

KidsPack Program Evaluation

2009/10 School Year

Introduction

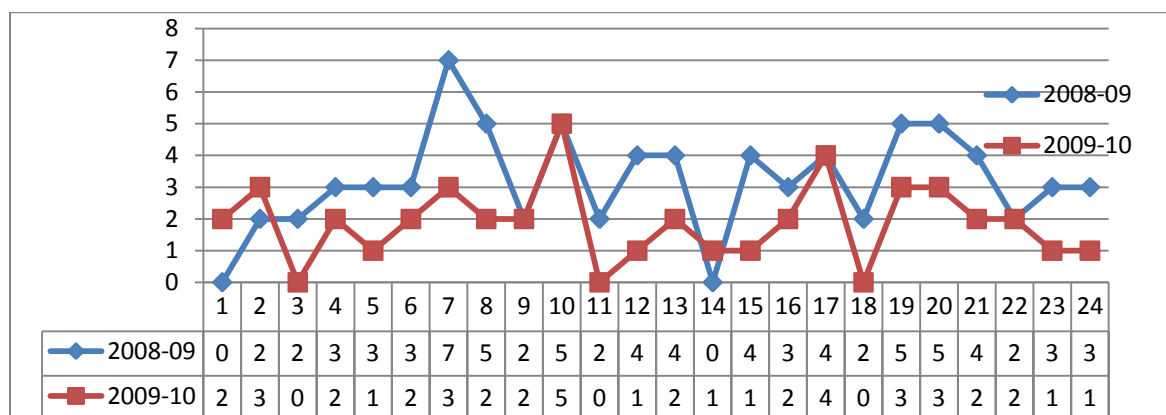
Despite the growing local and national popularity of the KidsPack Program designed from the Backpack Program model, neither program has received attention in scholarly literature on its impact. Similarly, little previous research has examined the Gallatin Valley Food Bank’s KidsPack Program specific need in the community, program indicators, or the program’s impact on childhood hunger in the area.

This evaluation seeks to broaden our understanding of the KidsPack Program by using school-level surveys and focus groups with teachers to assess indicators of program impact and program need. The analysis contributes evidence on the underlying reasons for childhood food insecurity and the impact of the KidsPack Program on participating students’ overall well-being. Most schools providing KidsPack assistance are located near areas that are served by the Gallatin Valley and Headwaters Area Food Banks or a satellite service, yet children still appear to be hungry or worried about food when they come to school. Survey responses indicate a number of reasons why children are facing food insecurity in Gallatin County including unemployed parents, parents who spend long hours away from home and cannot make ends meet, and parents who suffer from substance abuse. In a newly participating school, Monday discipline referrals fell significantly when compared to the previous year’s total. While several other school-level policies and changes occurred over the course of the school-year the addition of the KidsPack Program was the most considerable change. In contrast, school-level survey results yielded strong evidence of multiple benefits for participating students’ well-being including better relationships with school staff and/or other students, feeling more secure, more interest in school, and fewer behavior problems (healthier).

Data Description

Data construction started by reviewing Monday morning discipline referrals for Heck/Quaw Elementary School in Belgrade. Heck/Quaw was an ideal test case for the effectiveness of the program not only because it was the first year this program was offered at the school, but also because Belgrade, while served by the Gallatin Valley Food Bank, faces a greater number of challenges relative to other surrounding communities that increase the incidence of childhood hunger. A simple t-test found a significant difference ($t=3.22$; $df=1,43$, $p<.005$) between the number of Monday discipline referrals in 2008–09 and 2009–10. In the 2008–09 school year, the average number of discipline referrals on Mondays was 3.2 compared to 1.85 in 2009–10.

