

Is the Cafeteria Ruining Your Life?

Students say the cafeteria is the top spot for fighting, bullying, and drama. **Is assigned seating the answer?**

By Justin O'Neill and Elizabeth Larsen

Kate Allen will never forget the day in seventh grade when “the list” went up. She stepped into the cafeteria for lunch—her favorite part of the day—at Black River Falls Middle School in Wisconsin. And that’s when she saw it.

“Assigned seating?” she croaked, staring at a paper taped to the wall. She scanned the room for her assigned table, desperately hoping to see at least *one* friend there. But no, it was a group of strangers.

It’s not fair! she thought.

The Hunger Games Arena

Fair or not, Principal David Roou thought assigned seating was worth a try. The cafeteria had become ground zero for gossip, bullying, and fighting. Kids routinely wandered the room looking for a seat, choking back tears when no one would let them join a table.

For most kids, lunch is a time to catch up with friends, relax, and



trade Twinkies for chips. But for others, it is a time of acute anxiety, when simply finding a seat is a daily humiliation. For these kids, the lunchroom can feel more like the Hunger Games arena than what it should be—a much needed break from school-day stress.

Why is the cafeteria so crazy? First, there are the cliques: Band kids eat with band kids, soccer players with soccer players, and so on. If you’re not in a group, it can be hard to feel welcome. Then there is the rock-concert-level noise and

rowdiness (flying french fries, milk squirting out noses, etc.). Without close adult supervision, chaos erupts—and cafeterias can turn into bullying hotspots.

Sense of Camaraderie

At Black River Falls, a computer program randomly assigns students to tables, guaranteeing everybody a seat. (Assignments are rotated every few weeks.) This way, students must interact with kids they wouldn’t normally hang out with. Roou says the system has built a school-wide

sense of camaraderie.

Students didn't see the benefits—at least not at first. They circulated a petition to end assigned seating. Parents called to complain. As for Kate? She scarfed down her food so she could get out of there as fast as possible.

Other Options

Assigned seating does have its drawbacks. Lunch is one of the few chances students have to socialize. Is it so unreasonable for kids to want to spend it with their friends?

Besides, there are other solutions to cafeteria drama. At South View Middle School in Minnesota, for example, students sit at round tables rather than rectangular ones. That way, everyone can see and hear each other, and fewer kids feel left out of conversations.

Another option is “Mix It Up at Lunch Day.” Once a year, every student must sit with someone new at lunch. The idea is that interacting with kids from another social group will make you more tolerant of differences, and reduce bullying and prejudice. Thousands of schools participate in this program. It's successful, but it's just one small step in changing cafeteria culture.

Assigned seating goes a lot further than that. Just look at Black River Falls. Today, the cafeteria is much calmer and nearly bullying-free. Even Kate, now an adult, has changed her tune. “I gained a new perspective,” she says. “I met kids I had never had the chance to talk with. I made new bonds.” ●

What Do You Think?

Should cafeterias have assigned seating?

Use evidence from the article to support each side of this debate. Write the information on the lines below.



YES

BULLYING IS OFF THE MENU!

1 It would cut down
on cliques in the
cafeteria.

2

3

NO

FREEDOM TO CHOOSE!

1

2

3

EXAMINE POINTS ON BOTH SIDES—AS WELL AS YOUR OWN BELIEFS AND EXPERIENCES.

Decide what you think. State your opinion in one sentence below. This can become the thesis statement for an argument essay on this topic.

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