

We can do more for hungry kids

Improve the Child Nutrition Act to give more needy LI students summer meals

BY GWEN O'SHEA

Long Islanders care about their children's education. Many are willing to pay a premium for it, as shown by the approval of school budgets last month and this week. But while many public schools have been getting straight-A marks in meeting the needs of children with good teachers, programs and services, the region has been failing our poorest and most vulnerable children when it comes to providing the necessary nutrition for learning.

A recent survey, commissioned by the region's emergency food providers, shows nearly 65,000 Long Island households receive emergency food assistance each week. Among those with children receiving assistance, 80 percent are "food insecure" — meaning they lack access to food on a recurring and involuntary basis, and that's leading to chronic malnutrition and poor health.

For many Long Island children, the free or reduced-price meal program at their day care

center or school is their lifeline to daily nutrition. Research has shown that children who routinely eat healthy, regular meals have better standardized test scores, better behavior and are less hyperactive than children who skip meals — not to mention the positive impact good food has on their overall growth, development and health.

The free or reduced-price meal programs were enacted by Congress in the 1940s as a "measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children." The programs make it possible for all school children in the United States to receive a nutritious meal every school day by providing per-meal cash reimbursements to schools that give healthy food to children. Some 100,000 Long Island students receive free or reduced-price

school lunch; yet, only 24 percent of these eligible students receive free or reduced-price breakfast, and just 8 percent receive meals during the summer months.

So why not expand the programs to provide these additional necessary meals? The high cost of services, transportation and food make providing free and reduced-price breakfasts and summer meals a financial burden for public school systems. It's just too expensive for our schools to participate.

The Child Nutrition Act that

funds the school meal programs is up for reauthorization in Congress. Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-Mineola), chair of the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities, and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand have introduced legislation that would improve the reach and quality of these programs, including reducing the minimum percentage of eligible students for maximum reimbursement from 50 percent of the student body to 40 percent.

This would provide maximum reimbursement for an additional 46 Long Island schools. The increased reimbursements would provide incentive for more schools to open up summer feeding sites in these high-need communities, ensuring adequate nutrition for Long Island's most vulnerable children when school is out. Right now, there just aren't summer meal sites for children to visit in these communities.

This legislation would also allow for breakfast to be pro-

vided to *all* students in qualifying schools — reducing the stigma associated with the program, and ensuring that all students are starting the day with adequate nutrition. That puts everyone on an even playing field. Additional dollars would also help schools improve the nutritional value and quality of their meals — which will go a long way to ensuring those meals end up in students' stomachs and not garbage cans.

In a region as prosperous as Long Island, there's no reason for 76,000 kids to start their school day hungry, or for 92,000 children who are eligible for and need nutritious meals during July and August to go without them. A strong Child Nutrition Act is a key step in addressing these unthinkable realities, supplying hungry students with the resources they need to succeed in the classroom and providing every child on Long Island with a pathway out of poverty.



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