Table 1. Heck/Quaw Monday Office Discipline Referrals 2008–09 v. 2009–10



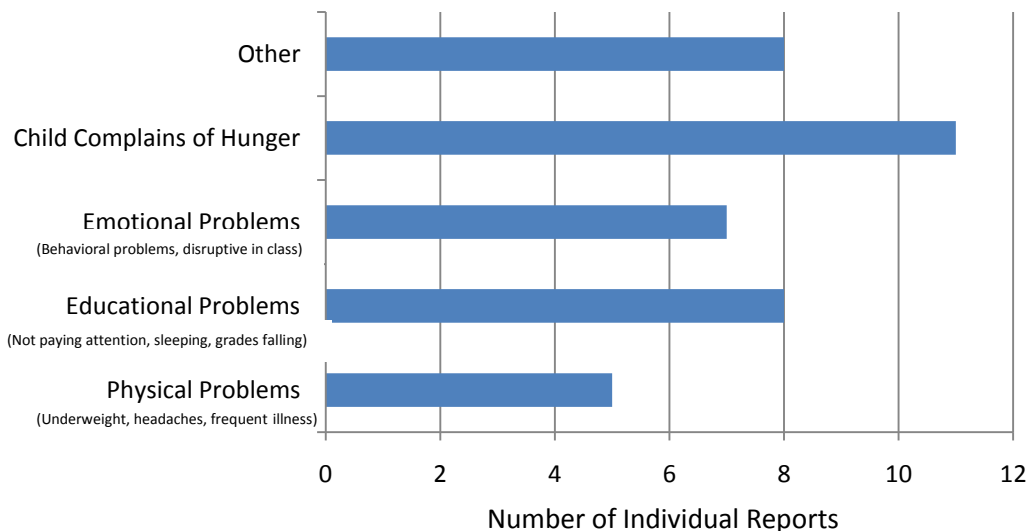
The Gallatin Valley Food Bank designed a questionnaire and delivered copies to all schools who received KidsPack support during the 2009–10 academic year. The surveys were completed by counselors, principals, school staff, and those designated as program coordinators for each school. This survey allowed the Gallatin Valley Food Bank to construct a unique set of program indicators and a second data set that consisted of schools that returned the questionnaire.

Seven schools participated in the KidsPack Program during the 2009–10 school-year and all seven schools returned their completed surveys. While the survey does not follow individual students, it does provide an evaluation by school personnel at the school-level. Survey questions fell into three general categories: how many children receive assistance, why children are placed on the program, and how the program affects participating children. The final section of questions pertained to how the program could improve and better serve student needs. The respondents were also asked to include a letter with a personal account describing what changes they have observed among participating students and some of the reasons students need the program.

Results

Survey results suggested that the KidsPack Program is reaching children who may have slipped through the safety net of other public assistance programs. Figure 1 reports five sets of frequency distributions for reasons school staff cite for placing children in the program in 2009–10. School personnel also cite a number of reasons why children are facing food insecurity. Most of the reasons involve insufficient income (parents/guardians work, but household is low-income or parents/guardians are temporarily unemployed, but usually work). More than 69 percent of school staff rank “parents/guardians work, but household is low-income” as the top reason children are served by the program. School personnel also report that drug and alcohol use, medical expenses, and parental neglect as important determinants of why children in their school are facing food insecurity.

Figure 1: Reasons Children are Placed in KidsPack Program: Frequency Distribution for 2009/10



Results point to a variety of benefits for children receiving assistance from the KidsPack Program. At least 50 percent of school staff report that participating children appear “less worried.” A similarly high percentage of school staff report students appear “healthier” with fewer medical complaints or illnesses and fewer behavioral problems in the classroom. Additionally, schools report participating students demonstrate a better and more trusting relationship with school personnel and/or other students. Because the educational environment improves as the behavioral problems within a classroom

community declines, many of these benefits could be affecting all the students in the classroom and not just the children participating in the program.

Statements from School Personnel

The survey also asked school personnel to include statements describing the program need and impact, and most complied. These comments by school officials added another dimension to understanding the impact of the KidsPack Program. Collectively, the responses indicated that personnel are pleased both with the types of food offered and its distribution and are thankful for the assistance. Frequent comments were made about how much the children appreciate receiving the foods, that they “look forward to coming to school,” and how proud some of the children feel to be receiving “their own food” and helping their family. The most commonly requested new food items school personnel would like to see included are those with less sugar and occasionally fresh fruits and vegetables.

