

# The BackPack Program

Shared Harvest Foodbank's signature program to address childhood hunger.

# Why Backpack?

During the school year, thousands of children three to twelve years old who live in southwest Ohio are growing up without enough food to feed their little bodies and brains. During the school year, they receive a free breakfast and/or lunch, but on the weekends they face empty cupboards at home. In many instances, the solution to this problem is obvious: A simple bag of food discreetly dropped into the students back packs on Friday afternoons. Shared Harvest Foodbank's Backpack Program meets this basic need for food for students identified by school faculty and staff as exhibiting signs of chronic hunger.

Chronic hunger in children contributes to behavior, attendance and/or academic problems in the classroom and does affect a student's ability to concentrate. In addition, these students become irritable, have headaches, stomachaches, are inattentive, and depressed due to their empty bellies. All of these problems follow the children to school on Monday.

A large body of research literature, amassed over the past two decades, shows clearly that food insecurity and hunger together with other correlates of poverty, can dramatically alter the architecture of children's brains, making it impossible for them to fulfill their potential.

It is not often we have the opportunity to really improve the lives of students who face multiple obstacles leveling the playing field and giving them the same opportunities for learning their as peers. By intervening in these young children's lives with something as simple as a bag of food each weekend, we can give them the energy, acuity and inspiration to participate on par with their better fed peers in the classroom, which in the long run will help them grow up healthy, caring and responsible.

And that is good for all of us.



Tina Osso, Executive Director



# What teachers say about Backpack

*Mayfield Elementary, Middletown:* This student started the year in academic troubles. He is finishing the year on target. He looks forward to receiving his backpack each week.

*John 23rd, Middletown:* Leah began coming to school smiling, alert, and eager to learn. She has made great strides this year!

*Hamilton Food Service:* I have been in charge of the Backpack Program for a number of years, and I know what a true impact the Backpacks are to our students. There are way too many children that come to school hungry. When there is a day or two out of school, it is extremely obvious that these kids have not had enough to sustain them over the time away from school. We do everything in our power to make sure that they have substantial breakfast, lunch and snacks while here at school and it is truly rewarding to know that Shared Harvest has the ability to provide food for a number of our students to eat over the weekend breaks! I personally appreciate the effort that Shared Harvest puts forth for the children of our district.



*Child hunger is  
an educational  
problem.*

Hungry children cannot learn as much, as fast, or as well, because chronic under-nutrition and toxic stress harm their cognitive development during this critical period of brain growth.

Childhood hunger changes the fundamental neurological architecture of the brain and central nervous system.



**“We always  
make sure the  
kids get fed first,  
and we’ll take  
what’s left so  
they can have a  
hot meal.”**

**Dan**

**Dan and P.J.**

**“It eases your mind because there are a lot of parents out there who are worried about getting enough food so their kids can eat every day.”**

Dan understands the value of the Backpack program to his son P.J., a third grader at Adena Elementary in the Lakota School District. P.J. anxiously awaits the arrival of his backpack every Friday and opens it immediately to see if some of his favorite items are included.

“He loves the chili and the macaroni and cheese that sometimes come in the bag, as well as the granola bars,” Dan says. “It’s a great opportunity for the kids, and they look at it as a gift to them. It brings a lot of smiles and enjoyment for P.J.”

Dan probably understands the problem of hunger better than many parents. He’s now on disability but was a truck driver who made many deliveries to Shared Harvest Foodbank. He understands many kids live with the fear of missing a meal because their parents don’t have money for food.

“The way the economy is today, some parents have to choose whether to make a house payment, a car payment, skip a doctor’s appointment or put food on the table,” he says. “From the middle to the end of the month, there are times when there are some food items we can’t get.”

Dan also encourages P.J. to help other kids whose families are struggling. “I’ve told him if there’s a snack he doesn’t like, share it with a friend who is hungry. I want him to have some incentive to help others.”

***Child hunger is an educational problem.***

Hungry children do poorly in school and have lower academic achievement because they are not well prepared for school and cannot concentrate.

