

THE NORTH CAROLINA CCR&R SCHOOL AGE INITIATIVE

# SUPPORTING SCHOOL AGE FOOD INSECURITY



NC DEPARTMENT OF  
**HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES**  
Division of Child Development  
and Early Education

**CCR&R Council**  
North Carolina Child Care Resource & Referral Council

*Southwestern*  
CHILD DEVELOPMENT  
COMMISSION

## Food insecurity is all around us...

Take a moment to think about the students and teachers in your school age program. Chances are, a number of these children and adults you care deeply about are affected by food insecurity.

Recent data from the North Carolina Justice Center highlights that 1 in 5 children and 1 in 7 adults in our state deal with food insecurity every year. For African American and Hispanic students and families rates of food insecurity run higher than the state average, with roughly 21 percent of minority populations affected in 2020-2021 (NCJC, 2021).

As a school age professional, you can help lead the fight against food insecurity in your community. Your afterschool or summer camp program operates in a perfect space to connect families, students, and coworkers to the support systems they need to flourish and thrive.

This resource guide will help equip you and other school age professionals with the skills necessary to recognize and assist students and families suffering from food insecurity. As you go through this guide, reflect on how your school age program can strengthen its approach to food insecurity in your local community.

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# What is food insecurity?

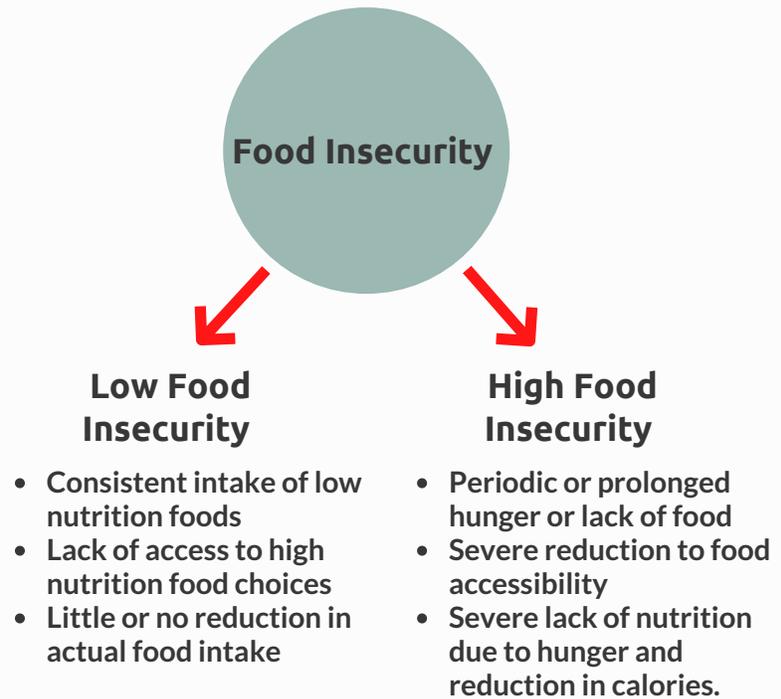
What does food insecurity really mean? The official definition from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) states that an individual experiences food insecurity when they don't "have access to the food choices they need to support a healthy lifestyle (USDA, 2020)."

A key term in this definition is **ACCESS**. Sustainable access to healthy food looks different from one community to another. For many students and adults, the grocery store is a sustainable access source for healthy foods. For other communities, sustainable access sources include thriving gardens, farmer markets, food co-ops, or community programs. The USDA highlights that having a secure and stable source to acquire healthy food is fundamental to ensuring that children and their caregivers obtain the proper amount of calories needed to live healthy and productive lives.

The lack of accessibility to healthy foods quickly leads to food-insecurity. The closing of a neighborhood grocery store, a redirection of public transit routes, or a sudden lack of transportation are common barriers that restrict easy access to healthy food options. For some communities in our state, the closest accessible food sources are fast food restaurants or sparsely stocked convenience stores that shelve an overabundance of highly processed food. Research provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) highlights that children who live on low nutrition, fast food centered diets are more likely to suffer from indicators of food insecurity like diabetes, cognitive delay, and long term obesity (CDC, Poor Nutrition, 2021).

