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# Background Paper

## Childhood Hunger: A Time to Act

by Michele Learner

Hunger advocates throughout the country have become increasingly concerned about children as poverty and unemployment rates continue to rise. Even before the economic recession, children were at greater risk of hunger—in fact, households with children are about twice as likely to experience hunger. In 2008, the last complete year for which we have data, nearly one in four children in the United States were at risk of hunger—meaning that 16.7 million infants, children, and teens lived in families that could not always afford to put food on the table. Continued troubled economic times throughout 2009 can only mean that these numbers are even higher.

In its November 2009 report, “Hunger in America’s Classrooms,” the anti-hunger organization Share Our Strength offers a wake-up call from 740 teachers who work in rural, urban, and suburban areas of the country. More than 60 percent of the teachers reported that they regularly see children coming to school hungry because they are not getting enough to eat at home. Most of this group said this happens at least once a week.

Here is more of what the teachers had to say:

“The only meals that [Kimberly] was guaranteed were served at school. Anytime we had leftovers, she would always want to take them home ... to her little brothers and sisters. She was a second-grader trying to make sure that her family got fed.”

—Kate, teacher in San Antonio, TX

“I see kids asking for extra food at the end of the day before they go home ... because they don’t know if they are having dinner or not.”

—Tori, teacher in St. Louis, MO

“I don’t know if most Americans realize that there are kids relying on school for every meal.”

—Laura, teacher in Milwaukee, WI



Eugene Megane, Jr.

### Growing Needs

The fastest, most direct way to reduce childhood hunger is through national child nutrition programs. Child nutrition programs are effective only when they actually reach the children who need help. Strengthening the country’s nutritional safety net is a critical first step toward meeting the goal, embraced by President Barack Obama and others, of eliminating hunger among U.S. children by 2015.

Congress passed a renewal of child nutrition programs in 2004, and the programs were due for review and reauthorization in 2009. Congress approved a temporary extension then and expects to pass a five-year child nutrition reauthorization bill this year.

In the meantime, Bread for the World continues to educate members of Congress about the improvements we seek in

the new legislation. Bread's priorities are measures that increase low-income children's access to and participation in these critical nutrition programs.

Who are the 16.7 million American children these child nutrition programs seek to help?

- Nearly half live in families headed by a married couple.
- More than half live in families with incomes above the federal poverty line.
- About one in six live outside a metropolitan area.
- Although whites are the largest racial/ethnic group, children of color are overrepresented. More than one in three African-American and Hispanic children live in families that do not always have enough money for food.
- The numbers are growing. Between 2007 and 2008, the percentage of children in food-insecure households increased by 34 percent. We are likely to see another increase when figures for 2009 are calculated.



Yesenia Garcia

Strengthening child nutrition programs is a crucial step toward ending hunger among U.S. children by 2015.

For families struggling to make ends meet—and for our whole society—child nutrition programs are an investment in the future. Children who experience hunger during the first three years of their lives can suffer damage to their health and development that is largely irreversible. Older children have difficulty concentrating and learning in school and are more prone to behavior problems. All of this can set up a destructive cycle that follows them into adulthood.

Ricardo and Ignatia Cruz live in San Antonio, TX, where Mr. Cruz works full-time in construction and Ms. Cruz is currently home with their youngest child, 1-year-old Samuel. Mr. Cruz earns about \$29,000 a year, although his take-home pay varies with conditions in his industry. Sometimes he is able to work overtime, but there have also been times when his employer cuts his hours.

The family receives benefits from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to buy healthy food for Samuel. The older children—Brittany, 16, Ricardo Jr., 14, and Kimberly, 9—all receive free school lunches, which help provide them with the nutrients they need. They are strong students—Brittany and Ricardo have earned some college credit while in high school. Because the children receive free school meals, Ms. Cruz is able to set aside small amounts of money for the teens' college educations. "We started their accounts off with only \$50 each, but at least it was a start," she says.

