

It is 10AM on Monday morning and you are sitting in your 3rd grade classroom. The teacher is beginning to introduce the reading lesson for the day which is focused on the phonics of how consonant blends work together to make sounds that will help you decode words when you are reading. You are asked to work together with a partner to identify words in a list that have examples of the blends the teacher has introduced. You start to look around and think that everyone is able to focus on the task, but you simply cannot. It has been approximately 65 hours since you ate a substantial, quality meal last week Friday for lunch at school.

Your stomach begins to turn and you start to feel anxious and frustrated then unable to focus on the task at hand. All you can think about is the lunch period that won't begin for another 2 hours. The teacher notices that you are not paying attention and asks you to focus on the partner project as she reminds you how important it is to understand this to be a good reader. You think, "This is not as important to me as it is to you. I'm hungry". You lose a connection with that teacher because you believe she doesn't understand you and therefore you begin to tune her out.

After several weeks/months/years of tuning the teachers out you realize that you are so far behind your peers the idea of catching up academically seems overwhelming and therefore not worth your energy. You look for ways to pass the time, which means talking to your friends and disrupting the class. All of these disruptions get you sent to the principal's office and out of class so as to avoid the embarrassment of not knowing the material. The disruptions become more chronic and severe until eventually you are suspended from school. Time goes on and your attendance rate drops. When desperation overcomes you, you decide to drop out of school.

With few job skills to enter the workforce you are left with limited options for employment. They do not pay well enough or are stable enough to save money or advance your career; you are living paycheck to paycheck. You eventually have children and want what is best for them. You want what every parent wants for their child (regardless of background), a better future. You start to work several jobs so you can become financially secure, but to do so you are not spending time at home with your family. Your kids want you around, your child's school wants you involved but you have to decide between being there for your kids or financial solvency.

One of the biggest barriers to academic/social success and subsequently, social mobility, is nutrition. Jefferson Elementary School in Sheboygan, WI has students like this, as well as countless schools across the country. These schools are not only located in major urban areas, but also rural communities, and even in the county with one of the lowest percentages of unemployment in the country (2.1%). Changes that affect the rules that govern the eligibility of students to access school nutrition will have an overall negative effect in our schools and communities across the country.

Students at Jefferson Elementary are currently able to access school nutrition options based on the percentage of families that participate in the SNAP program (57%) (Direct Certification) and Free/Reduced Lunch Eligibility. Direct Certified families do not need to complete a redundant school free/reduced lunch form, but are automatically qualified for free nutrition options based on their participation in the SNAP program. Eligible students can eat a free breakfast and/or lunch every day they are in school.

The Sheboygan Area School District has four schools (Jefferson is one) that are eligible to participate in the CEP (Community Eligibility Provision) based on a combined average of our school populations that are qualified by Direct Certification. The CEP program allows us to offer a free breakfast and lunch to all of our students, regardless of their participation in the SNAP program. Parents still are required to complete an Alternative Income Form, which determines if the family is considered “Economically Disadvantaged”. The percentage of “Economically Disadvantaged” students at Jefferson is 96%. This percentage makes us eligible for Title I funding and other grant opportunities.

The CEP program allows us to offer meals to students in an environment free of stigma. When all students are eating the same meal, it becomes less apparent a student is participating because of their family’s income level. As all students participate without negative stigma, they are more willing to participate in the meal programs. Our data shows that when more students eat a school meal option, behavior incidents decline. When all students participate in meal programs, (breakfast especially) we can offer breakfast in the classroom to our students.

Breakfast in the classroom allows teachers and students a time to share a meal together to build relationships that goes beyond education. Students can talk to their friends, share stories about their lives, and learn social skills necessary to function in society. Teachers can talk to kids about their lives and find out what motivates them. The relationships created during these meal times are invaluable to building a school community with shared purpose.

By offering the free meal options we also free parents to focus energy and resources on other needs. Parents have to buy fewer groceries for their house because they can rest easy knowing their child will have a nutritious breakfast and lunch at school. Parents can focus on quality time with their kids rather than frantically preparing breakfast or lunches. Parents can use that saved money to provide other essential needs for their families, save, or invest in their own career advancement.

If changes are made to the Broad Based Categorical Eligibility, a segment of our families will no longer qualify for SNAP. When this percentage goes down, we are unable to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students. Without these options available to all students, families will be forced to make tough, no-win decisions for

their families. The result will be an increase in hunger and therefore less educational opportunity and upward mobility for our country's most vulnerable population, our kids.