Letters accompanying the surveys indicated that children included in the program live in households where parents are having trouble coping with economic hardship, are not at home, or are neglectful. One statement provided a clear image of the domestic situations in which some children live and the extent to which the KidsPack foods are helping; an elementary school secretary wrote:

...there are children that take care of themselves. Their parents are never home, either because they are working, looking for work, or just neglectful. I would see these children come to school on Monday mornings, dirty and starving, for both food and attention. Here at school we can try our best to give the kids attention and food they need, but only when they are here. When the food in your KidsPack Program started, these children were looking forward to weekends, whereas before they dreaded Fridays because they knew there wasn't going to be a good meal again until Monday.

Other statements described how the KidsPack foods are helping other members of the household. As a writing assignment, one teacher asked the students in her class to write about their favorite day of the week and why it was so special to them. One student wrote about the KidsPack “Buddies” Program:

Friday is the specialist day because it is Back Buddies. Every Friday I get a sack that has food in it. When I get home I open it and then I eat whatever I see...I make dinner for my family and I use my special ingredient.

Similarly, another school administrator wrote:

I had a student ask if it was ok to share the pack with her grandma because she didn't have food either.

Another series of comments showed the importance that school personnel attach to the idea that participating students maintain their dignity and can still bring food home. One fifth grade teacher commented:

I was initially worried about the self-esteem of the students who would be getting the KidsPack, so we would “sneak” them into the kids' lockers while they were at recess. Over time, I have seen that the students will come and ask me for their packs (in front of peers!) if I have not distributed them yet. I have very

few kids who don't want others to know about their packs. I know that the students really look forward to their packs!

Other statements described how participating children, while being assisted by pre-existing programs, are still slipping through the safety net and how KidsPack is helping them to eat something before the school cafeteria offers the next meal. One teacher commented:

In this overwhelmingly tough economy so many families that have never needed help before are in desperate need for someone to help them. I feel as though this program has reached the most devastated by what's going on...the kids.

We have several students whose parents do not work and require money for food from family members. They are on the free and reduced lunch program—they go back for 2nd or 3rd helpings for breakfast and/or lunch. Your program helps out a great deal.

Most letters commented on some aspect of the program's benefits such as children feeling more secure, more interest in school, and better relationships with school staff. The following comments illustrate these types of responses:

I had a student that had to leave early quite often on Friday. He would wait until after the food drop to go.

The kids love Fridays because of the KidsPack Program. They see me in the hall and they ask, "have you put one in my locker yet?"

As a final example of a comment that communicated the program's impact described in the qualitative analysis, a school counselor wrote:

One little girl told me her mom cried when she got the explanation letter at the beginning of the program. Initially I thought maybe it was because she saw it as a negative thing. Then the child explained, "she cried because she was so happy because we don't have any food."

Conclusion

This study documents reasons why children participating in the Gallatin Valley Food Bank's KidsPack Program appear to be facing food insecurity, the improvements in office disciplinary referrals in one school participating in the program, and the multiple impacts of the KidsPack Program on children's overall well-being. The KidsPack Program is designed to assist children for whom government programs are not enough. Instead of overlapping with the efforts of food banks, the KidsPack Program appears to be meeting the food needs of children who might otherwise go hungry over the weekends. Food banks operate under the premise that parents will take care of their children. Some parents are not able to properly feed their children due to a combination of reasons related, but not exclusive, to economic hardship, illness, drug and/or alcohol addiction, lack of willingness, and pride.

The findings also support the argument that KidsPack is an effective means to improve a child's self-esteem and self-worth. Additionally, the program improves participating children's relationships with other students and adults at the school. The child knows that they have an additional support system and community available for assistance if they need to call upon them. A child's self esteem and sense of security are crucial elements to understand in terms of their link between food security, school performance, and behavioral issues in the classroom. The decrease in disciplinary referrals and its effect on the classroom environment affect all students in the classroom community, not just those receiving food assistance. These findings support the continued growth and replication of the KidsPack Program in other schools and potentially other age groups in order to support educational advancement, physical and social health, and the emotional development of children who face food insecurity in their homes. The program's objective is consistent with the American Dietetic Association's position on child nutrition programs, "that all children should have access to appropriate food and nutrition programs for securing a food supply that promotes physical, cognitive, and social development"ⁱ. The results of this evaluation provide the validation for using the KidsPack Program to meet these goals.

ⁱ Stang and Bayerl (2003). Position of the American Dietetic Association: Child and Adolescent Food and Nutrition Programs, *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 103 (7):887-93