## The National Child Nutrition Programs

The programs included in the legislation governing child nutrition are the National School Lunch Program; the School Breakfast Program; summer, after-school, and childcare feeding programs; and WIC. For a more detailed description of each program, see Bread for the World Institute's February 2009 background paper, "Nourishing All Our Children," or the "Programs and Participation" fact sheet, both at [www.bread.org/childnutrition](http://www.bread.org/childnutrition).

More than 19 million children—or more than 62 percent of lunch participants—receive free or reduced-price school lunches. Yet only 9 million students receive free or reduced-price school breakfasts. Most (about 82 percent) of those who participate in the School Breakfast Program are low-income children. Summer programs are by far the weakest link in the safety net for school-age children, since just one in nine students who receive lunch assistance during the school year are able to take advantage of the Summer Food Service Program.

Half of all babies born in the United States participate in WIC, which provides their families with vouchers to purchase healthy foods for them. WIC serves low-income babies, children up to age 5, and pregnant women.

## How We Can Improve Access to Child Nutrition Programs

### *Enroll more eligible children automatically.*

In the past year, participation in SNAP (formerly food stamps) has surged. By November 2009, more than 38 million Americans, about half of them children, were receiving SNAP benefits to help put food on the table.

Children who receive SNAP are also eligible for free school lunch and breakfast. Federal law now requires states to enroll them automatically—a process known as "direct certification." When states implement this effectively, it is accurate and reduces the paperwork burden on schools and

families. Most importantly, of course, it means that more eligible children are actually receiving free meals at school.

But an October 2009 study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that states vary widely in the effectiveness of their direct certification efforts. As a result, many children still aren't being automatically enrolled and are missing out on the school meals they qualify for. Many states could reduce the number of missed children by making simple improvements to their direct certification systems. For example, because many children join SNAP throughout the school year (more than 500,000 in 2007-2008), Zoe Neuberger, a child nutrition expert at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, recommends that states also automatically enroll children in school meal programs throughout the school year.

According to Rich Huddleston of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, there are an estimated 2 million children nationwide who participate in Medicaid but not SNAP. "Even though these children are living in poverty and are nutritionally needy, they are not receiving the free school meals Congress intended," Huddleston told the Senate Agriculture Committee in November 2009.

Thus, allowing or requiring states to automatically enroll children who participate in Medicaid in school meal programs would boost the participation of eligible children. Sens. Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Bob Casey (D-PA), and Michael Bennet (D-CO), along with Reps. David Loebsack (D-IA) and Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO), have introduced the Hunger Free Schools Act to address this issue. The legislation requires schools to automatically enroll children in free school meals programs if their families receive Medicaid or health insurance through their states (SCHIP, or State Children's Health Insurance Program).

### ***Focus on high-poverty areas.***

Given the difficult economic times and the tight budget environment in which Congress is working, it is important to concentrate resources where the need is greatest. Often, this means focusing on geographic concentrations of poverty and hunger.

The U.S. government tracks not just poverty and low-income rates, but rates of "extreme poverty"—defined as less than 50 percent of the federal poverty level. For a family of two adults and two children in 2008, this meant living on about \$10,900 per year or less. Sizeable numbers of children do live in such very poor families—for example, 9 percent of all children in Texas and 11 percent in Arkansas.

The Hunger Free Schools Act includes another strategy that has proven effective in reaching more children who are eligible for free school meals: allowing schools or school



Brittany Thomasson

Children who experience hunger during the first years of their lives can suffer health and development damage that is largely irreversible.

districts with a high proportion of low-income children to serve free meals to all students, without requiring individual applications. This strategy would reimburse high-poverty schools using recent economic data rather than individual applications. Schools can apply their significant administrative savings toward the additional expense of serving all meals free.

