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HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

Bread for the World  
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# Background Paper

## Nourishing All Our Children

by Michele Learner and Sophie Milam

Valencia Shackelford says that the hardest part about being hungry was “not being able to function as a normal person. There was no energy.” Her sister Genora adds, “You feel like you’re a speck of dirt.”

Valencia is 10 years old. Her sister is nine. They live not in a developing nation, but in Alabama.

Valencia and Genora, whose family lived in a van for a time after their rented home was destroyed by Hurricane Ivan in 2004, are among the children who receive meals at Friendship Mission in Montgomery, AL.

Elijah Peterson, also 10, is another regular visitor to the mission. Elijah walks a mile through a barren part of town to eat at the mission—for dinner only when school is in session, but for both lunch and dinner on the weekends and during school breaks. Then he brings meals in Styrofoam containers home for his disabled mother and two younger brothers. Elijah reports that most of what he eats comes from the mission.

Research by the initiative “Kids Count” found that a quarter of all children in Alabama don’t get enough to eat. The Montgomery Area Food Bank’s executive director, Parke Hinman, estimates that about 40 percent of those who get help at the food bank are children.

In December 2008, Valencia, Genora, and Elijah talked with Kym Klass of the newspaper, *The Montgomery Advertiser*. Outside the media spotlight, more than 12 million other children in the United States live in families that struggle to put food on the table.

### Congress Will Renew Child Nutrition Programs This Year

The United States has a variety of nutrition programs aimed at making sure that children have enough to eat. The National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women,



Margaret W. Nea

Ensuring that all students get a full meal at lunch is a first step toward ending childhood hunger in the United States.

Infants, and Children), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program are key programs that together make up the Child Nutrition Act. Congress will be reauthorizing these programs this year; the last five-year renewal was in 2004.

In 2008, these programs, totaling about \$20 billion, served more than 30 million participants. While a permanent solution to hunger requires a sustainable solution to poverty, the fastest, most direct way to reduce childhood hunger is through existing child nutrition programs. Strengthening these programs is the critical first step to meeting the ambitious 2015 goal of ending hunger among children in the United States.

## Child Nutrition Programs

**The National School Lunch Program** provides nutritious reduced-price or free lunches to low-income children on school days.

It is an entitlement program, meaning that it must serve all children whose family incomes make them eligible.

The program operates in 101,000 schools. More than 18 million children receive free or reduced-price lunches.

**The School Breakfast Program** provides nutritious reduced-price or free breakfasts to children on school days. It is an entitlement program.

The program operates in 85,000 schools. 8.5 million children receive free or reduced-price breakfasts. About 46 percent of children who receive free or reduced-price lunch also receive breakfast.

**The Summer Food Service Program** provides free meals and snacks to low-income children during the summer and long school vacations. It is an entitlement program.

There are 32,700 sites that offer summer food, serving 2.1 million children. Program sites are run by a variety of schools, government agencies, camps, churches, and community organizations.

Only about 11 percent of the children who receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year benefit from the Summer Food Service Program.

**The Child and Adult Care Food Program** provides meals and snacks to low-income children in daycare centers and emergency shelters. Eight states are also piloting a supper program.

It is an entitlement program, serving 3.2 million participants.

**The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)** provides monthly packages of nutritious foods to low-income pregnant women, infants, and children up to the age of five.

WIC serves 8.7 million people, 75 percent of whom are infants and young children.

WIC is not an entitlement program. This means that it must be funded by Congress every year, and it can serve only as many participants as this annual funding allows.

## Strengthening Our Child Nutrition Programs

As Congress takes up child nutrition reauthorization early this year, Bread for the World urges our elected representatives to pass a Child Nutrition Act that closes the hunger gap for our nation's children.

The United States has 18.4 million low-income children who receive free or reduced-price school lunch, and this

number is on the rise. Far fewer children (8.5 million for breakfast and 2.1 million for summer meals) receive the other meals they are eligible for.

To reduce child hunger, we will need to reach nearly 10 million children missing breakfast and 16 million going without food assistance in the summer. A top priority for the 2009 Child Nutrition Act should be to expand access and participation in the school breakfast and summer food entitlement programs.



Providing children with fruits, vegetables, and whole grains is essential.

USDA

## School Lunch Program: Responding to Rising Needs

The difficult U.S. economic situation is hitting low-income families hardest, and more students are participating in school lunch and breakfast and the Summer Food Service Program. In December, Clair Doyle, director of school food services in Franklin, MA, told the *Milford Daily News* that new applications come in every day. "Let's face it," she said, "the economy is terrible and people need it." In Indiana, the past decade has seen the number of children receiving free or reduced-price lunches at school increase dramatically—from just over 26 percent of all students in 2000 to nearly 38 percent in 2008, or an increase of 43 percent.

Nationally, the School Nutrition Association's recently-published study, "Saved by the Lunch Bell: As Economy Sinks, School Nutrition Program Participation Rises," found that 425,000 more students are participating in school lunch and breakfast programs this year. About 80 percent of the schools surveyed across the country reported

increases in the number of free and reduced-price school lunches they are serving.

■ **Recommendation:** Students whose families receive SNAP (food stamps) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are eligible for free school meals. Enrolling students for school meals automatically when their families sign up for SNAP or TANF has been shown to increase participation and reduce paperwork. Congress could improve this process of “direct certification” for school breakfast and lunch by also including children who receive Medicaid and by further streamlining the cooperation between government agencies and local schools.

