

# What's for Supper? Addressing Food Insecurity

*Many school districts are focusing on students' end-of-day nutrition.*

By Robert Ruder, Ed.D.



**H**ow many of your students are “food insecure”? The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that in 2015, 13 million children lived in food-insecure households—homes where they had limited access to nutritious food. In those households, parents often have to choose between paying the electric bill and buying food. Those students not only come to school with empty stomachs, they also may bring with them a variety of other issues. Research shows a broad range of consequences of food insecurity, including increased rates of anemia and asthma; higher levels of aggression, anxiety, and behavior problems; and reduced cognitive function.

What can school districts do to help those students succeed? The Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers several programs that help provide healthy meals to children at school, including the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Summer Food Service Program. Administered by state agencies, those programs help fight hunger by reimbursing school districts for providing healthy meals to children.

However, providing breakfast and lunch isn't always enough. In an effort to help meet the needs of a growing

number of students who are identified as food insecure, many school districts have added supper to their meal program with the support of the federal government and, in some cases, the community.

Florida's Broward County School District offers the Aftercare Supper Program at 98 of its schools. Broward County students who are enrolled in aftercare programs receive a nutritious early supper in the schools' cafeterias. Meeting all USDA requirements, meals include milk and a serving of fruit, vegetable, grain, and meat (or meat alternate).

The Aftercare Supper Program, funded by the USDA and administered by the Bureau of Child Care Food Programs of the Florida Department of Health, is available to schools in which at least 50% of the enrolled children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals and where regularly scheduled afterschool educational or enrichment activities are structured and supervised. The meals can be served at any time during the after-school program—immediately after school or at a “traditional” dinner time. A snack can be served in addition to the meal.

The Third Meal at School program in the Kansas City (Missouri) Public Schools was launched in 2010, after President Obama signed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. A change in the district's school start times concerned Ellen Cram, the director of nutrition. Students who arrived at school at 7:30 a.m. ate lunch at 10:00 a.m., and if they participated in after-school activities, they often did not get home for supper until 6:00 p.m.

Now, students who stay after school for programs such as tutoring or computer lab can receive a light dinner. Although it is not intended to take the place of dinner at home, for some students, it often does, according to educators.

In Michigan, the IM Kids 3rd Meal program provides evening meals for needy students in the Iona County Intermediate School District and the Montcalm Area Intermediate School District. The “3rd meals” are prepared by volunteers at the H. O. Steele Education Center, delivered to schools in the afternoon, and distributed to

students before they are dismissed for the day. Each student whose family participates in the program goes home with a nutritious, ready-to-eat evening meal, such as a bag containing a peanut butter sandwich, fruit, whole-grain pretzels, and milk.

IM Kids 3rd Meal serves over 400 meals a day, five days a week, during the school year. The program is supported by sponsors, donations, volunteers, and fundraisers.

The rationale for providing meals at school is basic: students who are not hungry have more energy, are better able to focus, are healthier, and subsequently learn better. But providing nutritious meals has added benefits. For example, the parents of many children work late hours or second jobs and can rest a bit easier knowing their children have something to eat that will carry them through the night. In addition, the program draws students to enrichment activities after school and helps them become more engaged with teachers, volunteers, and other students.

## Supper Time Naysayers

Supper programs are not without their cynics. Dick Learn, who has served as chief financial officer for a number of Pennsylvania school districts, says, “A supper program is one that is needed and yet controversial, depending on the philosophical and political inclination of a school district’s leadership. For some, the overriding discussion will be whether such a program is an educational or social issue.” In other words, should school districts step in and fulfill what some see as the responsibility of the parents?

Of course, there are financial and personnel costs associated with implementing an after-school supper program at schools. Schools must have the facilities and personnel to produce and serve the meal. Because school kitchens typically shut down at the end of the school day, food preparation and storage may offer challenges.

## Resources for Addressing Food Insecurity

### **At-Risk Afterschool Meals: A Child and Adult Care Food Program and Handbook**

[www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/atriskhandbook.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/atriskhandbook.pdf)

This handbook from the USDA addresses the program’s requirements that apply to at-risk afterschool care centers, including school districts. It provides information about eligibility requirements, how to apply to participate in the program, meal patterns and food service requirements, reimbursement, record-keeping requirements, and monitoring requirements.

### **USDA School Meals Child Nutrition Program Website**

[www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals](http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals)

This website offers guidance about providing nutritious meals at school.

### **Moving from Afterschool Snack to Meal: It’s Easier than You Think**

[http://frac.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/moving\\_snack\\_to\\_meal.pdf](http://frac.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/moving_snack_to_meal.pdf)

This tip sheet from the Food Research and Action Center guides districts through the process of adding an afterschool meal.

### **“Successes, Key Strategies and Recommendations: The D.C. Public School Experience in Rolling Out the Afterschool Meal Program at 100 Schools”**

[www.dchunger.org/pdf/dc\\_afterschoolmealprogram\\_report\\_oct2011.pdf](http://www.dchunger.org/pdf/dc_afterschoolmealprogram_report_oct2011.pdf)

This 2010 report by D.C. Hunger Solutions details the implementation of the Afterschool Meal Program in 100 Washington, D.C., schools, including challenges and guidelines for success.

### **IM Kids 3rd Meal**

[www.imkids.org](http://www.imkids.org)

This website provides information about this collaborative program that involves two communities, their school systems, and an army of volunteers.

Moreover, school eligibility to participate in the federal after-school supper program requires that the school offer a qualifying program—such as homework help, physical education activities, and computer lab, among others. Therefore, districts must ensure that they can support those enrichment programs with both money and personnel, in addition to possibly providing students with transportation home.

## Going Forward

As school districts consider the pros and cons of implementing a supper program from a school business standpoint, they must consider this essential question: Would the addition of an after-school supper program benefit students, and how would those benefits be qualitatively measured?

An analysis of academic progress and success, attendance, disciplinary

infractions, retention, and graduation statistics of students receiving free or reduced-priced breakfasts or lunches for a specified period would yield valuable data. Those data could provide the basis for establishing goals for the launch of a supper program.

An afterschool supper program offers forward-thinking school districts tremendous opportunities not only to be responsive to the needs of children and their families, but also to partner with organizations in the community that could support such programs with volunteer personnel and funding. The commitment to such a program is one that may yield significant rewards for the students, their parents, and the community.

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