



**GEORGIA PARTNERSHIP**  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

## **School Nutrition Can Make a Big Difference in Student Learning**

*National School Lunch Week (October 9-13)*

By Caitlin Daugherty Kokenes, Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education

Georgia recently submitted the new state plan for education under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). While much of the attention given to the plan focuses on issues like accountability and assessments, it is worth noting that Georgia's education strategy places the "Whole Child" at the center of our public education system. When thinking of the whole child, the first component of care is to assess a child's well-being: that is the state of being comfortable, healthy, and happy. One key factor in achieving health and comfort is good nutrition.

Though schools are not solely responsible for the nutrition of students, thanks to our National School Lunch Program (NSLP), many students receive daily meals at school – and recent research shows a key link between nutrition and student learning. While we're at the end of *National School Lunch week* (October 9-13), good school nutrition is an issue we should be mindful of year-round.

Our country's federally assisted meal program, the NSLP, was founded in 1946 to provide nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to students each school day. Today, this program provides meals in over 100,000 public and non-profit private schools, as well as child care institutions. Students from families with income levels between 130 percent and 185 percent of federal poverty levels are eligible for reduced price or free meals, and in Georgia this group accounted for 60 percent of our student body in 2016—over one million students.

For some students in this group, school lunch may be their only source of nutrition. In 2010, the United States Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act with the intent of raising minimum nutrition standards for public school lunches. This act was passed in part due to the growing concerns surrounding a nearly 20 percent obesity rate among America's children, but there was little discussion at the time regarding the effect nutrition has on student learning.

Though the links between diet and cognitive function and development have been widely documented, research has just recently shown how nutrition affects educational achievement. Earlier this year, the National Bureau of Economic Research released the results of a study covering five academic years. That study measured the effect of healthier school lunches on end-of-year academic test scores for California public school students and found that in years when a school contracted with a healthy lunch company, students at the school had higher scores on their end-of-year academic tests.

Nutritionists at the Nutrition Policy Institute analyzed school lunch menus using the 100-point "Healthy Eating Index" (HEI) — a well-established food component analysis published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that determines how well food offerings match the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. School lunches averaged a score of 59.9, compared to the average American diet of 63.8.

When students were served healthier lunches, their test scores increased. This impact was especially pronounced for low-income students. Those enrolled in the free or reduced priced school lunch program had test scores that rose nearly 40 percent. The increased costs for the healthier lunches was approximately \$80 more per student per year. Considering the return on investment in student performance, it would be worthwhile for schools to explore how to put more resources towards increasing the nutrition of their food.

This is especially relevant in Georgia, where child poverty ranks 10<sup>th</sup> in the nation and continues to grow. As previously stated, over 1 million students in Georgia participate in the school lunch program. These children are some of our most vulnerable citizens in terms of hunger, and they are also more likely to live in what the USDA calls food deserts—areas more than one mile from a supermarket or other reliable source of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Many of these Georgians are considered food insecure, indicating they cannot afford to buy healthy food on a regular basis. As of 2014, close to 30 percent of Georgia children were living in food insecure households, and a new analysis reflects that as poverty increases in the state so does food insecurity. The same research found that areas with increasing food insecurity have less public transit access.

Children in food insecure homes are found to experience summer learning gaps much more severely than others. Though community partners work to provide these students with summer meals, access remains a challenge for citizens in the highest levels of poverty. For those children, receiving nutritious, quality food at school is essential to their well-being, and they are poised to make greater academic gains when they receive healthier school meals.

Georgia is currently trying to address challenges faced by our chronically underperforming schools. Through the focus on the whole child, the state is developing ways to ensure all children can meet their full potential, even those living in disinvested communities and overcoming the challenges of intergenerational poverty. Providing healthy, nutritious school meals to our youngest, most vulnerable citizens is a foundational step in breaking the poverty cycle and improving educational outcomes for all students.