

Testimony to National Commission on Hunger

I have been a teacher, coach, bus driver, principal and superintendent at various schools in Arkansas. These experiences have given me a broad perspective on the lives of our students and the issues that many of them face. Many students have factors outside of school that may affect their performance in the classroom and other areas of their life. In the 2012-2013 school year, 60 percent of Arkansas students qualified for free/reduced lunches. This number represents more than 280,000 students.

Many students who do not have adequate food at home exhibit behaviors that are very telling of their situation. Many times these students will eat at a much slower pace by increasing the amount of time between bites or taking smaller bites of food. I have been told that this is the child's attempt to prolong and savor the moment. I have noticed this behavior most notably among younger elementary students.

Among older students I have observed an increase in the amount of food eaten as well as the type of food eaten on Mondays and Fridays. I believe the reasoning for this type of behavior is due to the lack of food they receive on the weekends. Not only are the students trying to fill an empty stomach on Monday, they are attempting to "stock up" on Friday for the weekend. Fridays also seemed to be a time when students ate foods that were high in carbohydrates, such as bread and potato products. It would be natural to assume that this was done so the students felt fuller for a longer period of time.

There are several resources and practices available to help combat hunger in our public schools. In districts where I have worked there have been various programs such as the Arkansas Rice Depot's "backpack program." I have seen how very beneficial this is to not only the student, but his or her family as well. With this program students pick up a backpack full of food on Fridays and bring it back to be filled again the next week.

Another successful practice I have personally implemented is the use of alternate meal times. By alternate times, I am simply referring to a time other than what is traditionally known as "before school." Having alternate breakfast times to include the time between class periods or simply later in the day helps to avoid the possibility of students skipping breakfast due to oversleeping or running short on time.

Serving breakfast in multiple locations is another successful practice I have observed. One reason I believe this is successful is because it is reflective of many business practices in society today that respond to consumers' here and now needs. While analyzing the success of this in one district, we observed students who were eligible for free lunches visiting multiple locations to receive additional meals. The cost of these meals was absorbed locally. What was shocking is that prior to this happening, I had assumed those students who had already eaten breakfast were no longer hungry. Unfortunately, that was not the case, but thanks to implementing this practice those students were getting more to eat.

The grab and go style of serving breakfast is another practice that allows for the quick delivery of meals. While this may seem to reduce wait times for students, it also benefits schools, as they are limited on the time they have to distribute meals. Having meals prepared and packaged in a way that all the student has to do is grab the meal (typically located in a bag or wrapper) helps to eliminate a possible hunger barrier while providing the student with a healthy meal.

Alternate location is another successful practice that is not difficult to implement. While many people focus on the classroom as being an alternate location, other locations include outside or in the hallway. The only limitation here is to what a school can effectively manage.

The before-mentioned practices of alternate times, multiple locations, grab and go meals, and alternate locations can easily make healthy meals available to students. Not only do they have very little, if any, costs associated with them, school cafeterias are more efficient and cost effective when they can serve more meals. Implementing practices with minimal costs can actually produce revenue for a district.

The role of schools has changed over the decades. Schools are now filling voids that were previously filled by families and communities. Key district leaders, including school board members, superintendents, principals and child nutrition directors, must embrace best practices that increase student participation in the breakfast and lunch programs.

As an educator, I have been charged with preparing students for the future, and that means ensuring all students have the necessary resources to be successful. No child should be hungry. It takes a collaborative effort to ensure our students achieve their highest potential.