

Does this mean I don't get breakfast today?

Why many Ohio schoolchildren can't focus in class

Children's Hunger Alliance

It was a cold and snowy morning in December when a Children's Hunger Alliance (CHA) staff member drove to Warren for a visit with the education director of the **Trumbull County ESC**. It seemed to be a lucky day for the kids — school was canceled because of the snow.



Many Ohio students depend on school breakfast and lunch programs for daily meals.

Yet the CHA staff member saw one little boy walking into the school. The elementary school principal said to him, "**Jonny**, there's no school today, it's a snow day."

The little boy looked up and said, "Does that mean I don't get breakfast today?"

The problem

Approximately 24% — about 630,200 — of Ohio children live in poverty. Poverty leads to food insecurity, defined as not having access at all times to enough nutritious food to live an active, healthy life. In Ohio, more than 16% of adults face food insecurity, according to 2013 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. However, according to CHA, food insecurity for children exceeds 26%.

Food insecurity contributes directly to poor nutritional intake, impairing a child's cognitive development and ability to learn. In fact, children who struggle with food insecurity at any point in their lives tend to experience higher rates of depression and anxiety, more nurse visits, increased behavioral problems, lower math scores and more developmental delays. They also repeat grades more often.

Poverty and poor nutrition also are associated with childhood obesity. Families with fewer resources often rely on cheaper, calorie-dense foods high in sodium, fat and sugar. Childhood obesity is a serious issue in Ohio, where more than one in three children between the ages of 10 and 17 — or 500,000 youth — are overweight or obese. Obesity often leads to lifelong illnesses such as Type 2 diabetes, asthma, hypertension and various cancers.

One of the most critical of all needs is access to reliable sources of nutritious food. CHA's mission is to ensure

all children are fed regular, nutritious meals and develop lifelong healthy eating habits.

Public schools in Ohio play a huge role in combating food insecurity by creating an environment where kids are safe, healthy and ready to learn. A 2013 survey by Field Research Corp. found that 90% of Americans believe schools should take a role in curbing obesity. In fact, they reported that K-12 schools should play the largest community role in fighting obesity.

A record 45.3% of Ohio children are now eligible to receive free or reduced-priced federal meals, according to 2011 data from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). Ten years ago, this number was close to 30%. The greatest increase comes from schools that typically serve middle-income students.

CHA works with superintendents, principals, teachers and community agencies so that all kids have access to free or reduced-price meals without stigma. Following are some of CHA's programs.

School breakfast initiative

Eating breakfast is shown to improve memory, test grades and school attendance. Yet in 2012, only about 38% of eligible Ohio children participated in school breakfast programs, ODE reports. The barriers to participation include stigma, lack of student awareness and hesitation by schools to participate because of perceived added cost and administrative work, as well as a lack of knowledge of the potential benefits.

The school breakfast initiative increases participation in the federal School Breakfast Program by working with school leadership to assess the individual school's needs, select a research-based method (for example, "grab-and-go" breakfast in the classroom) and identify barriers to participation and strategies to overcome them.

Healthy Kids, Healthy Schools

CHA developed a five-year anti-obesity initiative, Healthy Kids, Healthy Schools, to make sustainable changes in both student behaviors and school wellness environments.

The initiative increases participation in the federal School Breakfast Program by working with school leaders through CHA's school breakfast initiative. Healthy Kids, Healthy Schools increases physical activity by promoting participation in Fuel Up to Play 60, a research-based program that encourages students to eat healthy and engage in

60 minutes of activity daily. Several school districts will be sharing their experiences with the program at the OSBA Capital Conference Student Achievement Fair in November.

To create sustainable changes in the school wellness environment, CHA staff members help schools improve the nutritional quality of food in lunch and breakfast menus, vending machines, school stores, after-school programs and a la carte lines. CHA also offers incentive grants to schools to purchase start-up equipment, such as milk coolers, and make environmental changes.