Healthy food access is not only linked to location or transportation. Other barriers like community violence, mental health, physical disabilities, cultural influences, and socio-economic factors can limit access to healthy food options for students and families. Information gathered by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion asserts that food insecurity is directly tied to the "eco-system" of the surrounding community. Changes in modes of employment, health services, crime, and housing all contribute to the stability of a students overall diet (ODPHP, Social Determinants of Health, 2020).

Take a moment to reflect on the community your school age program serves. What barriers exist between your families and students and access to healthy food options.



## Potential Barriers to Food Access



Transportation  
and  
Location



Employment  
and  
Socio-economic



Physical  
or  
Mental Restrictions



Crime  
and  
Social Barriers



Lack  
of  
Resources

Another key element to defining food insecurity is determining the overall nutrition of the food available to students and their families. The USDA asserts that school age children need a diet high in vitamins, protein, complex carbohydrates, and fiber to help support brain and physical development. Healthy food options contribute to a reduction in developing chronic health conditions, heart damage, and depression in students 8-17 years old (CDC, Health and Academic Achievement, 2021). Further research from the CDC states that students who start eating healthy foods at a young age are more likely to continue healthy eating patterns as they become adults (CDC, 2021).

Students and families can still suffer from food insecurity and not experience the effects of hunger. Low food insecurity is a term that represents an individual who has access to food, but sustains a diet that does not provide their bodies with the nutrients needed to thrive. Students who obtain a large portion of their daily caloric intake from fast food, processed foods, and other high calorie food choices have an increased chance of dealing with the effects of low food insecurity.

Low food insecurity is a health issue that affects students from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. A student dealing with low food insecurity might not show the typical signs of malnutrition; however, their daily diet could be leaving them starved.

# What foods are best for school age students?

USDA, MyPlate.gov



## Whole Fruits

Whole fruits are an important source of vitamins, minerals, and dietary fiber.

## Vegetables

Vegetables are great for supporting healthy digestion for students. They are also a great source for trace minerals.



## Protein

Lean protein supports muscle growth for students. Protein also supplies young bodies with needed fatty acids.

## Dairy

Dairy foods are necessary for young bone development and access to Vitamins B, D, and A.



## Whole Grains

Whole grains provide students with sustainable energy throughout the day. Whole grains also help with digestive health.

## Food Insecurity at a Glance

### Food Secure

This child has adequate access to highly nutritious food and a balanced diet.

There are no indications of a reduction in needed calories to sustain activity.



### Low Food Insecurity

While this child is not hungry, their diet is not balanced and does not give them proper nutrients.

The food they eat is lower quality and can lead to obesity or other health issues.



### High Food Insecurity

This child suffers from a lack of food and nutrition that results in hunger.

Food intake is irregular with meals being skipped.



# The effects of food insecurity on students

The negative effects of food insecurity are monumental for school age students. Academically, students dealing with high food insecurity score lower on end-of-grade assessments and other comprehensive tests compared to food secure peers. Students dealing with high food insecurity have a higher probability to miss school on a regular basis, and showcase challenging behaviors when they do attend school (Children's Health Watch, Too Hungry to Learn, 2012).

Recent data highlights that students who consume low amounts of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products report lower grades than food secure students. The CDC states that students who do not receive adequate amounts of vitamins A, B6, B12, zinc, calcium, iron, and folate are more likely to display challenges with acute problem-solving skills and attention span (CDC, Health and Academic Achievement, 2014).

Food insecurity can also negatively impact a student's physical and social-emotional success. Malnutrition and the effects of hunger directly correlate to lower body weight, weaker bones, stunted brain development, and higher instances of illness. For students dealing with low food insecurity, a diet consisting of fatty, nutrient depleted foods often results in childhood obesity, heart congestion, diabetes, and other weight related medical problems (Naude, Cochrane Database Systematic Review, 2018).

On an emotional level, food insecurity is a direct contributor to childhood stress and trauma. Researcher Ellyn Satter asserts that individuals who consistently deal with food insecurity live under a constant stress associated with finding calorie rich foods. For children, this stress can quickly develop into eating disorders, socially negative behaviors, anxiety, and hoarding (Satter, Hierarchy of Food Needs, 2007).

