

100 FOOD INSECURE CHILDREN IN BALTIMORE ARE EATING HEALTHIER, RISING ABOVE STIGMAS & STRENGTHENING FAMILY TIES

A Pilot Program from TasteWise Kids & Weekend Backpacks



BACKGROUND

Since 2015, Weekend Backpacks and TasteWise Kids have worked separately to improve the lives and health of Baltimore City school children.

Weekend Backpacks provides food-filled bags for food-insecure children to use on weekends and during breaks when they have no access to school meal programs. Weekend Backpacks has never believed in the notion that “any food is better than no food,” and they strive to include healthy options in every bag they pack. Each backpack contains 18 meals – enough to

feed a family of four for two days. The heart of Weekend Backpacks is to curb childhood hunger and prevent the physical, intellectual, and emotional delays that result from it. Since its inception in 2015, Weekend Backpacks has delivered over 2 million meals to children across 43 Baltimore City schools.

TasteWise Kids provides Baltimore City children with fun, hands-on food literacy activities. These activities teach children new ways to think about food, help them explore their sense of taste, and show them that “good-for-you” food is good-tasting food. The heart of TasteWise Kids is to see a reduction in obesity, diabetes, and other illnesses linked to unhealthy eating habits formed during childhood. Each year, over 3,000 kids participate in TasteWise Kids’ programs. Eighty five percent (85%) of those involved try at least one new food, and over 1,200 families cook together with a take-home salad kit.



Now, TasteWise Kids and Weekend Backpacks are piloting an initiative to combat child hunger and child obesity in tandem.

Although these issues may seem unrelated — one stems from too little food, the other from too much — both are symptoms of food insecurity.

THE NEED

When you think of food insecurity, you might imagine a single mother who isn't able to afford enough food to feed her children and herself for an entire week. Or, you might imagine a child whose parents have to alternate between buying groceries and paying rent. You might even imagine one of the 3,000 homeless schoolchildren in Baltimore who don't know where their next meal is coming from.

For many children, this is exactly what food insecurity looks like. Their families struggle to afford food, their bellies go empty, and their physical, mental, and behavioral health suffer.

But there's another side to food insecurity that is often overlooked.

While some food-insecure children live without access to enough food, others live without access to enough healthy foods. So, although their tummies are full, they aren't getting the nourishment they need to properly fuel their bodies. Instead, their diets are full of low-cost, high-calorie foods that lead to childhood obesity, diabetes, early hypertension, and other negative health outcomes.

Children facing this type of food insecurity often live in low-income areas where nutritious food is hard to come by — either because grocery stores are too sparse or because healthy food is too expensive. Once known as food deserts, these areas are now referred to as healthy food priority areas. And they are directly linked to food insecurity in Baltimore City.



Food Insecurity by the Numbers

- About **146,000 people** in Baltimore City live in healthy food priority areas (food deserts).
- Over **40,000** of those living in food deserts are children.
- In 2022, food insecurity in Baltimore **increased from 18% to 21.7%** as a result of the pandemic.
- **1 in 4 people** in Baltimore City is food insecure.



THE NEED

For the past three months, TasteWise Kids has partnered with Weekend Backpacks to provide food literacy activity kits alongside the weekend food bags. These kits contain fun activities like coloring sheets, word puzzles, crafts, and games designed to make learning about food exciting. Every kit includes all the supplies necessary to do the activities - from coloring pencils to Play-Doh - to ensure every family can fully and equally participate.

The goal of these activities is to bring students and their families one step closer to food literacy, so they can start to understand where the food in their bags comes from, how it fuels their bodies, and how to use it.

“Food isn’t often used if you don’t know what to do with it,” says Salina Duncan, Program Manager at TasteWise Kids. She explains that when families are unfamiliar with a food in their backpack, they’re less likely to use it. But the literacy activities can help them build knowledge around the foods they receive, so they aren’t afraid to try them.

Many of the activities also include conversation starters to help families connect and build community around food.

The joint initiative is currently being piloted for 100 food-insecure children in two Baltimore City public schools: Edgewood Elementary and Mary Rodman Elementary.

RESULTS

Hungry Bodies *and* Hungry Minds Are Being Fed

According to Ghorpu Whoa-tee, the Community Coordinator for Edgewood Elementary, many food-insecure families in the school appreciate the food from Weekend Backpacks.

"Some parents are very grateful for it," she says. "There is a great auntie of one of the students who faithfully waits for those bags every Friday. And the kids love the bags. They love the fruit cups. Those are [one of] the things they take out to snack on immediately after school."

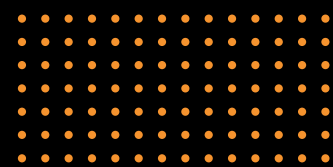
The kids even tell Whoa-tee about recipes they create with the food from the bags.

"They love the diced tomatoes because that helps them make chili. They make sausage and egg omelets. They love the mac-n-cheese and they express using that to be creative - making a mac-n-cheese and sausage meal."

Lashaun Allen, Community Coordinator at Mary Rodman Elementary, says her students love many of the food options as well. But that's not all her students want. Many of her students are hungry to read.

"We have literacy nights. Many of these kids want more - bigger books, more activities," says Allen.

The food literacy kits give them that. The kids are coming to school saying they read to their families at dinner. And some of the kids are using the food literacy activities to read to their friends when they get the backpacks.



Children Are Swapping Stigmas for Excitement

Before the addition of the activity kits, some children at Mary Rodman Elementary School were hesitant to take a backpack for fear of what their peers might think.

But once the kids saw that fun activities came with the bags, that changed.

"The TasteWise Kids activities have amplified the Weekend Backpacks for the kids," says Allen. "Now they dive into the bags and get excited about it."

Family Engagement is Increasing

"This program is allowing our students to open the doors for more engagement with their parents," says Whoa-tee, who explains that being able to sit with parents and do an activity for just five to 20 minutes gives these students attention that they often yearn for.

Allen sees this as an enormous benefit as well.

"A lot of our parents work 75 to 80 hours a week," she says. "So someone might look at the TasteWise activities and say, 'Oh, that's just an activity book.' But something as small as an activity book might help a child bond with their parent on a Friday or Saturday night when they don't typically see them during the week."

Spanish-Speaking Families Feel Included

All TasteWise Kids activities are written in English and Spanish, which is helping to foster a sense of belonging for Spanish-speaking families.

"Because we don't have translators or interpreters here to translate things [for our Spanish-speaking families], it's hard to ensure they are always included," says Allen.

Since these materials are bilingual, Spanish-speaking parents can do the activities with their children and have a sense of belonging.

WAYS YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

These kids couldn't be reached without donors like you. By supporting these initiatives, you can help get healthy food into the hands of food-insecure children and their families in Baltimore. Plus you can help ensure they get the educational materials they need to understand why healthy food is important and to learn how to prepare the food they get.

Here are several ways to get involved. You can learn more by visiting tastewisekids.org



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