

State Board Voice

School Meals: A Basic Ingredient for Equity

At Highland View Elementary in Bristol, Virginia, educational equity begins with a healthy breakfast. Since 2014, my staff and I have implemented an alternative breakfast program called Breakfast-to-Go, in which students kick off their school day with breakfast in their classrooms. The program helped us reach more students and created a more inclusive, affirming environment where all students can thrive and learn. Little did we know at the outset, the program also prepared us to serve kids during the pandemic, when congregating students as a group in the cafeteria is unsafe.

Ninety-nine percent of our school's families live at or below the federal poverty level. It is no secret that the pandemic amplified food insecurity. In the current economic crisis, many families struggle even more to pay bills and put food on the table.

Leveraging federal nutrition programs has been a smart, efficient solution to address childhood hunger at Highland View. Now more than ever, many of our students depend on the meals they receive at school for their daily nutrition. And without proper nutrition and access to food, my students will not enjoy equitable opportunities in education and healthier lifestyles that all children deserve.

When Virginia schools closed for in-person instruction, our district's nutrition teams never slowed down. Over the spring and summer, the district provided nearly 160,000 meals to youth. There was an astounding 375 percent increase in this year's summer service compared with last year's.

A new report by No Kid Hungry illustrates what I and other educators are witnessing across the nation: Almost

half of American families are living with hunger during the pandemic. The numbers are even worse among black (53 percent) and Latino families (56 percent).

Many parents and guardians are essential, frontline workers or do not have the luxury of working from home, meaning they are more likely to be exposed to the virus and to lose jobs and wages because of the pandemic. And people of color account for 43 percent of all U.S. essential workers, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

School meals will continue to play a vital role in communities of all kinds, but especially for low-income families and people of color, as they navigate pandemic-induced financial hardships. While different classrooms have different needs, meals programs can always make an impact.

The Virginia Department of Education recently updated its roadmap for achieving educational equity. State leaders describe educational equity as our commitment to eliminating the predictability of student outcomes based on race, gender, zip code, ability, socioeconomic status, and/or languages spoken at home. Implementing available federal nutrition programs—and seeking innovative ways to maximize participation—is an important step in filling equity gaps. I urge all school districts to consider the options.

Investing in school meal programs is an investment in your community. A critical lifeline now, school meals will continue to help level the playing field for future generations of students. ■



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