Hungry children have more social and behavioral problems because they feel bad, have less energy for complex social interactions, and cannot adapt as effectively to environmental stresses.

# What teachers are telling us...



*Creekview, Middletown:* My kiddos are so excited when the food is delivered to our classroom! Their eyes light up, and they rush to put the food in their back packs. One little boy said; "Now I have food for the weekend! Mommy doesn't get money until next week, and we don't have any food!"

*Kramer Elementary - Talawanda:* I had a child who was not able to have a snack in the classroom until they started getting the BackPacks. Now they bring in snacks that they got and can feel more like their peers.

*Marshall Elementary, Talawanda:* This is such a fabulous program, which is greatly appreciated by the staff, students and families. I am so impressed by the kindness of the Backpack volunteers; they address each student personally by name and always tell them to "have a great weekend."



# ...about the Backpack Program

*Rosa Parks Elementary, Middletown:*

I have seen some positive changes in the students involved in the program. One student has stopped asking others for food at lunchtime. Another student has not asked for breakfast snacks to take home in quite some time.

*Kramer Elementary, Talawanda:* My students receiving this service depend on this food. It is heartwarming to see their relief each weekend. One student commented; “now my mom will be able to eat too. I’ll share mine.” Thank you all!

*Ridgeway Elementary, Hamilton:* We have a student living in a hotel/motel and expressed that she is stressed about money, food, clothes etc. When we were able to offer this program her face just beamed!

*Wildwood Elementary, Middletown:* A mother came to school one day, hugged me and said; “Thank you so much for your help!”



*Child hunger is a health problem.*

Hungry children are sick more often, and more likely to have to be hospitalized.

Hungry children suffer growth impairment that precludes their reaching their full physical potential.

Hungry children incur developmental impairments that limit their physical, intellectual and emotional development.



**“For someone like me who is a single mom on a fixed income, it helps me out tremendously.”**

**Ayonna**

**Tiasha, Ayonna & Dashonna**



**“My kids enjoy it so much because every time they bring home a Backpack, it’s like Christmas to them!”**

The Backpack program has helped Ayonna explore her creative side in preparing meals for her three daughters - Tiasha, Dashonna and Ayshae. “I love to cook, and I want to go back to school to get my certificate to be a chef,” she says.

Two of her three daughters, Tiasha (kindergarten) and Dashonna (2nd grade) are in the program at Rosa Parks Elementary in Middletown. “I struggle toward the end of the month, so the Backpack contents help me come up with ideas of what I can make,” she explains.

“I go on Google and look for different recipes. Sometimes they’ll bring home a chili mix, which I can use to make chili dogs, nachos, and I’ve even used it to stuff in chicken. My mom also found a recipe to wrap the chili in tortillas, so we try all kinds of stuff!”

Ayonna likes the fact that Backpack items change from week to week, including items her daughters had never tasted before. She encourages them to try new things. Ayonna also knows other moms whose children are in the program, so she enjoys working with other families to combine their efforts in feeding their kids.

“One of my daughter’s best friends has a single mom on a fixed income too, so we try to help each other,” Ayonna says. “I know how it feels not to eat every day and how it feels not to have things. So sometimes she doesn’t have things, and I’ll try to help her out, and sometimes she’ll do the same thing for me.”

***Child hunger is a workforce and job readiness problem.***

Workers who experienced hunger as children are not as well prepared physically, mentally, emotionally or socially to perform effectively in the contemporary workforce.

Workers who experienced hunger as children are less competitive, with lower levels of educational and technical skills, and seriously constrained human capital.

# What teachers are telling us...



*Springcreek School, Miami County:* Thank you for doing the Backpack Program. You could tell my students relied on this to get through the weekend. Some would even start asking about it on Thursdays. It set my mind at ease, because I knew they would have enough food for the weekend. Thank you for helping take care of our students.

*Tri Village, Darke County:* My students really seem to appreciate the food we send home every Friday. I have heard from the community that this has been needed for years and what a wonderful program it is to have in our community.