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After-school meals

Through the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program, CHA assumes the fiscal and administrative responsibilities of operating an after-school meal program on behalf of sites that lack resources to do so on their own. After-school sites include schools, recreation centers and other youth-serving organizations.

CHA recruits potential sites, ensures delivery of nutritious meals and snacks, provides training to site staff and offers ongoing assistance. CHA recently established nutrition guidelines for vendors that exceed USDA standards, enhancing the nutritional quality of meals. Participation improves children's nutritional intake, develops healthy eating habits and improves school attendance and academic performance.

Ohio Serves Summer Meals

The Ohio Serves Summer Meals project improves low-



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A Non-Negotiable Value for Our Children **School Nurses:**

- ◆ Keep children healthy, in school and ready to learn
- ◆ Decrease absenteeism and better attendance rates
- ◆ Create and manage health plans for care at school
- ◆ Remove barriers to Academic Success

**"School Nurses Save Lives
and Help Children Learn"**



income and at-risk children's access to the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) across Ohio. Low-income children in Ohio who depend on school meals often lose access to nutritious, reliable food during the summer months. Almost 11% of children in Ohio who receive school lunches participate in a summer feeding program, the Food Research and Action Center reported in 2012.

By helping to increase attendance through the Ohio Serves Summer Meals project, CHA provides low-income children with a consistent source of healthy food throughout the summer. Increasing participation in

Join OSBA and the Children's Hunger Alliance Celebrate for a Cause!

Help OSBA support the Children's Hunger Alliance. In addition to serving 5,000 meals to kids in eight Ohio counties every day, the alliance also provides winter clothing to children in after-school programs. You can support this cause during the OSBA Capital Conference. OSBA will collect new hats, scarves, gloves and mittens in all sizes for children ages 6 to 18 during the conference at the OSBA Bookstore, Pavilion, Registration and Information Station. If you'd rather make a monetary donation, visit the Children's Hunger Alliance in the Trade Show at booth 1517.

Join OSBA at the Tuesday Night Event — Celebrating for a Cause — for an evening of food, fun and dancing, and updates on the total donations received during the OSBA Capital Conference. Children's winter clothing also will be collected during the event.

SFSP reduces food insecurity, poor nutritional intake and childhood obesity.

Early Childhood Nutrition and Education

Low-income children often lack access to the early learning experiences they need to enter kindergarten prepared to learn. In the 2011-12 school year, 34% of Ohio children entering kindergarten required reading intervention because they lacked fundamental skills, according to ODE.

Through the Early Childhood Nutrition and Education program, CHA assists low-income home child care providers to serve more nutritious food, create healthier child care environments and provide school readiness activities.

Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities

CHA's Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities program delivers evidence-based nutrition education and physical fitness enrichment programming to at-risk children at after-school and summer programs through the Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) Kids Club. The curriculum offers opportunities to prepare and eat healthy snacks, and take part in physical activities. In addition, the program provides special events that promote healthy eating, physical activity and overall wellness.

Jonny's breakfast

Jonny was lucky on that snowy day in December; the principal and CHA staff member took him to get breakfast. But there are many days when Jonny and children just like him go without meals. Things that may seem insignificant to us — like snow days — can be devastating for children without access to the food they need.

Ohio public schools need to take a leading role in the fight against hunger. Without breakfast, lunch, summer and after-school programs, schoolchildren often are forced to go without eating. Providing regular, healthy meals can ultimately break the cycle of childhood hunger and poverty through increased opportunities provided by improved academic performance and personal welfare.

Ohio's children will never succeed in our schools if we are ignoring the reality that they are coming to school with empty bellies. □

About the Children's Hunger Alliance: Children's Hunger Alliance is known for "feeding hungry minds and bodies." The agency's mission is to ensure all children are fed regular and nutritious meals and develop lifelong healthy eating habits. To learn more, call (614) 341-7700 or (800) 227-6446 or visit www.childrenshungeralliance.org.