

# Community Engagement: Feeding America-Tampa Bay Meals for Minds Program

## Summary

Feeding America-Tampa Bay was successful in implementing the Meals for Minds program at Foster Elementary School for the 2014-2015 school year. Bags of food were provided monthly to the school for roughly 200 children and families. An evaluation was conducted of the program's impact on children's readiness to learn.



A group photo of the Target® volunteers

## Challenge

This project addressed food insecurity among children, with food insecurity being defined as not knowing where your next meal will come from. *Can you imagine being a child, knowing that Monday through Friday you will at least be able to eat breakfast and lunch at school but come the weekend, you may be facing the reality of an empty pantry?*

One out of every four children in Tampa Bay struggles with food insecurity (Feeding America 2014). Research conducted by Children's HealthWatch (Cook and Jeng, 2009) on the impact of food insecurity and hunger on children's health, growth and development clearly shows that food insecurity and hunger can dramatically alter the architecture of children's brains, making it difficult for them to fulfill their potential. This research has been verified extensively by researchers over the past two decades (Duncan et al 1994). Hungry children have lower academic achievement because they are not well prepared for school and cannot concentrate.

## Success Stories

*"Meals for Minds has provided my students a better learning experience in the classroom. I noticed when food are low in the homes when my students are coming in feeling tired, sluggish and unfocused to learn. But when Feeding America-Tampa Bay come to the school, the next day, I immediately noticed the change in energy and their excitement to learn! And they are not fighting, thank goodness!" – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher*

*"The students are becoming more interested of how fruits and vegetables are grown, asking questions and sharing their excitement. They are exploring their taste buds by trying the different produce given during that month, some likes tomatoes and cucumbers." – 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher*



Reusable bags provided by Target®

Food insecurity depresses both the starting point and the upward trajectory of a child's education from the moment he or she enters the kindergarten classroom. Studies show that children who suffer from food insecurity in their youth struggle as adults with depression, anxiety, obesity, diabetes, and a myriad of other emotional and health-related issues (Cook and Jeng, 2009).

## *Goals of the Project*

The goals of the project were to see a significant improvement among the students' academic and behavioral performance during the school year. We hoped to gain more support among parents, teachers and administrative staff in helping students who are struggling in their classrooms due to hunger.

## *Solution*

Feeding America is the largest domestic hunger relief organization in the country, consisting of a network of more than 200 food banks. Feeding America-Tampa Bay provides food to over 400,000 people in West Central Florida. The programs administered by Feeding America not only increase food security, but also help individuals get on a better path for success. One such program is Target® Meals for Minds, which sends a weekend's worth of meals home with food insecure children and their families. The purpose of this project was to evaluate the impact of the Meals for Minds Backpack Food Assistance Program on participating children's food security, mental and cognitive health.

To achieve these goals, Feeding America-Tampa Bay identified Foster Elementary School for the Meals for Minds Program participation because 95% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The demographics of students at this school are 76% Black, 17% Hispanic, and 5% White. Collaboration with the University of South Florida's College of Public Health (USF COPH) provided Feeding America-Tampa Bay a graduate student to collect vital data to evaluate the Meals for Minds program and assist the Nutrition Coordinator with program administration. USF COPH also helped increase the amount of healthy foods provided by providing guidance on lower cost, healthy foods. The project resulted in a comprehensive evaluation of the program's impact on students' food security, readiness to learn and well-being.

## *Results*

Pre- and post-surveys on food security levels, readiness to learn, school performance, and mental well-being were conducted with 120 students, 52 parents and 23 classroom teachers. Overall, very positive feedback was received on the Meals for Minds program and the impact it had on the students. Some themes identified among student responses were that they expressed higher interest in learning and are able to concentrate better since the program began. Students also showed more interest in eating healthy as they are discovering different fruits and vegetables, and where they come from.

We received responses from parents that having the meal program at their child's school has helped them make food last longer in their homes. It decreased family stress of worrying about food and the cost of purchasing food even when money is tight. Further, it improved healthy eating in their



*Bags from Target®, ready for distribution to students.*

homes, in part because Feeding America-Tampa Bay ensured that approximately 80% of the food items were fresh produce.

Among teachers, many responded that they have noticed a change in their students' learning and behavior in the classroom. This was especially evident when the students' families were struggling at home and the students were coming to class very hungry, unfocused and with limited concentration ability. Teachers reported their students had more energy and were happier in the days following food distribution. An unanticipated benefit was teachers spending less of their own money on food for their students.

## **Sustaining Success**

Interviews with students, parents, and teachers demonstrated the importance of continuing the Meals for Minds program at Foster Elementary School and expanding to other Title 1 schools in Hillsborough County. Results of the program evaluation demonstrated its success, and may lead to increased partnerships with other community organization and companies who are interested in reducing hunger in our county. Continued partnership with Target® would provide support to sustain the program at its current site and expand it to other schools in the future.

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### Citations:

- Cook J and Jeng K. Child food insecurity: The economic impact on our nation. 2009. Accessed June 23, 2015 at <http://www.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/child-economy-study.pdf>
- Duncan JG, Brooks-Gunn J and Klebanov PK. Economic deprivation and early childhood development. *Child Development* 1994. 64(2):283-295.
- Feeding America. Map the Meal Gap. 2014. Accessed June 23, 2015 at [http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/2013/FL\\_AllCounties\\_CDs\\_CFI\\_2013.pdf](http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/2013/FL_AllCounties_CDs_CFI_2013.pdf)

*The findings and conclusions in this success story are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the funding agencies or DOH-Hillsborough.*

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