activity” (IRA) period, during which principals are accountable for ensuring that teachers are engaged in student-related activities. Working with the school union representative, the committee (with support from the administrators) proposed the idea that working with students for some portion of the lunch period would be the trade-off for the IRA period. Staff could structure this time in the way that worked best for them and their students: it could be posted office hours, daily availability, by appointment, or through departmental arrangements.

Meanwhile, Blake was becoming a professional learning community, and one working lunch a week per department seemed like a logical way to help accomplish this shift. Resource teachers (department chairs) were charged with setting the structure for their respective department’s meeting. In the math department, for example, the algebra teachers might meet as a group on a designated day and look at common assessments and planning while the geometry teachers did the same. On that day, the math department would be unavailable to work with students, but students would know that their other teachers were available on a well-publicized schedule. The schedule was agreed to by consensus among the department chairs and it rotates annually.

An additional factor that year was the adaptation of a hybrid schedule, consisting of seven periods on Monday through Wednesday and a rotating block schedule Thursday and Friday (with seventh period as a single period each day). Periods one, three, and five meet for 90 minutes on Thursdays; periods two, four and six meet on Fridays. The single lunch period falls at the same time each day, whether it is a seven-period or a block day. (This consistency is extremely important for students with medical needs, internships, or partial schedules, as well as for part-time teachers.) The advantages of having each class in three single and one block periods each week immediately became obvious. Teachers had more freedom in planning, and everyone enjoyed the variety of instructional activities this model encouraged: science classes could use the block day as a lab day, students had time to go to the computer labs to do extending writing and in-depth research, physical education classes could hold tournaments, and music classes had time to practice complete performances.

After much discussion and debate, and with some trepidation, the staff reached a decision to try one lunch for the 2000–01 school year, with clearly defined parameters of where students could and could not be, where they could eat, and what they could and could not do. Parents needed a little more prodding, but through frequent discussions at PTSA meetings, as well as regular communication in the PTSA newsletter and e-mail distribution list, concerns were minimal. The student leaders were also on board with the idea.
Proceed cautiously and ensure that all stakeholders—students, parents, and staff members—support the idea.

Provide numerous, varied, and well-advertised activities for students at lunchtime.

Encourage staff members to welcome students into their classrooms.

Provide perks for clubs and activities that draw a large number of students.

Share lunchtime best practices at staff meetings.

Work closely with school security to ensure that all problem areas are patrolled regularly. These include back stairwells and student restrooms.

Work with the student government and class officers to develop a campaign for clean-up.

Invite skeptics in the community to tour the school during lunch.

When issues arise (and they will), have clear processes for dealing with them.

Create responsible students and reward good citizenship when students head off issues or help with concerns.

Make sure that students understand that having a single lunch period is a privilege.

That school year began with a huge leap of faith. As confusing as the first day of school is normally for students, it was compounded by 1,600 students charging into the cafeteria and standing in ridiculously long lunch lines for most of the 50-minute period. Parent complaints began before the end of the school day, and a call from a parent to the fire marshal prompted a visit on the second day of school. Clearly additional training and communication were needed.

After a few long days and with a lot of communication and discussion, students began to make changes. They realized that if their class immediately before lunch was far from the cafeteria, there was no point in rushing down; it made sense to take care of business first. So they began to go to their lockers, use the restroom, and check in with teachers, and they discovered that by staggering when they arrived in the cafeteria, the lines were manageable and there was plenty of food left when they got there. The vending machines were also stocked with healthy options, and the school store began selling approved snack food and drinks.

A number of things happened, both formally and informally. Teachers began to notice that students were stopping by during lunch if they did not understand a concept covered in class. Students also started just visiting teachers in their classrooms, which resulted in informal, positive relationships. Coaches began to use lunchtime to hold team meetings and check student grade sheets. To increase student physical activity and allow more energetic students to blow off steam, the physical education teachers opened the gym and weight room during the lunch period.

Teachers now schedule voluntary review sessions before tests during the lunch period and find that many students show up who previously would not come to after-school review sessions because they had outside obligations or transportation or motivation issues. One teacher traded a teaching period for staffing a study center during lunchtime where National Honor Society students offer one-on-one tutoring in a variety of subjects for students who need help. More than 300 students spend time in the media center every day, working on research or homework or simply looking for a quiet place to spend their lunchtime. Serving detention at lunchtime has become a wonderful deterrent to negative behavior because students do not want to miss lunch. Students who had conflicts with other students request peer mediation, which is offered at lunchtime, eliminating the necessity of missing classes.

Guidance counselors schedule group meetings at lunchtime. Special interest speakers, sometimes sponsored by clubs, have become popular. Clubs have far better participation during meetings that take place at lunchtime, rather than after school, and musical groups frequently give impromptu concerts. Lunchtime also has become a time to take care of financial obligations, report locker problems, schedule appointments, apply for parking permits, and do all of the things that students rarely have time to do during the school day. Student advocacy and self-responsibility is clearly on the upswing.

Many student groups found gathering places outside of the cafeteria. The main hallway is cluttered with groups of students
sitting on the floor and leaning against walls eating their lunches, and groups of students of different ages and interests congregate in stairwells. Special interest areas—such as art rooms, music rooms, the TV studio, and the theatre department—are popular places for students to assemble. Shy kids who find a crowded cafeteria overwhelming hang out in small groups in quieter hallways. Students who work on the school yearbook and newspaper use lunchtime to ensure that they finish their work before a deadline.

The building services team positioned extra trash cans, many on wheels, around the building for easier access, which became a big help in keeping the building clean. At the end of lunch each day, the team made a sweep of the entire building. Visitors to Blake are amazed that by 20 minutes after the lunch period ends, the entire building is clean and there is virtually no evidence of students having eaten in hallways, classrooms, or other nontraditional locations.

The one down side of a single lunch period is having an extended opportunity for students to get into trouble, so the security team is positioned around the school and keeps in regular communication with administrators throughout the lunch period. Any brewing issues are quickly identified and dealt with.

For administrators, lunchtime is the best and most productive time of the day. Using the lunch period to walk around, chat with students, and have a high level of visibility has had a huge effect on administrator-to-student, administra-
tor-to-staff-member, and staff-member-to-student relationships. Students often share concerns, observations, or general information that might not come out in a more formal setting. Being available for informal interactions allows administrators to feel the pulse of the school. It becomes crystal clear which teachers have a room full of students on a regular basis and really take time to work with them. Lunchtime birthday parties for students are a good opportunity for administrators to mooch cake, congratulate the birthday boy or girl, and get to know students informally. Students sitting alone are easy to identify, and administrators make it a priority to ensure that those students have connections in the school.

**Measured Success**

One lunch period at Blake began in 2000 and has continued to be highly successful for the past six years. Last year, Blake had 1,997 students and a 5.4% suspension rate. Student achievement has risen dramatically in every academic indicator, and county-distributed surveys about the school environment, which are distributed annually to students, parents, and staff members, are overwhelmingly positive. Visitors from dozens of high schools both in and out of our district have come to observe our lunch hour. Anne L. Bryant, the executive director of the National School Boards Association, visited Blake and wrote:

> The lunch hour is the centerpiece of the school. All students have the same 50-minute lunch break; there are no staggered lunches. During this time, teachers are in their classrooms available to students for consultation, tutoring, problem-solving, discussions, and connecting.

> The bottom line is that after six years in practice, one lunch period at Blake has empowered students and staff members, raised student achievement, improved staff collegiality and planning, and overall created an extremely effective and overwhelmingly positive school climate. The consensus of the school community is that Blake’s single lunch period is highly successful and absolutely here to stay.

**Reference**