

Stamping out hunger is crucial to student learning, panelists stress

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Getting nutritious food to poor students is a key component of efforts to close the academic achievement gap, a point that was driven home during Second Harvest Food Bank's annual Hunger Action Summit.

Panelists at the five-hour summit at Santa Clara University's Locatelli Center on March 15 emphasized that it's difficult for students who are hungry and don't eat nutritious food to learn.

According to Second Harvest, one in three children struggles with hunger in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. Hunger hinders the ability of children from low-income families to reach their full academic and life potential, according to Second Harvest CEO Kathy Jackson.

"I think everyone would agree that [hunger] is a side effect of poverty, but it is indeed a perpetuator of poverty," Jackson said. "No one can solve a complicated math problem on an empty stomach; you just can't. There's all kinds of data which underscores the reality that hungry kids have more behavioral issues; hungry kids get sick more frequently so they have higher absenteeism, and if you miss school you're going to fall behind."

Despite a recovering economy, the hunger index that's used to measure the gap between the number of meals low-income residents in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties can purchase on their own versus buying meals with food assistance programs hasn't improved since 2013, Jackson said, blaming the lack of purchasing power on the region's continually rising housing costs.

"Our numbers have been pretty flat," she said. "We were declining over the last few years; now we're jumping back up. It seems counterintuitive when the unemployment rate is at all-time low. It's just a real conundrum at the moment."

Tia Shimada of California Food Policy Advocates said there are practical ways to feed more students, especially if schools get on board. Simply switching up the time when a free breakfast program is held can make a big difference, Shimada said.

"They're offering breakfast early in the morning before the school day begins, before kids are actually there to eat," Shimada said. "The state and districts are investing in breakfast programs that aren't actually reaching the kids they're meant to serve."

Serving breakfast after first period would ensure that every child who qualifies for a free meal actually receives it. To make sure this happens, Shimada wants the state to require that schools with high rates of impoverished students use this after-the-bell model.

And to ensure children don't experience what Jackson calls the "summer slide" of forgetting what was learned the previous school year, Shimada wants to see families receive food assistance through a summer Electronic Benefits Transfer program when school is out. The program is already being tested in eight other states and two tribal nations, according to Shimada, but California lawmakers have missed several opportunities to bring it here. That is why passage of Assembly Bill 2054 is crucial, she added, so the state would be required to pursue all available federal funding for summer EBT benefits.

"What we're doing with this piece of policy is to say to California leaders... 'Get California prepared for summer EBT,'" Shimada said. "There's going to be increased opportunities to fund this federally and to have federal authority to operate the program in California. We want to make sure our state is two steps ahead of the game."

"Let's get prepared," she added. "We already missed the boat once; there are just too many kids in California who need access to these benefits."