## How does food insecurity affect students?



**Lower Assessment Scores**  
**Lower Grades**  
**Higher Rates of Absenteeism**

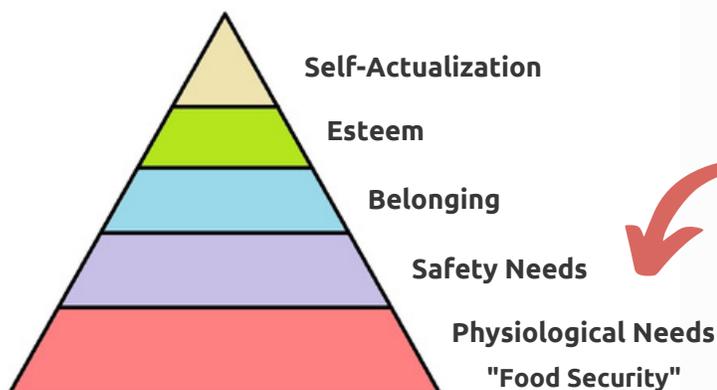


**Weaker Bones**  
**Weight Issues**  
**Higher Chance of Medical Issues**



**Increases In Stress**  
**Increases in Mental Health Issues**

## Food Insecurity and Maslow's Hierarchy



In his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Behavior", psychologist Abraham Maslow recognizes access to a stable source of nutritious food as a fundamental factor to an individual's mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

Maslow classifies food access as a foundational physiological need required for humans to survive and develop. For school age students to thrive, they must have access to healthy, reliable meals that provide them with the nutrients needed to grow and learn.

# Recognizing the signs of hunger

As a school age professional, you play a vital role to support students and families dealing with food insecurity. By taking time to recognize the signs of hunger and food related stress, you can help increase the success and quality of life for the students in your care. Remember the statistic...1 in 5 children in North Carolina deal with the effects of food insecurity on a regular basis. The chances are high that a number of students you serve are currently dealing with food insecurity at this very moment. Below are some key signs to help you recognize hunger and food related stress in your program.

## Physical Signs

- Sudden gain or loss in weight with little change in activity level
- Extremely slower rate of physical growth and physical development
- Signs of a weaker immune system and increased sickness
- Lethargy and chronic fatigue
- Signs of childhood obesity and extreme weight gain (low food insecurity)



## Academic Signs

- Low grades or sudden drop in grades and test scores
- Lower attention spans during classroom time
- Decrease in school attendance
- Increase in challenging behaviors during classroom time



## Social-Emotional Signs

- Constantly asking about food
- Stealing food or manipulating others to give them food
- Hoarding food or sneaking food into the program
- Increase in aggression and anger
- Increase in isolation and social retreat



When looking for signs of food insecurity, you must know your students and their families. Some older students may try to secure extra snacks or food for younger siblings in your school age program during meal time. These students may also attempt to sacrifice their food in order to provide more for their siblings or family members. Families struggling with hunger or food insecurity may also "forget" to bring snacks or meals for students on a regular basis.

Take time to properly observe the dynamics of your classroom, and always make sure to approach food related behaviors and issues with calmness and compassion.

# Ways to combat hunger in your school age program



## Think about your attitude and approach

Food insecurity and food related discussions can be an embarrassing topic for students. An individual's relationship with food can be directly tied to issues of self-worth, body image, and personal confidence. Research from the Mayo Clinic asserts that body image and eating habits are two leading factors of stress for students as they mature into their teen years (Mayo Clinic, Tween and Teen Health, 2022). This personalized stress compounds when food insecurity enters into the developmental equation.