*Washington Elementary, Miami County:* I am a guidance counselor at all the intermediate buildings. Backpack has had a huge impact on the lives of our students and their younger siblings. Your food is often what gets our kids through the weekend! Thanks for all that you do for our students.

*Versailles, Darke County:* I believe this is a great program! I am very thankful that you provide this opportunity for my students and so many others. Thank you!

# ...about the Backpack Program

*Washington, Miami County:* I have had students who cannot concentrate because of hunger. I appreciate this program's attempt to help with the problem.

*Kings Mills Elementary, Warren County:* The Backpack Program allowed this family to utilize resources toward other things and bridge the gap between paychecks. Their child is slowly improving because they can afford proper medical care and basic needs.

*Little Miami Schools, Warren County:* Most of our students are very humble when receiving and always thankful. Although I think it's difficult to take because they are prideful with their friends. They know they need it and they know it frees up some extra dollars a week for their family. Thank you!

*Columbia Intermediate, Warren County:* I have done home visits to three-quarters of the student's homes that receive Backpacks, and I know for certain that these families are facing challenges that often affect their ability to secure food! Thank you so much for the effort in their behalf.



## *Indicators of chronic childhood hunger:*

Extreme hunger on Monday mornings;

Rushing food lines at the cafeteria;

Quickly eating all the food served;

Lingering around or asking for seconds;

Asking classmates for food they don't want.



**“For the kids, knowing their food will be there each week is important. They don’t have to worry about going without a snack that day.”**

**Marilyn**

**Marilyn and Shane**

**“ The first thing I always eat is the can of mandarine oranges. They’re good! I love the pudding snacks, but chocolate only!”**  
**Shane**

First grader Shane has been in the Backpack program for two years at Shawnee Elementary in the Lakota School District. “He’s so excited every week when he goes through his food bag and picks out the things he loves best,” says his mother, Marilyn. She juggles parenting and school as she works toward a degree in business management.

Marilyn calls Backpack an awesome program because Shane knows he won’t have to go without a snack. “It also helps out a lot on weekends because I don’t have to worry about Shane having something to eat,” she explains. “If there’s ever a day when I don’t have something for lunch, there’s always soup or ravioli or spaghetti and meatballs in the bag to fill him up.”

Marilyn emphasizes the importance of nutritious items contained in the Backpacks, but she says it’s also a vital part of providing food for kids whose families have limited income. “I’ve talked with parents of some of his friends who receive Backpacks as well, and it helps everybody out and it saves us from having to focus just on food when there are other issues to deal with financially,” she says.

Like most of the kids in the Backpack program, Shane has developed a close relationship with his school liaison Jessica, who works with children in three elementary schools as part of her job with the Butler County Success program. “He always greets me, gives me a hug and thanks me for his food bag,” Jessica says.

### *Indicators of chronic childhood hunger:*

Asking when the next meal or snack will be served;

Regularly asking their teachers for food;

Comments about not having enough food at home;

Saving, hoarding or stealing food to take home.



# What teachers are telling us...



*Little Miami Junior High, Warren County:* We had one student on our team who came to school crying because they did not have dinner food the night before. I sat and talked with her as she cried. I mentioned the Backpack Program and she cried more because she was embarrassed to ask, so we set her up with our school counselor and got her and her sister food for each weekend.

*Bowman School, Warren County:* Four of my students receive Backpacks in my classroom and they always look forward to it. I have one student in particular who looks out for it every Friday and begins to get nervous if it doesn't arrive before lunchtime. I assure the student that it will come and he doesn't need to worry. The student is clearly concerned about whether he will get enough food to eat for the weekend. I hate to see him worry but I am glad that we have program that helps with this. Thank you for all you do! For some of our families, it is a huge and very much needed.

# ...about the Backpack Program

*J.F. Burns School, Warren County:* We have had five families this year successfully get off the Backpack Program due to finding work. They have expressed gratitude for the program in helping their family get through a difficult time. We are grateful. Thank you!

