

THE RULES

Federal regulations require that school lunches be served between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., but 13 schools in Virginia Beach and Norfolk start serving at earlier times.

Bayside High Juniors Lydia Walther-Rodriguez, left, and Kim Rodriguez start their lunch period at 9:05 a.m.



VICKI CRONIS/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

It's 9:05 a.m. Time for lunch.

Virginia Beach schools seek waiver for early seatings

BY LAUREN ROTH
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

VIRGINIA BEACH — As morning rush hour jams the highways, students at six Beach high schools sit down for their 9 o'clock meal.

No, not breakfast. Lunch. Greasy pizza, crinkle fries and chicken sandwiches.

"I'm pretty much just eating so I won't be hungry again in an hour," said Chris Bullington, a Bayside High School sophomore. The 15-year-old poked at the remains of a sub sandwich. "By 2, I'm hungry again."

Breakfast-hour lunches are a fact of life for many students in Virginia Beach and Norfolk, where thirteen public high schools and middle schools start their lunch periods before 10 a.m.

Federal regulations require schools to serve lunch between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Beach schools learned they were out of compliance in late September and requested a waiver through the state Department of Education. No other school divisions have asked the department for waivers.

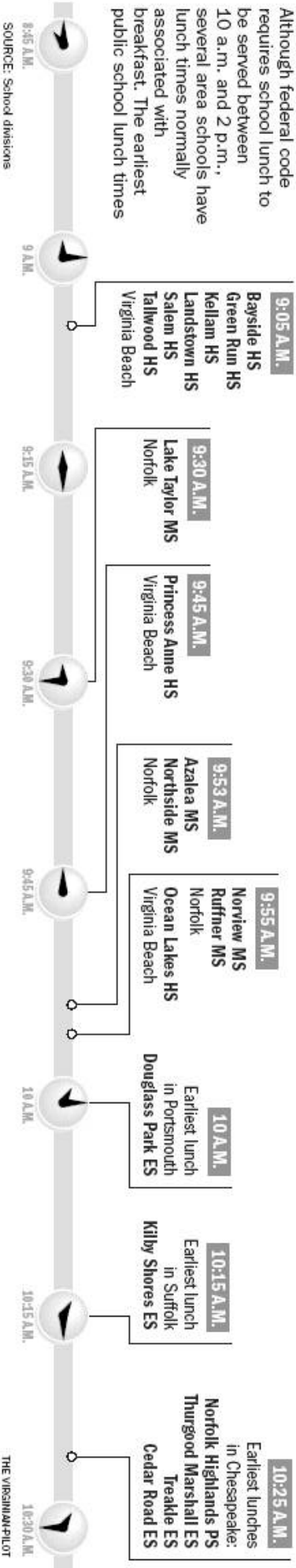
School officials say they hear few complaints.

In Virginia Beach, eight of the 11 comprehensive high schools start lunch between 9 and 10 a.m. Food Services Director James Ratliff said lunch has to start early so all students can get a chance to eat. With four class blocks of about 90 minutes at the high school level, scheduling

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LUNCH TIMES

Although federal code requires school lunch to be served between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., several area schools have lunch times normally associated with breakfast. The earliest public school lunch times



Lunch: Beach's breaks longer than U.S. norm

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options are limited.

Lydia Walther-Rodriguez, a 16-year-old Bayside junior, ate a grilled chicken sandwich at the 9:05 a.m. lunch. That period starts after students have been in school for an hour and a half. "I don't think it's healthy," she said, "because most people skip breakfast."

The city's health director said Lydia might have a point. "To eat at 9, it doesn't give children fuel when they need it," said Dr. Venita Newby-Owens. "Their brain is not getting continuous nutrients."

Lydia said hunger distracts her during her fourth block chemistry class. Her friend Kim Rodriguez,

"To eat at 9, it doesn't give children fuel when they need it. Their brain is not getting continuous nutrients." DR. VENITA NEWBY-OWENS, HEALTH DIRECTOR

16, said that after eating an early lunch she often goes 12 hours without a meal.

She heads straight to work after school and gets only a 15-minute break to eat a bag of chips. What's worse: She works at a grocery store.

"I smell baked chicken and cookies," she said. "Ooh! All that good stuff!"

Brian Baxter, principal at Landstown High School, said he tries to keep the earliest and latest lunches smaller. Lunch there is served in shifts from 9:05 a.m. to 2 p.m.

also can affect lunch times.

The 45-minute lunches put Virginia Beach schools out of line with national norms. According to a 2005 survey by the School Nutrition Association, the typical high school lunch period lasts 25 minutes.

In 90 percent of high schools, lunch periods are shorter than 40 minutes, according to the survey.

Ratiff said longer lunches allow all the students to get through the lunch line. At Bayside, the first students to eat cleared their trays within 20 minutes.

In Norfolk, the high schools serve three 30-minute lunches during an extended two-hour block. That allows students to eat a half-hour lunch and

attend a 90-minute class.

"They eat in 10 minutes," said Michael Caprio, principal of Maury High School. "They spend the rest of the time talking."

As of Friday, the state Department of Education had made no decision on granting Virginia Beach's waiver.

For now, some students will continue to eat lunch as the day begins.

"It's not that it's too early to eat," said Bayside senior Crystal Hamilton, 17, who ate a pizza slice and fries. "It's too early to eat lunch food. We should be eating breakfast."

A LONG, LONG LUNCH

Virginia Beach lunches start early to fit 45-minute lunch periods into block schedules. Nationally, fewer than 10 percent of high schools have lunches longer than 40 minutes.

Virginia Beach high school lunch period:

45 minutes

U.S. average high school lunch period:

25 minutes

SOURCE: School Nutrition Association 2005 survey; Schools Virginia Beach City Public, THE VIRGINIANPILOT

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