As a school age professional, you must reflect on how you approach physical health, body image, and food related conversations with students. Here are some key points to remember:

- ✓ Never shame a student or their family because of physical health, food intake, or food availability. Simple statements like "you never eat your snack" or "why do you always forget your food" can be devastating to students struggling with food insecurity.
- ✓ Check your personal bias. Take time to reflect on any stereotypes you might place on students based on food intake. These internal judgements could affect your relationship with a student and, in turn, impact their chance to succeed in your classroom.
- ✓ Never tolerate bullying. Create and uphold a zero-tolerance stance on food and body shaming. Creating a classroom culture centered on acceptance will help all of your students thrive.
- ✓ Keep yourself from pressuring students to eat or try foods. Food insecurity forces many students to create deep and complicated relationships with food. Pressuring students into food selections can increase stress.
- ✓ Be open to students who want to talk about food insecurity problems. Remember to approach these conversations with a non-judgmental attitude and keep your body language open. It's always a great idea to link students up with a professional guidance counselor with specific training and resources.



## A's of Active Listening

It can be difficult to reach out to someone when your struggling with food insecurity. Remember the three A's of Active Listening if a student or family member chooses to reach out to you for food support.

### Attitude

Be aware of your attitude before entering a conversation. Are you in a place personally where you can talk to someone dealing with complicated problems? Engaging in a deep conversation with the wrong attitude can create more harm than good.

### Attention

Make sure to devote your full attention to the person coming to you for support. Being distracted gives off the perceptions that you don't care about the conversation at hand.

### Adjustment

Don't be afraid to ask for clarification. Many times, stressful conversations branch out quickly to multiple topics of trauma. Taking time to keep the conversation focused will help develop solutions.

# Ways to combat hunger in your school age program



## Program Structure and Approach

In North Carolina, licensed school age programs are structured to support students and families dealing with social hardships. School age programs in our state are instrumental in connecting students suffering from abuse, neglect and learning barriers to the safety nets they need to flourish. Addressing food insecurity must be a part of these support conversations. Taking time to incorporate food insecurity into your program's philosophy will ensure that students and families have the help they need as they battle food related stress.

Below are some simple tips:

- ✓ Connect with local food banks and community organizations that support families dealing with food insecurity. Form relationships with their staff and identify a reliable contact person with each outside organization that can direct families to the food support they need. Make an effort to place promotional materials and resources on your program's parent table or reception area.
- ✓ Take time to form strong relationships with the local schools your students attend. Have conversations with the school's guidance counselors and social service support staff. Many times, families might not know that their school has an advocate waiting to help.
- ✓ Have an open door program policy with parents. Let them know that you are there to talk and truly listen. Remember to actively listen to parents and students who come to you with food related problems.
- ✓ Connect families to North Carolina DHHS Child Care Subsidy. Qualifying families can receive financial support for licensed school age care. Your program may also choose to implement a scholarship/reduced care payment policy for families needing temporary assistance.
- ✓ Reflect on your program's approach to transportation. Providing alternate ways to help parents and students arrive at your program can help families dealing with the lack of transportation.
- ✓ Become a host site for a local food bank. Many food banks in North Carolina have the ability to set up temporary food stops in child care parking lots during summer and fall months.
- ✓ Provide students with the option of having "seconds" for snack.
- ✓ Plan field trips to local farms and mold your curriculum to include instruction on healthy foods. Exposing students to healthy foods will help expand their palate. Check with local farms or grocery chains to see if they can send food experts to your site if field trips are not an option.
- ✓ Start a program garden and have your students take home what grows. Even if the garden is small, planting provides great exercise and increases a student's exposure to healthy food options.

## Extra Resources For Food Insecurity Support

**Feeding the Carolinas**

**NC Farm to School**

**WSCC Model**

**Alliance for a Healthier Generation**

[www.feedingthecarolinas.org](http://www.feedingthecarolinas.org)  
1.888.689.1447

[www.ncfarmtoschool.com](http://www.ncfarmtoschool.com)

[www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/wsc](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/wsc)

[www.healthiergeneration.org/takeaction/out-of-school-time](http://www.healthiergeneration.org/takeaction/out-of-school-time)

# Taking an inventory

This inventory will help you reflect on ways you and your school age program can help students facing food insecurity. Take time to think about each question as you plan your next steps of support.

**What are the social barriers in my community that enable food insecurity?**

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**What signs of food insecurity exist in my school age program?**

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**What changes can I personally make to support students dealing with food insecurity?**

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**What changes can my school age program make to support students dealing with food insecurity?**

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**List of local community resources that can support students and families struggling with food insecurity.**

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