

Summer Feeding

August 2015

Nationwide, approximately 21.7 million breakfasts and lunches are served to American students at school for a free or reduced price during the school year. Students who are eligible for federal Free and Reduced Price Meals from the National School Lunch Program come from families who live within national poverty guidelines.

For example, a child living with a single parent would qualify for reduced price meals if the family's annual income was less than \$29,471 and free meals if they earn less than \$20,709 a year. The USDA reports that in 2013, 17.5 million children lived in food-insecure households at some time during 2013. That means they did not consistently have access to enough nutritious food to grow and develop properly.

Last school year, 71.83% of 13,410 students enrolled in Whitfield County Schools participated in the Free or Reduced meals due to the family's low income level. This percentage is somewhat higher than the state's average participation rate of 62.4 percent. Data shows that an average of 86.1 percent of students eat lunch in one of our schools' cafeterias, which also exceeds the state average lunchroom participation of 70.5 percent. The culinary professionals in our school district manage incredibly efficient kitchens, serving more than 180,000 meals a month or more than 162 million meals a year!

Although children have access to breakfast and lunch during the school year, some children get less food during the weekends. Many local churches and community organizations provide sacks of food for elementary children to take home on Fridays. The sacks contain healthy prepackaged and individually wrapped foods that require little or no home preparation. The groups bring the sacks to the schools to share with students who need and ask for them.

Research has consistently shown that inadequate nutrition hurts a child's health and prevents them from learning as well as they should. As educators, we know that children who are hungry struggle to concentrate on reading and math. We know hunger can keep a child from remembering what they learn during school. For this reason, Whitfield County participates in an additional federal program to provide free breakfast to all elementary school children supplemented with healthy snacks during the school day.

What about the children who are not old enough for school? Data indicates that good nutrition in the first three years of life lays the foundation for a child's physical and mental health, as well as academic achievement. Families who are unable to provide adequate nutrition often cannot afford books or educational experiences in a child's life. These children seem destined to face academic struggles even before they start to school.

When we think of summer break when kids are out of school, many remember happy carefree days filled with sleeping late and playing all day. For many children in today's economy; however, summer without school-provided meals can result in days of hunger. Georgia is one of the eight states with the highest prevalence of food insecurity.

School-provided summer meals allow for any child under 18 to receive a nutritious breakfast and lunch at designated feeding sites across our county. Last summer, Whitfield County cafeteria workers served nearly 300,000 free meals to children at 35 locations across the county. This does not include the number of children served by school systems in Dalton City and surrounding counties. Increasing participation over prior years provides strong evidence that poverty is among the greatest challenges for local families. So far this summer records indicate the number of meals served may exceed those of last year with approximately 6,000 meals being served daily.

2015 marks the 12th year school nutrition leaders have prepared healthy summer meals for children. The Summer Food Service Program was established to ensure that low-income children continue to receive nutritious meals when school is not in session. Our employees in food service work diligently every day all year long to feed our children and support the academic and physical health of Whitfield County students.