

# Harnessing Youth Voice in the Fight Against Hunger

## The role of youth in evaluating federal nutrition assistance programs within Albuquerque Public Schools



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*Miriam Passman, Grade 7*



*Jessica Sayers, Grade 7*

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## **Executive Summary**

### *Purpose of Study*

This report seeks to highlight the importance of youth voices in evaluating federal nutrition assistance programs, focusing on the National School Lunch Program and the National Breakfast Program. The majority of evaluative processes used by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service and school districts to assess nutrition assistance programs serving youth are quantitative measures focusing on meals served and program participation rates. These assessment tools do not incorporate student perceptions of these programs and their on-the-ground efficacy. This report discusses the importance of engaging and consulting youth when assessing federal nutrition assistance programs and mechanisms for gathering such data.

The objective of this report is to provide USDA Food and Nutrition Service staff, school district administrators, school-level cafeteria managers, school-level administrators, and youth organizers working within the school environment a resource for advocating for the incorporation of youth voice in evaluative processes as well as a example of how such data can be collected and interpreted.

### *Key Findings*

- The students interviewed identified hunger as a significant problem in their community that affects the ability of their peers and themselves to learn and develop.
- Students identified three main causes of hunger in their community: joblessness, family instability, and lack of access to nutritious foods.
- Students expressed that breakfast was important for learning though that perception did not correlate with students in need utilizing the National Breakfast Program.
- Students highlighted three issues associated with the National Breakfast Program that contribute to an underutilization of this program by eligible students: stigma, low food quality, and inconvenience.
- Students interviewed universally expressed that the National School Lunch Program was important for students in need though some students interviewed felt that the lunch program would better serve students if more students had access to free or reduced lunch
- Students identified three main issues associated with the National School Lunch Program that contribute to an underutilization of this program: serving systems, access, and low food quality.

## Child Food Insecurity in the U.S.

As the recession deepened and unemployment continued to rise in 2008 and 2009, food insecurity within the U.S. reached its highest levels since the USDA began collecting national food security data in 1995<sup>i</sup>. Children have been disproportionately affected by the current recession. In 2008, 22.5% of all U.S. children were food insecure as compared to the national household average of 14.6%<sup>ii</sup>. This alarmingly high rate of food insecurity among U.S. children jeopardizes their future. Numerous studies have shown that food insecure children are at a higher risk for health and developmental problems<sup>iii</sup>.



*Christy Bird, Grade 6*

Federal programs such as Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), National School Lunch Program (NSLP), Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) work to insure that children throughout the U.S. are able to have their caloric and nutritional needs met. Through these programs millions of

American children have access to food that they would otherwise be unable to receive. These programs, however, are unable to reach all children in need due to issues of implementation and outreach.



*Sydney Sandoval, Grade 6*

In order to identify ways in which food insecure youth can be better served it is essential that youth be provided a space to present their perspectives around the federal nutrition assistance programs that serve them. Youth voice is essential in assessing how programs are serving young communities and identifying areas for improvement. Youth perspectives are seldom included in nutrition assistance program evaluation. This exclusion of youth voice from evaluative processes is a disservice to the youth around the nation that rely on these programs to fulfill their nutritional needs.

## Childhood Food Insecurity in New Mexico

In 2009, 1 in 5 New Mexican households experienced food hardship<sup>iv</sup>. Food hardship is defined by the Food Research Action Center (FRAC) as the lack of money to buy food the family needs. Poverty is the key cause of food hardship/food insecurity. 25.5% of New Mexico children are living in poverty as compared to the 18% national average<sup>v</sup>. This means that roughly one quarter of all New Mexican youth are living at or under the federal poverty line. Recent studies have shown that the two to three times the federal poverty line is needed to meet a family's basic needs, meaning that even more than 25.5% of New Mexican children are at risk for becoming food insecure or experiencing food hardship<sup>vi</sup>.



*Floripa Olguin, Grade 10*

It is evident that a significant number of New Mexican youth are at risk for hunger. The presence and utilization of federal nutrition assistance programs is a key component to insuring the future of New Mexican youth.

## Childhood Food Insecurity in Albuquerque

Approximately one third of the population of New Mexico lives in Albuquerque, making it the largest city in the state. In 2009, 17.9% of households in Albuquerque experienced food hardship<sup>3</sup>. Due to the high prevalence of food hardship in Albuquerque, federal nutrition assistance programs are especially crucial for Albuquerque youth.



