

# Rural Hunger in America: AFTERSCHOOL MEALS



**T**he Afterschool Nutrition Programs fill the hunger gap that exists after school for millions of low-income children in rural communities. The programs, which include the Child and Adult Care Afterschool Meal Program and the National School Lunch Program Afterschool Snack Program, provide federal funding to afterschool programs operating in low-income areas to serve meals and snacks to children 18 and under after school, on weekends, and during school holidays. Meals can be served at schools, community and recreation centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA's, faith-based organizations, and other sites that offer educational and enrichment activities after school.

## In rural areas across America, the Afterschool Nutrition Programs:

- **reduce food insecurity for children and teens.** Rural households with children are more likely to experience food insecurity than households with children in metropolitan areas.
- **support students' health and wellness.** Children living in rural areas have 26 percent greater odds of obesity compared to urban children.<sup>1</sup> School-aged children have higher daily intake of fruits, vegetables, milk, and key nutrients, like calcium, vitamin A, and folate on days they eat afterschool meals compared to days they do not.
- **draw families and students into afterschool enrichment programs.** Sixty-nine percent of rural parents reported that an afterschool program providing healthy snacks or meals was very important in their selection of a

program, nine percentage points higher than parents who do not live in a rural area (60 percent).<sup>2</sup>

- **allow small afterschool programs to stretch their budgets.** When federal nutrition dollars are used for meals, program dollars that would have been spent on food can be used to serve additional children or improve program quality.
- **support working families.** Seventy-two percent of rural parents agree that afterschool programs — which are linked to afterschool meal programs — help working parents keep their jobs.<sup>3</sup>

## Did You Know?

Afterschool programs can serve meals through the Afterschool Meal Program not just afterschool, but also on weekends, school holidays, and school breaks during the school year. As more rural school districts implement four-day school weeks, thousands of students are at risk of missing out on the school breakfasts and lunches they rely on during the school day. The Afterschool Meal Program can play an important part in filling this nutrition gap.

Afterschool sites may serve up to one meal and a snack any day of the week during the school year, even on days when schools aren't open. Programs operating on days when school is not in session can choose to provide breakfast, lunch, or supper (and a snack) based on what works best for the program. Schools and community leaders should work together to ensure meals and snacks are provided on any weekday during the school year, as well as on weekends, school holidays, and breaks.

<sup>1</sup> Afterschool Alliance. (2016). *America After 3PM Special Report: The Growing Importance of Afterschool in Rural Communities*. Available at: <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/>. Accessed on March 2, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## Strategies to Increase Afterschool Meals Participation

The following key strategies can help more rural communities overcome barriers to participating in the Afterschool Nutrition Programs:

**1) Increase the amount of federal and state funding for afterschool programs.** Only 1 in 3 families that want access to afterschool programs for their children has it. In rural areas, less than 13 percent of children are enrolled in an afterschool program.<sup>4</sup> One of the most effective ways to increase participation in the Afterschool Nutrition Programs is to increase public (federal, state, and local) and private funding to operate afterschool programs in low-income communities. The federal dollars available through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers play an important role in supporting afterschool programs, but do not come close to meeting the need. State and municipal investment in programming can help increase participation in afterschool meals and snacks, yet only 17 states have invested state funds to specifically support afterschool programming.

**2) Increase the number of rural school districts serving afterschool meals.** School districts in rural areas should provide afterschool snacks and suppers in areas with 50 percent or more of students certified for free or reduced-price school meals. If rural schools are unable to meet this eligibility threshold for suppers, schools at least can participate in the National School Lunch Program Afterschool Snack Program and individually qualify students. Schools — as well as other rural programs — that provide regularly scheduled child care services can also provide up to two meals and one snack to children 12 years old and younger through the Child and Adult Care Food Program's Outside School Hours Care option. Reimbursement is based upon the household income of the participating children, i.e., under the free, reduced-price, and paid meal eligibility standards.

While school districts often have a captive audience, as many formal afterschool programs and informal enrichment activities are offered in school buildings,



this is not always the case in rural areas. Rural schools may not offer afterschool programs due to budget cuts. Long travel distances may make it challenging for some children to stay after school even when programs are offered. Schools and community partners should work together to reduce barriers rural children face. For example, schools can work to adjust bus schedules slightly to allow for meal service and an enrichment activity before buses leave. Schools also can consider serving meals immediately after the bell rings in the classroom alongside homework help.

**3) Increase collaboration and communication between rural stakeholders.** Rural communities face unique challenges around increasing participation in the Afterschool Nutrition Programs. Schools, anti-hunger partners, and other leaders should work with families and communities to maximize existing resources in rural areas to expand the reach of afterschool meals. For example, U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development provides grants through its Community Facilities Programs initiative to construct, expand or improve facilities that provide health care, education, public safety, and public services. This funding stream can support programs that serve afterschool meals. Other partners in rural areas may include 4-H, universities, community colleges, and faith-based organizations. These groups may be able to provide space, transportation, programming, or other support.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



**4) Increase awareness.** A key part to connecting more children to afterschool meals is raising awareness about the program. Many afterschool programs, school administrators, and families do not know that afterschool meals are available, or if they do, there might be stigma surrounding the meals. Schools, youth program providers, and other afterschool programs should let families know that meals are being served and should be prepared to answer any questions about the program. Afterschool programs can advertise meal service on outreach materials that go home with students and can also partner on an open house or kick-off event that highlights both meal service and programming. In rural communities marketing the supper as a “super snack” can overcome barriers to providing a meal after school.

**5) Reduce eligibility limitations.** In order to participate in the Afterschool Meal Program, afterschool programs must be located in the service area of a school with at least 50

percent of its students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. This threshold disproportionately limits low-income children’s access to healthy meals in rural and suburban areas that do not have the same concentrations of poverty as urban areas. Lowering the threshold for the Afterschool Meal Program to 40 percent would help ensure that children in low-income communities across the country are receiving the healthy afterschool nutrition they need. The upcoming Child Nutrition Reauthorization creates the opportunity to address this barrier to participation.

Providing nutritious meals and snacks with available federal funding for all children who qualify is a winning strategy for combatting hunger, improving nutrition, and drawing children into afterschool educational and enrichment activities. Efforts to help more rural children access nutritious meals through the Afterschool Nutrition Programs are not only essential to addressing food insecurity, but also to supporting children’s health and academic achievement.

*This fact sheet is part of a series on rural hunger developed by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) with the support of Smithfield Foods. FRAC and Smithfield Foods have teamed up to create the Rally Against Rural Hunger initiative to raise awareness about rural hunger and to connect eligible people across the country with federal food assistance programs so they may get the nutrition they need for their health and well-being.*