## School Breakfast Program: Promoting Success at School

Eating breakfast has a positive impact on a child’s cognitive development and academic performance. The *Boston Globe* reports that a recent academic study, “The Impact of School Breakfast on Children’s Health and Learning,” confirms that making sure children eat a nutritious breakfast is one of the best investments in their school success. An elementary school student agreed with the research findings, saying that without breakfast, “I’d sit there for 10 minutes trying to figure out the question. My belly would be grumbling while waiting for lunch.”

Communities and states vary widely in their success in providing school breakfast. Among major cities, Newark, NJ, scored highest in a report by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) on school year 2006-2007 (the latest available). More than 88 percent of the children in Newark who received free and reduced-price lunch also received breakfast.

Chicago scored lowest among the urban areas, with less than 29 percent participation. State participation rates vary almost as widely—during school year 2007-2008, more than 60 percent of those who receive lunch in South Carolina and New Mexico also receive breakfast, compared to about one-third in Utah and Illinois.

Some children are eligible to receive free school breakfast but do not attend a school that offers it. Others do not participate because of logistics—the school bus reaches school just in time for them to dash to class. Some teens would rather miss breakfast than have classmates see them standing in line for a free meal.

■ **Recommendation:** Depending on the size of the school and the share of low-income students, operating a traditional cafeteria breakfast program may not be cost effective. But with some creativity, schools could provide their students with breakfast in nontraditional and lower-cost ways. One idea that has worked well, especially for older children, is to provide pre-packaged meals that students pick up on their way to class.



Eugene Mebane, Jr.

Kids who eat well are energetic and ready to learn.

## Summer Food Program: Expanding Traditional and New Solutions

There are far fewer summer food sites than schools providing meals. Transportation also often poses a problem for low-income families. The result is that about nine out of 10 children who receive free or reduced-price lunch do not receive meals from the Summer Food Program.

But of course, children get as hungry in the summer as during the school year. Cynthia Ervin, coordinator of North Carolina’s Summer Food Program, says, “During those long summer months, the [program] serves what is too often [children’s] only nutritious meal of the day. We need more providers to offer this program in their local communities.”

■ **Recommendation:** Churches and congregations can help ensure that children have access to nutritious meals when school is out by signing up to be a Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsor or meal site. Organizations approved by state agencies to participate in the SFSP receive reimbursements for meals provided to eligible children. New rules have made it much simpler to manage the program. To find out more about helping children avoid hunger through SFSP, visit the USDA Food and Nutrition Services Web site at [www.summerfood.usda.gov](http://www.summerfood.usda.gov). To apply, click on Contacts to find the agency that administers the SFSP in your state.

Some communities have experimented with mobile summer food programs. For example, a bus may make stops in a number of neighborhoods, providing a library of books for children as well as a healthy meal or snack.

Sometimes, particularly in small or remote communities or where low-income families are widely dispersed in

the community, a physical summer meal site may not be possible. In these cases, one idea is to build upon existing nutrition programs. Many students enrolled in school lunch and breakfast programs live in households that participate in SNAP. Increasing the household's monthly SNAP benefits during summer months would help families serve the meals that their children normally receive at school.

## WIC: Providing Crucial Early Help

Our country's youngest children benefit from the widely praised WIC program. WIC helps right from the start: Half of all babies born in this country are participants, and WIC prenatal care means that they are less likely to have low birthweights, which are associated with a variety of medical problems. In fact, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates that each \$1 spent on WIC for pregnant women generated \$2.89 in health care savings during the first year after birth and \$3.50 in savings over 18 years.

WIC's packages of healthy foods enable low-income children not yet in school to get the critical nutrients needed for their development. For example, participating children have a lower rate of anemia (iron deficiency) than low-income children who do not participate. WIC participants are also more likely to complete their immunizations on time.



Margaret W. Nea

A strong WIC program helps our nation's babies and toddlers grow up strong and healthy.

WIC's focus on not simply providing enough food, but providing the right food, with the nutrients children need, is part of what makes it successful. Healthier foods like fresh produce and whole grains are more expensive but essential. The advantages of providing kids with school and summer meals could be augmented by strengthening meal and snack nutrition standards.

## Looking to the Future

Even beyond the misery of being hungry and, in Genora's words, "feeling like a speck of dirt," not getting enough to eat has serious consequences for children. It puts them at risk for a range of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physical problems. Even short-term episodes of hunger can make children more likely to have difficulty paying attention in school, suffer anxiety and depression, have problems with aggression, miss school, and be hospitalized.

And even in tough times, childhood hunger is unnecessary in a country like the United States.

Bread for the World urges Congress to pass a Child Nutrition Act that:

- Increases the number of school breakfast programs and summer food sites that are available to low-income families;
- Explores alternative models of providing children with summer meals, such as higher family SNAP benefits when school is out;
- Maintains a strong WIC program;
- Increases outreach so that families know that programs that they may qualify for are available and are encouraged to participate;
- Reduces the paperwork needed to determine eligibility and apply for the programs;
- Encourages exploration of ways to reduce stigma associated with the programs (for example, by providing universal school breakfast);
- Increases reimbursement rates to more accurately reflect the cost of a nutritious meal or snack, and bases nutrition standards on science-based data from the National Institute of Medicine or USDA; and,
- Provides states with incentives to reduce their rates of child hunger and increase participation in child nutrition programs.

### Opportunities to Take Action on the Child Nutrition Reauthorization

**Beginning in March:** Funding parameters are set by the Senate and House budget committees through the annual budget process.

**Spring and Summer:** Senate and House authorizing committees hold hearings on child nutrition issues.

**Summer and Fall:** Once authorizing committees see the results of the budget committees' work, they draft legislation to reauthorize child nutrition programs.

**Follow the process at [www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org)**