

## **Volunteers turn grocers for hungry, needy families: EAST BAY: Advocates pack bags full of healthy items for students, parents to pick up at schools so children get nutrition they need**

**BYLINE:** Sara Steffens, Contra Costa Times, Walnut Creek, Calif.

Feb. 10--Nearly every day, a child stops by the office of Oakland's Whittier Elementary School hoping to fill his empty tummy.

"We just had a child that came in 10 minutes ago and said 'I didn't eat breakfast,'" Rodolfo Perez, the school's outreach coordinator, said Friday morning. "That's very typical."

Hunger is such a common problem at the school that teachers have learned to suspect it when students are sleepy and listless in class, and administrators keep an emergency stash of power bars and fruit.

Whittier isn't alone -- one in five California children live in poverty and more than half of the state's students receive free or reduced-price school lunches because their families have very low incomes.

So what happens on the weekends, when school cafeterias are closed?

In the East Bay, anti-hunger advocates have hit upon a practical answer: sending small bags of nutritious food home with students at the end of each week.

"No one here at the **food bank** can stand the thought of kids going hungry, so this just seemed like a natural for us," said Suzan Bateson, executive director of the Alameda County Community **Food Bank**, which sponsors the program with help from Faith Network of the East Bay.

At Whittier, where 90 percent of students get free or reduced-price lunches, parent volunteers pass out the food bags every Thursday afternoon.

The distribution is first come, first served, and some families always leave empty-handed, Perez said. "There's a great need," he said. "We tell them; maybe you can try arriving earlier next time."

Founded by local churches in the early 1990s, the school food distribution program grew quickly, and then fell on hard times. Revived last school year with the help of a grant from Wal-Mart, it now serves 1,130 students at Whittier and seven other Alameda County schools: Marilyn Avenue Elementary in Livermore, Malcolm X Elementary in Berkeley, and Oakland's Glenview, Hoover, Lazear and Lockwood elementary and Webster Academy.

Two dozen volunteers gather each Wednesday at the **food bank's** main warehouse to assemble the food packages.

Conveyer rollers whir as the group works assembly line-style, quickly packing plastic grocery bags with jars of peanut butter, pouches of tuna or salmon, bags of generic cornflakes and nonperishable cartons of milk.

"It's an opportunity to open your eyes to needs you might not be aware of," said Marian McGaw of Albany, a Faith Network volunteer. "Just seeing the food they pack makes you think about what children must be missing."

Nationally, more than a third of **food bank** clients are children younger than 18, numbers that also hold true in the East Bay.

Among parents who use the Alameda County **food bank**, one in four reports their children have missed meals because there was no food in the house.

In Contra Costa, a new program sends elementary and middle school students home with bags of fresh fruit and vegetables.

In its second month, the pilot program already has passed out about 12,000 pounds of produce through after school programs at Bel Air, Rio Vista and Shore Acres elementary in Bay Point, Delta View Elementary in Pittsburg and Riverview Middle School in Bay Point.

"As many as 70 percent of the kids at these schools are getting free and reduced-price lunch," said Larry Sly, executive director of the **Food Bank** of Contra Costa and Solano. "We know they're in a situation where they may not be getting anything to eat when they go home."

School distributions not only put high-quality nutritious food into the hands of kids, they also help parents who can't leave work to visit a food pantry, said Bateson.

"Nobody likes to ask for help," Bateson said. "Wouldn't it be great if there were more programs like this that were offered before somebody has to say my kids don't have enough food to eat?"

Sara Steffens covers poverty and social services.

