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In Oakland Classrooms, Getting Fed is First Lesson of the Day

As hunger and poverty rise in Alameda County, schools step in to provide meals; 70 percent of students now qualify

By: [Katharine Mieszkowski](#)

On a recent Saturday morning, some 60 teachers and nurses from the Oakland Unified School District gathered at Tilden Education Complex for a daylong seminar on nutrition education.

Markell Lewis, a nutrition policy advocate for California Food Policy Advocates, a nonprofit group based in Oakland, stood at the front of the room. “How many of you have ever given food to a hungry student at school?” she asked the teachers and nurses, as they ate breakfast.

Almost everyone raised a hand.

Recent figures from the United States Census Bureau revealed that Alameda County has a higher percentage of residents living in poverty than any of the other eight counties in the Bay Area. The county has high unemployment and low family incomes, and nearly 70 percent of students in the Oakland school district now qualify for free or reduced-priced meals at school.

In the last year, Oakland schools have introduced and expanded a host of programs, some federally subsidized, to feed students at school and home. Dozens of parents now line up outside schools, at the end of school days, to receive plastic bags of food provided by a food bank.

“Kids are coming to school hungrier and hungrier,” said Allison Rodman, a mother of two students, who is involved in the Oakland School Food Alliance, a group working to improve school food.



Thor Swift for The Bay Citizen

Paul Thomsak and other kindergarten students at Melrose Leadership school in Oakland, eat a free breakfast provided by the Oakland School District's "universal breakfast" program, Wednesday, September 21, 2011

Rodolfo Perez, outreach coordinator for Greenleaf Elementary School in East Oakland, said: "Hungry kids cannot learn," adding, "There are a lot of parents that are out of work right now."

According to the Census Bureau, some 200,000 people in Alameda County, representing 13.5 percent of the population, live below the poverty line. The figure was 10.7 percent a year earlier.

Demand for free food is increasing in the county. In September, the Alameda County Community Food Bank received 3,770 calls to its emergency food helpline — the highest volume of calls to date. The second-highest volume of calls was in August.

Robyn Sakamoto, a dietitian with the Alameda County Public Health Department, said that making sure students eat breakfast helped them learn better. "You are going to get more quality instructional time having a child with a full stomach," she said.

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Today, more than 90 Oakland schools offer a free breakfast to all students. At some schools, students are allowed to eat breakfast once class has started, which removes the hurdle of showing up early to get a free meal in the cafeteria.

When students eat together in class, officials say, the social stigma is removed from the neediest students, who otherwise might eat alone.

At Melrose Leadership Academy in East Oakland, every day, the school serves about 200 free breakfasts to its 285 students.

After Melinda Ayadi gave a lesson about the alphabet recently, each of the 25 desks in her classroom held a serving of cereal, graham crackers, milk and a nectarine.

Parent volunteers had set up the breakfast, which was provided by the school cafeteria. By 9 a.m., the kindergartners were spooning Froot Loops. Several of them also ate the nectarines.

Some Melrose teachers were not thrilled with having to sacrifice lesson time to eating.

“It is kind of an interruption,” Ayadi said. “I would rather they had breakfast at home and use the school time for academics. But I realize that there are kids that if they don’t get breakfast at school won’t eat. If kids don’t eat breakfast, they won’t do well academically.”

Nutrition advocates and the parent group, the Oakland School Food Alliance, are pressing more Oakland schools to offer breakfast in classrooms.

The district has taken a different approach to making breakfast accessible — and appealing — to teenagers. At Fremont Federation of High Schools in Oakland, two courtyard food carts offer a “Grab ‘n’ Go” breakfast. Students can pick up a bagged breakfast, including things like an orange and blueberry bread with a choice of milk or apple juice.

M’kala Payton, 16, explained why she was getting her breakfast on the run. She had not eaten dinner the night before or breakfast that morning, she said, and “I woke up late.”

Another student who picked up his bagged breakfast said he welcomed the meal, even though he had already eaten that morning — a Snickers bar.

The offer of healthy food does not end when class does.

“I know the majority of our students, when they leave school, they’re not eating, and if they are eating, quite frankly, it’s bad food,” said Jennifer LeBarre, director of nutrition services for the district.

At least nine after-school programs at Oakland schools will be offering dinner to students starting this month.

More than 20 Oakland schools, in neighborhoods where fresh fruits and vegetables are scarce, host food stands that sell fresh produce to students and parents.

At schools in the poorest areas, Alameda County Community Food Bank distributes food to families at the end of every other week. The initiative, called the Children’s Backpack Program, is designed to keep children fed through the weekend.

“This makes sure that these children are getting the same level of nutrition over the weekend that they are getting at school,” said Michael Altfest, a spokesman for the food bank.

As dozens of parents, mostly mothers, waited outside Greenleaf Elementary School in East Oakland to receive plastic bags of food provided by the food bank, the mother of a 5-year-old pupil, who would not give her name because she and her son had recently fled domestic violence, said it was good to have “special things just for him” to eat.

The bags contained tuna, peas, rice, oatmeal, milk and fresh apples, and 100 of them went quickly.

“It’s helpful,” the mother said of the food program. “Anything is helpful nowadays.”

Sydney Lupkin contributed reporting

This article also appears in the Bay Area edition of The New York Times.