

On the Table:

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Children still fed in summer

BY SUZANNE HAVALA HOBBS, Correspondent

School's out, but fortunately the lunch lady didn't go on vacation.

Despite millions of meals served during the school year to children from low-income households, those same children may be at risk of going hungry over summer break.

In North Carolina and other states, that's where the Summer Food Service Program comes in.

Since 1968, the program has provided meals to needy children in low-income areas when they are not in school. More than 30 counties in our state participate, including Wake, Durham, Mecklenburg and Gaston.

Under the guidance of the Child Nutrition Department of the Wake County Public School System, for example, more than 49,000 children are participating in the SFSP this summer at parks, schools, camps, churches and other sites.

But after 40 years of operation, the program still doesn't reach every hungry child.

"Access is an issue, especially in rural areas," said Cynthia Ervin, SFSP coordinator for the Division of Public Health in the state Department of Health and Human Services,

That's why state leaders are touting collaboration as a key strategy to extend nutrition services to as many kids as possible.

The WCPSS Child Nutrition Program is one success story, having increased by 200 percent the number of children participating in the SFSP during the past five years.

The school system was honored late last month at the Poe Center for Health Education, a community partner serving summer meals to children as part of its Healthy Habits Camp in Raleigh. The ceremony was attended by N.C. DHHS Secretary Lanier M. Cansler and Dr. Janey Thornton, deputy under-secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"We should recognize that even in bad budget times, good things are happening," Cansler said. "When we work together, we can accomplish positive things. When we work in silos, it's harder to get things done."

The Wake school system is also partnering with Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina. The nonprofit organization is feeding more than 400 children in rural parts of the state at approved sites to where kids can walk to get breakfast and lunch.

Thornton, who was appointed by President Barack Obama in April to lead the USDA's 15 nutrition assistance programs, wants to end child hunger by 2015. She told me that coordinating the nation's child nutrition advocacy groups to focus on select, mutual goals is one of her aims.

The Summer Food Service Program is helping folks get through some tough times. North Carolina is one good example of how, working together, school system administrators, nonprofits and government can accomplish more to help those in need.

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