

Students Should Be Able to Focus on Their Lessons – Not Their Stomachs

By Hannah Kohanzadeh

When a family’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits run out—often well before the end of the month—it can mean a lot more than an empty fridge and going hungry. It also leads to children doing worse on math tests at school, according to a [new study](#) of children in South Carolina. Anyone who has tried to focus on *anything* while being really hungry understands why this happens.

This means that one way to help children succeed in school is to find strategies to help SNAP benefits stretch—or to provide added help when they inevitably run out.

Whom Does SNAP Reach?

In Fiscal Year 2016, it reached:

- **135,000** District of Columbia residents, or **20%** of the state population (**1 in 5**)
- **44,219,000** participants in the United States, or **14%** of the total population (**1 in 7**)

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--|--|
| DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA | more than 58% of SNAP participants are in families with children | more than 30% are in families with members who are elderly or have disabilities | almost 26% are in working families |
| NATIONALLY | more than 68% of SNAP participants are in families with children | more than 30% are in families with members who are elderly or have disabilities | more than 44% are in working families |

Source: CBPP analysis of data from USDA Food and Nutrition Service, FY 2015

In the District, [one in seven households are food insecure](#), meaning that people cannot access adequate and safe food, and [one in five](#) residents receive SNAP benefits. SNAP benefits help many DC students stay full and focused at school. Families with children make up more than 58 percent of SNAP participants in DC.

Food insecurity hurts students’ success at school academically and socially—contributing to worse attentiveness, social skills, and classroom behavior. The long gaps between the distribution of SNAP benefits, leading to periods when food at home is scarce, makes it hard for students of lower incomes to [compete](#) with their higher income peers. The impact of food insecurity on academic performance is as great as the gender performance gap in mathematics, and as much as attending a school with significantly more low-income students.

Food insecurity also widens the opportunity and achievement gaps between white students and students of color. Nationally, Black and Latinx families [struggle the most to afford food](#). In the South Carolina [study](#), the negative impact of SNAP benefits running out was most significant for Black boys' test scores.

This means that SNAP benefits help students succeed and focus on their lessons and not their stomachs. Ensuring that SNAP works well for students benefits everyone, by producing a well-educated workforce for the future.

The South Carolina study shows just how important SNAP is to curb food insecurity and promote success in school for children in low-income families. The District could help students cope with their families' inevitable running out of SNAP benefits through creative strategies, like boosting caloric levels of breakfast and lunch menus around major exam dates.