*Bowman School, Warren County:* The parent of one of my students mentioned that she is so thankful for the program. She is divorced and struggles to make ends meet each month. She said that it was very helpful. They look forward to each week, and I am so glad we can help them.

*Wight Pre-Kindergarten, Warren County:* One of my students said she really liked the Backpacks because she liked to share the food with her little brother and sister. When I asked her what she liked in particular, it was the snack bars because they don't have them at home.



*Physical  
appearance of  
chronic childhood  
hunger:*

Extreme thinness;

Puffy, swollen skin;

Dry, cracked lips;

Chronically dry and  
itchy eyes;

Chronic sickness.



**“The food bags  
are just an  
awesome way to  
give these kids a  
little bit of luxury  
not having to  
worry about food  
for the weekend.”**

**Jessica  
School Liaison**

**P.J. and liaison Jessica**

**“The kids are always very grateful to those who deliver the food bags and to their teachers for supporting this program.”**

Jessica is very popular with children in three Lakota elementary buildings. As a liaison for the Butler County Success program, she makes sure children in the Backpack program receive their weekly bag of weekend food. The project also has helped her to understand the problem of hunger.

“It has been very eye opening for me to go into the classroom each week and see the reaction on the children’s faces when I walk in with their food bags,” Jessica says. “They understand this is their food for the weekend. You can see the relief on their faces just to see those Backpack bags sitting on the counter in their classroom.”

Jessica has found teachers are huge advocates of the Backpack program. “If a child hasn’t received a bag for whatever reason, they will come and ask where the child’s bag is because they know how important it is,” she says.

The contents of the food bags are important too. Jessica points out it exposes children to a wider range of foods than they may get at home.

When she tells people about her work with Lakota Schools, Jessica says: “Some people are surprised when they find out we’re giving out food bags to children because they don’t see hunger in Lakota. But it is most definitely here.”

***Learning  
barriers related  
to childhood  
hunger:***

Excessive absences or tardiness;

Repetition of grade;

Short attention span;

Behavior problems;

Inability to concentrate;

Limited classroom participation.



# Thanks to our many BackPack volunteers

**“BackPack has been the easiest program we’ve ever had in terms of support and developing volunteers. No one wants to see little children go hungry.”**

Chuck Osso retired recently from his position running Shared Harvest Foodbank’s BackPack program, which started in January 2007. He watched the program grow from serving children in Butler County to assisting elementary kids in Warren, Miami and Darke Counties as well.

Shared Harvest now has a reliable base of volunteers to help pack and distribute weekend bags of food to children identified as being at risk of hunger in local elementary schools.

“There are many opportunities to serve when you volunteer here, and we especially enjoy working with the BackPack Program,” says Angie Ritter of Conagra. She joins with fellow employees in volunteering to pack bags at Shared Harvest’s warehouse.

“When they tell us what the BackPack program is for, it helps you feel like you’re doing something for a worthy cause,” says John Clark of G.E. Aviation, which also volunteers to pack bags. Our thanks to the many dedicated people who give their time to fill bags and those who deliver them to local schools.





# Each Backpack makes a difference



At the end of each school year, we ask teachers, counselors, school nurses, administrators and other staff to complete a one-page evaluation of their students who have received Backpacks throughout the year.

In the 2013-14 school year, we served an average of 3,100 children each week. The cost is \$3.15 per child for each bag of food per weekend, and we distributed 82,570 bags of food over the course of the school year.

We want to know if this intervention of a simple bag of food improved the students' attendance, behavior and classroom performance. The quotes throughout this report are comments we received on the evaluation forms.

We received 400 completed evaluations; the results are amazing with 61% reporting their students were somewhat or very much improved, and 39% report their students got no worse.

In all cases, this little bag of food truly made a difference in these students' lives, and we couldn't do this without you.

***Please*** use the enclosed envelope to make a donation to the Backpack program for the 2014-15 school year.



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