*Miriam Passman, Grade 7*

School based federal nutrition assistance programs such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) are especially effective at providing food insecure youth with nutritious meals. The NSLP and SBP provide public school districts, non-profit schools, and non-profit and public residential childcare institutions with USDA commodities and reimbursement for meals or snacks that meet federal nutrition guidelines. Free meals are provided to students who are at or below 130% of the poverty line. Reduced meals are served to students who are between 130% and 185% of the poverty line<sup>vii</sup>. In

the 2009-2010 school year, 90,029 students are enrolled in Albuquerque Public Schools (APS). 57% of those students are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)<sup>viii</sup>. The NSLP is one of the most crucial elements in insuring that Albuquerque youth are able to meet their nutritional needs.



*Isabell Stephenson, Grade 6*

## **Youth Experiences with Hunger in Albuquerque: Methods**

The inclusion of youth voice into federal nutrition assistance program evaluation is an essential element to understanding the on-the-ground successes and shortcomings of these crucial programs. In an effort to engage diverse youth around their experience with federal nutrition programs a variety of strategies were used in preparing this report. A group of approximately one hundred students in Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) were invited to participate in a photo-voice project that focused on the everyday relationship between teenagers and food. The photos which are presented throughout this report are images from that project.



*Nazhoni Cunejo, Grade 8*

Additionally, four focus groups were held with middle school students in APS. These focus groups included discussions of what hunger is and also what are things that can be done to help students in need. As part of these focus groups the students expressed what hunger means to them by writing their definition on a large piece of

paper which was placed in the classroom. The activity, which is called “Popular Knowledge” allowed students to share their personal understanding of hunger. These popular definitions of hunger are presented within this report as way of providing a basic understanding of how the youth who participated in these focus groups experience and understand hunger.



*Scott Schrader, Grade 8*

These focus groups were followed up with one-on-one interviews with students about their perceptions of the federal nutrition assistance programs which are present in their schools. These interviews focused on what programs are in the school, what has been the experience of students with these programs, and what are suggestions for how we could better fulfill the needs of students in school. Particularly relevant excerpts from those interview transcripts are included within this report and organized by the follow themes: Hunger in the School Community, the School Breakfast Program, and the National School Lunch Program. Following each theme a short analysis of student feedback is provided.

## **Youth Experiences with Hunger in Albuquerque: Defining Hunger**

What does hunger mean?

- Hunger means food and sometimes not having enough of it
- It could be wanting food or wanting more food
- Hunger is where you might not have enough food
- To be hungry
- Hunger is to have an empty stomach
- Being hungry
- Want food
- Need to eat
- When you want to eat
- Not having something to eat
- When your stomach growls
- Because your stomach tells you to eat
- Me
- Going without food for sometime
- Go eat something
- Not eating



*Sarah Marzulli, Grade 7*

## Youth Experiences with Hunger in Albuquerque: Youth Interviews

### Hunger in the School Community

“I think that hunger is an issue because the parents of the kids don’t have a job to support their family and they don’t have someone to rely on.”

*Paolo Perez, Grade 8*

“People don’t have enough to eat because maybe their dad left home or divorce or they don’t have a job.”

*Diego Reyes, Grade 8*



*Karem Malagon, Grade 6*

“Hunger is happening more often now because there are no jobs. There are not enough jobs for anybody.”

*Alex Rodriguez, Grade 8*

“Hunger is an issue here and I think it is going to affect them (students) when they grow older because kids need to eat now. They are growing now, they need to eat, eat all they can.”

*LaVette Martinez, Grade 8*

“I think that hunger is a problem in my community because people are hungry, but they need to stop eating so much junk food and eat healthier food. That is probably why they keep getting hungrier and hungrier. Junk food doesn’t really fill them up. If they eat something healthier it will work better for them. People don’t have enough to eat because junk food tastes good and maybe some of them are poor. .. I think these programs (NSLP and SBP) are important for people that don’t have a lot of money.”

*Isabella Perales, Grade 8*

“We need to live and if we don’t have enough money or a job to buy stuff then we’ll go hungry. Our human body needs food to survive. If we don’t eat we won’t be healthy. We wouldn’t be able to do what we want to do in life or learn in school.”

*Cinthia Salazar, Grade 8*



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