



TIPS FOR TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM RESOURCES

# Hunger Pains: Teaching Hungry Students

By Jennifer Gunn

[fFacebook](#) [tTwitter](#) [pPinterest](#) [inLinkedin](#) [✉Email](#)

Cranky. Tired. Lethargic. Moody. Sick. *Failing*. These are just a few things that happen when students are hungry. Schools — and especially classroom teachers — can play a vital role in helping kids stay healthy and learn. Here's a look at how.

Get Relevant Teaching Content and Updates Delivered Directly to Your Inbox. Subscribe Today!

Join

according to 2017 research by [NO KID HUNGRY](#), it's said that 22 million students across the country rely on reduced-price or free school lunches through the National School Lunch Program (funded by the USDA). Food insecurity puts tremendous stress on families, who worry about food running out before money becomes available to buy more. As a result, parents may skip meals, so their children can eat, and a child's meals may shrink throughout a week or month — or even disappear entirely. [No Kid Hungry](#) reports that 74% of educators have students who regularly come to school hungry.

The truth is hunger hurts, and 46% of children from low-income families say hunger negatively impacts their academic performance. They're not wrong. Studies published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, *Pediatrics*, and the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* show that hunger greatly impacts a child's performance and behavior in school. "Hungry children have lower math scores. They are also more likely to repeat a grade, come to school late, or miss it entirely" due to illness.

## The stigma of hunger

When students eat breakfast in school, [research](#) shows that academic achievement improves, most notably in math. Unfortunately, hunger comes with a stigma that forces many kids to avoid eating the free breakfasts and lunches that are available in school cafeterias. Students can feel embarrassed having to come to school early to go to a lunchroom before classes, or getting a free school lunch when their friends have packed lunches or get to go out to eat. Few students want to admit they receive free or reduced lunch, and feel ashamed when they can't pay school lunch fees. This stigma can lead to more hunger because students avoid the available meals and food. But new initiatives are cropping up to make student meals more equitable.

## Ensuring that *everyone* eats during school hours

Some states have created programs to help de-stigmatize the hunger issue. Instead of making students come early to go to the cafeteria before classes, many schools have made breakfast a whole-school, after-the-bell event. New York City schools began offering free breakfast *and* lunch for *all* students in September of 2017, reducing the stigma of "qualifying" for such programs.



SHARE professional learning - Teaching Through The Coronavirus Pandemic course

"Traditional breakfast — served in the cafeteria before the school day begins — often has low participation due to factors ranging from tight schedules to concerns about stigma," according to Hunger Solutions NY. The growing trend in *Breakfast After the Bell* programs helps reduce hunger-shame and integrates breakfast into the school day and even into the classroom. According to *The Effect of Providing Breakfast in Class on Student Performance* in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, math and reading achievement test scores go up when breakfast is moved from the cafeteria and into the classroom.

## Create grab-and-go meals and snack stations for all

Offering Snack Stations throughout the day or Second Chance Breakfasts (also called Mid-Morning Nutrition Breaks) can ensure that all students receive food, and are better able to focus on their learning. Offering items such as granola bars or fruit in a central location or in all classrooms can greatly help students make it through the school day without hunger. The [Grab & Go breakfast model](#) lets students "pick up conveniently packaged breakfasts from mobile service carts or vending machines in high traffic areas when they arrive at school or between classes," eliminating the need for students to out themselves by going to the cafeteria or showing a free lunch card.

## Covering the weekends and summers

While many learners may be well-fed during the week at school, weekends can prove particularly daunting. "After a week in a structured environment where they have at least two full meals, they will leave school and for 68 hours have little to eat," according to [End 68 Hours of Hunger](#), a nonprofit that provides weekend food for students to take home. The same is true for summer and school vacations when subsidized meals become unavailable. [No Kid Hungry](#) notes that "just 17% of children eligible for free summer meals are getting them. But more and more schools and community organizations are opening their doors in the summer to provide free breakfast and lunch to all who need it."

student can learn to pause and self-assess their mood and needs. Mindfulness instructs students to check in with themselves and ask reflective questions like: Am I really angry about this or is it something else? Am I tired? Am I hungry? Do I need to take a breather? Am I ready to get started on this assignment? [Research](#) shows that mindfulness empowers students to become more in control of self-managing their attention span, emotions, empathy, and anxiety levels, according to [Mindful Schools](#). Incorporating a steady mindfulness practice and hunger-fighting programs in your school can prevent negative behaviors from surfacing and help liberate students to truly learn.

## For more on Student Hunger and Nutrition:

- [This is a Student's Brain on Trauma](#)
- [Food Insecurity in Schools: How Can Teachers and Administrators Cope?](#)
- [No Kid Hungry](#)

*Jennifer L.M. Gunn spent 10 years in newspaper and magazine publishing before moving to public education, where she has been for nearly a decade. She is a curriculum designer and public high school educator in New York City. Jennifer is the creator of Right to Read, a literacy acceleration program for urban adolescent youth that's steeped in social justice. She is an education writer and co-founder of the annual [EDxEDNYC Education Conference](#), which won the New York City Department of Education Excellence in School Technology Award this year. Jennifer regularly presents at conferences on the topics of adolescent literacy, leadership, and education innovation. Follow Jennifer online at [www.jenniferlmgunn.com](http://www.jenniferlmgunn.com) or on [Twitter](#).*

---

### Join Resilient Educator

Subscribe To Our Newsletter To Get Content Delivered To Your Inbox. Click or Tap the Button Below.

Join



---

## You may also like to read

**Teaching Strategies for Welcoming Elementary Students Back to School**

**Most Common Teaching Styles Used with Elementary School Students**

**Four Great Programs for Teaching Financial Literacy to High School Students**

**Benefits of Teaching at a Charter School**

**Web Research Skills: Teaching Your Students the Fundamentals**

**Culturally Responsive Teaching: Empowering Students Through Respect**

Tags: [Teacher-Parent Relationships](#), [Trauma and Resilience](#)

---

