

FederalReport

By Sally McConnell, NAESP Associate Executive Director for Government Relations

"If we can conquer space we can conquer childhood hunger."

—Buzz Aldrin, U.S. astronaut

It's an understatement to say that the members of the 111th Congress will confront many challenges requiring immediate attention. There's the economic crisis to tackle, as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We know Congress will eventually turn to the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, currently No Child Left Behind) and possibly to the update of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). But there is another reauthorization of which many educators may not be aware, even though it can be related to all other education issues. It is the child nutrition reauthorization.

Federal child nutrition programs include the school lunch and breakfast programs; the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (better known as WIC); the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which includes authorization for snacks and meals for children in Head Start, in child care settings, and in homeless or domestic violence shelters; and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program).

The statistics on childhood hunger are surprising to most people who learn them for the first time: Every night in this (still) rich nation of ours, some 12.6 million children (one in six) go to bed hungry or "food insecure," wondering where their next meal will come from—and when. "Food insecurity" refers to the lack of access to enough food for a healthy, active life. Of those 12.6 million children, the highest number live in the

Feeding the Brain—and the Heart

South (5.2 million). White children make up the highest proportion, numbering 5.3 million; 5.8 million live in single-parent households headed by women; and 5.9 million live with a married couple (usually their parents).

"Hunger steals the memory."

—Louise Erdrich, U.S. author

Principals and other educators know that hungry children cannot perform to their highest potential in school. A child who does not receive a steady supply of sufficient nourishing food is more likely to develop a host of physical maladies and spend more time in hospitals than a well-fed child, to exhibit emotional and behavioral problems, to develop learning disabilities or other cognitive impairments, and to fall behind academically and eventually drop out of school. A large body of scientific literature attests to the harmful and sometimes permanent effects hunger has on children, especially in their early years when brain development normally occurs at a rapid pace.

Childhood hunger is often invisible. Outright starvation and bellies bloated from malnourishment are rare in this nation, and many children who are hungry or food insecure may look much like their classmates. They may try to hide their hunger because they feel embarrassed or even ashamed.

"If you want to eliminate hunger, everybody has to be involved."

—Bono, musician and anti-poverty activist

As an elementary or middle-level principal, you are in a good position to notice who is in need of food assistance because you know your students and their families. Principals and other school personnel rise

to the occasion daily, working with nurses, counselors, and others to contact government agencies and help families enroll in programs for which they are eligible; taking children to the "cafeteria ladies" for an immediate snack; and often dipping into your own pockets to help students in need.

Principals are uniquely qualified to engage in grassroots advocacy in the upcoming child nutrition reauthorization. You can bear witness to the salutary effect of school lunch and school breakfast programs on your students' learning. You can tell your legislators about the positive effect that SNAP has on helping families obtain more food at affordable prices and point to the need for improved access to it and the school nutrition programs. You can work with those who run pre-K programs in your school or the surrounding community to make sure hungry children receive snacks and meals through CACFP. For mothers and younger children in the families of your students in need, you can provide information on how to benefit from WIC, which provides access to certain healthful foods for pregnant women and young children in poverty.

NAESP will be lobbying in the reauthorization for improved access to all child nutrition programs, for simplified rules for program implementation and enrollment, and for high nutrition quality standards. Some in Congress are calling for the next U.S. president to appoint a food czar, whose mission would be to coordinate the nation's anti-hunger efforts both at home and in developing countries. We'll study this proposal and weigh in with your needs and those of your students in mind.

You have an important role to play in the child nutrition reauthorization. Plan now for your moment in the spotlight. ■