Referring to the Hunger Free Schools Act, Rich Huddleston stated that schools serving high-poverty areas "would literally be hunger-free spaces. All children would be eligible to eat breakfast and lunch free of charge." There are 6 million children nationwide, he said, who attend schools in which more than 80 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch. In Arkansas, about 18 percent of all school-age children attend such schools. Serving meals to everyone also eliminates the stigma that makes many older children reluctant to take advantage of the meals. As Huddleston put it, they "would benefit from a more welcoming cafeteria."

### ***Provide children who receive free school lunch with the other meals they need.***

As highlighted in Bread's 2009 background paper, "Nourishing All Our Children," a significant gap remains between the number of children who receive free or reduced-price school lunch and those who receive school breakfast and summer food.

Currently, more than 10 million children who receive meal assistance at lunch are not receiving school breakfasts. One reason is that nearly one in seven schools that offers lunch does not have a breakfast program. Another barrier is that school bus schedules sometimes deliver children to school too late for them to eat breakfast before class starts.

Schools around the country are experimenting with strategies to make sure all students can eat breakfast. Cristina Sepe, a Bill Emerson Hunger Fellow for 2008-2009, worked with Maryland Hunger Solutions to promote such alternatives in Maryland's public schools.



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Sepe reported that at first, school administrators were not enthusiastic about the idea of offering “grab and go” breakfasts for students to eat in the classroom. They were concerned about potential disruption to classes and excessive amounts of trash. But schools who tried the approach considered it a success. At Calverton Elementary School in Baltimore, MD, participation in school breakfast increased from 10 percent to 90 percent in just two months.

“Teachers said it was a change they were reluctant to take on at first,” said Sepe. “But once it happened, they wouldn’t want to change it back.”

In nearby Washington, DC, some schools began serving breakfast during the first 15 minutes of class. They report fewer complaints of stomachaches and requests to visit the school nurse. In addition to the “grab and go” meals, some schools offer “second-chance breakfast,” which allows middle and high school students to get food after their first period class.

Providing summer meals to children who receive meal assistance during the school year has proven challenging. There are far too few sites to do the job that schools do during the school year. When sites do exist, transportation can be

a problem—school buses do not operate for summer food sites. As a result, only about 11 percent of the children who eat free school lunches receive lunch during the summer, leaving a gap of more than 17 million kids.

To increase the number of summer food sites, Congress recently simplified the program to make it easier to manage, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture has increased outreach to potential sponsors. Advocates also play an important role in recruiting program sponsors. In November 2009, the Texas Hunger Coalition brought together federal, state, and local agencies to campaign for effective summer food programs for children. At their hunger summit in Waco, TX, advocates agreed to coordinate efforts by churches, youth organizations, and school districts to provide free meals to the 2.5 million Texas children who receive them during the school year.

Bread for the World urges its members to learn more about the program and consider providing meals to low-income children at their church in the summer. To find out more about becoming a Summer Food Service Program sponsor or meal site, visit [www.summerfood.usda.gov](http://www.summerfood.usda.gov) and click on “getting started.”

Yet even if we increase the number of summer food sites, the program is limited in its ability to serve students during the summer because attendance is not required and transportation is not provided. Another option is to build on existing programs—for example, increasing families’ SNAP benefits in the summer to help pay for the extra meals children are eating at home, or providing a summer WIC-style food voucher for schoolchildren.

## Part of a Larger Effort

Childhood hunger is rooted in poverty: low-wage workers struggle to make ends meet and feed their children. Without the opportunity to create a financial cushion or accumulate other assets, low-income families remain vulnerable. Even minor emergencies such as the car breaking down or a child’s illness can consume the monthly grocery budget very quickly.

A long-term solution to childhood hunger certainly requires strong nutrition programs, but they are not enough. We need to also seek solutions that will put more money in the pockets of low-income workers. This year, Bread’s Offering of Letters urges Congress to protect and strengthen tax credits that benefit low-income families, particularly the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit. Please visit [www.bread.org/OL2010](http://www.bread.org/OL2010) to learn more.