

After-school meals for kids fight hunger, promote learning

By Rep. George Miller and Jennifer Peck © 2013 Bay Area News Group

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The holiday season is a time to reflect on one's blessings. For many, that includes basic necessities, like a roof over our heads, enough food to eat, and a good education.

Unfortunately, far too many cannot even count having such basic needs met. Hunger is a daily danger for one in five children in America. And every day, 16.7 million children -- 2.5 million in California alone -- don't know when or from where they will be getting their next meal.

However, thanks to a law Congress passed several years ago, there is a new approach being tried in West Contra Costa Unified and other school districts in California that is helping combat child hunger and promote learning -- serving meals to low-income students in after-school programs at schools, tutoring sites, and housing developments. More school districts should take advantage of this program.

In 2010, President Barack Obama signed into law the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, to fund and improve the long-standing federal school meals and child nutrition programs. The law included an expansion of a small pilot program known as the After-School Meals Program.

This new program provides resources to school districts to serve a nutritionally balanced meal in after-school programs in low-income areas.

For many kids, what they eat at school may be the only food they get all day. And while many may take advantage of publicly funded after-school programs that extend the school day and build critical learning and enrichment opportunities within the school community while their parents are at work and no one is home, the snack they serve simply isn't enough for most kids. The After-School Meals Program provides a solution.

Kids who eat properly often see improvements in their academic performance: They show better attendance and improved social skills, have more energy and are better able to learn.

WCCUSD is showing what can be done when a district is focused on meeting students' nutrition needs. Their leadership in implementing the program quickly and efficiently has made it possible to reach large numbers of students by serving all 32 of their eligible after-school sites. However, many other districts have been slow to implement the program, leaving federal dollars on the table and students going hungry.

To date, 160 of the 900 eligible California school districts are implementing the After-School Meal Program. We can and should reach all 450,000 eligible students.

Congress should learn from this successful WCCUSD pilot and reverse course from the relentless march toward austerity that is hurting families living on the edge and exacerbating hunger in our community.

Across-the-board budget cuts, like the sequester, or deep cuts to food stamps through the Farm Bill, are exactly the wrong approach. We need to make smart investments that grow the economy, shrink the deficit and make sure that all of our children have enough healthy food to eat every day.

It may have sounded far-fetched at one time to say we can eliminate childhood hunger in America. But when the federal government makes critical investments in our children and our future, like the After-School Meal Program, we see real results and a real path forward.

School districts across the country should take advantage of the federal dollars that are available to them. Hungry students are waiting.

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