

EDITORIAL

Better nutrition for students can help narrow learning gaps

There's a strong connection between good food, school achievement.

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It seems that everywhere one turns during the holidays there is food, food — and more food. Yet amid what appears to be a time of plenty, too many children still don't get enough nutritious meals. For some, the holiday break means missing one or two daily school meals — a deficit that can negatively affect their brains and behavior.

That's why expanding efforts to feed children through school-based and other nutrition programs is so important. It's essential to connect needy students and their families with federal initiatives that can provide healthy meals.

According to [Hunger Impact Partners \(HIP\)](http://hungerimpactpartners.org/), about 40 percent of Minnesota school kids — almost a half million — are eligible for nutrition programs based on family income. But, for a number of reasons, only about 40 percent of those eligible students receive breakfast in school.

To help get those meals to kids who need them, Minnesota policymakers, educators, business and community leaders met last month to learn more about child hunger-relief strategies. Convened by HIP, the Minnesota Department of Education and Cargill, the conference helped stakeholders understand how to leverage available resources and how improved nutrition can help narrow persistent achievement gaps.

HIP's state and [national data](http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/?_ga=1.77651735.261552971.1483037604) point to strong academic reasons to invest in feeding kids: In Minnesota one in 6 children lives in households that have food insecurity issues. A [hungry child](https://www.nokidhungry.org/) is more likely to have lower test scores and a greater need for special education. And kids who miss meals are twice as likely to repeat a grade and three times as likely to be suspended.

From nonprofit food shelves to individual efforts to schools, multiple programs supported by generous Minnesotans work on feeding children. During summer months, about 36,000 Minnesota kids receive lunch each week through the federal Summer Food Service Program. A [social media campaign](http://www.startribune.com/helping-of-generosity-removes-red-ink-from-school-menus/408086276/) to pay off overdue lunch accounts has so far this year donated more than \$100,000 to needy students in Twin Cities public schools.

In Minneapolis Public Schools, meals are available at Winter Break Academy, an academic recovery program the district offers. High schoolers are given breakfast, and all K-8 students attending the academy can eat breakfast and lunch at school. But that's only for students enrolled to make up credits.

All types of anti-hunger programs are welcome and needed. But more can and must be done to put available resources to work to feed growing bodies and minds.

“We know from data that child nutrition programs are underutilized for a variety of reasons,” said Elle Lucas, CEO of HIP. “[We] can help schools, community organization and nutrition experts zero in ... on opportunities to increase participation. We know these programs can be financially sustainable ... and want to partner with district to make that happen.

“Kids should only be hungry to learn.”



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About 40 percent of Minnesota school kids — almost 500,000 — are eligible to receive breakfast and lunch at school, but a mere 40...