

Food for Thought: Summer Lunch Programs in the Public Library

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Introduction



1 in 5 children in the US is at risk for hunger.

Summer is a time when many low-income children are left to fend for themselves. With parents at work, and limited food sources at home, children have less options for healthy, balanced meals. Many public libraries offer summer meal programs to keep kids fed throughout the day. Coupled with programming or interactive activities, meal programs are providing children with healthy lunches and opportunities for learning.

USDA Program

Food insecurity occurs when children or adults are deprived of food and nutrition. 13.1 million children in the United States qualify for free and reduced meals. During summer break, these 13.1 million children need to be able to access adequate sources of nutrition.

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides meals to low-income children throughout the USA in areas where at least 50% of children qualify for free or reduced lunches. Lunches are offered to children up to the age of 18.

Actual lunch components include: milk, a meat or meat alternative, and a serving of vegetable and fruits.

Issues

Research shows that there are three major risks for low-income students over the summer:

1. Weight gain/obesity
2. Food insecurity
3. Summer learning loss

Middle-class children lose an average of two months of reading achievement over the summer, but low-income students lose even more. For every one line a child from a lower socioeconomic status reads, a child from a higher socioeconomic status will read three. Compared with middle-class peers, low-income students have a harder time re-learning material at the beginning of the school year. This phenomenon is known as the **achievement gap**.

Public libraries fight the achievement gap in two ways—providing food and providing learning opportunities.



5 year old Pamela drinks milk at a St. Louis County Library branch.

Forbes, J.B. Pamela Lara, 5. 2014. St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Web. 19 Oct. 2016.



Jose and Miguel Rincon create post-lunch crafts.

Forbes, J.B. Jose, 7, (center) and Miguel Rincon, 5. 2014. St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Web. 19 Oct. 2016.



Children enjoy summer lunch in Cook County, Illinois.

SFSP Picture. 2012. US Department of Agriculture. Web. 19 Oct. 2016.

Results

The following conducted studies reaffirm that library or related learning, and nutrition are effective for children.

The Dominican Study

Over three years, a study was conducted to see if children entering fourth grade who participated in library summer reading programs performed better at the beginning of the school year. Results concluded that participants in the study either maintained or increased reading skills.

Summer Food Service Program Study

A study examined nutrients in SFSP lunches versus lunches served at home to low-income children in West Virginia. The results determined that SFSP lunches overall provided more nutrition, but could use improvement (calcium levels).

Health and Academic Achievement Study

A health study observed 5th-6th graders from 12 schools in an urban district of Connecticut. The study compared BMI levels, standardized test scores, age, race, sex, and eligibility for free and reduced lunch. The study found that students with more health assets (positive health indicators) performed better on tests.

Parent Poll

A study of parents and libraries found that 76% of lower income parents rank free programs at the library as "very important" compared to 58% of parents (earning \$50,000/year or more). This data shows it is relevant to host summer lunch in the library because it is already valued and trusted in the community.

Conclusion

Libraries serve as epicenters of community. By offering a safe space to community members that can nourish them and educate them, libraries are an ideal place for summer lunch programs to grow.

Only 2.7 of the 13.1 million children who qualify for free and reduced lunches are reached in the summer months. Extending summer lunch programs to more libraries and increasing awareness of the benefits is crucial to low-income children's nutrition, health and educational achievement.

References

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- Roman, Susan, and Carole D. Fiore. "Do Public Library Summer Reading Programs Close the Achievement Gap? The Dominican Study." *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children* 8.3 (2010): 27–31. Print.

For a more extensive list of references, please visit <http://bit.ly/2hOQKws> or scan the QR code below:



Questions?

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