

More NJ Children Relying on Free Lunches Because of the Recession - Even in Suburbs

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More New Jersey children are relying on free school lunches because of the recession — even in some comfortable suburbs where people might not realize so many neighbors need help just to eat.

Last year, 20,061 Bergen County students got free and reduced-price lunches, a 17 percent rise in three years.

In Passaic County, 41,176 students depended on them, a 15 percent increase over the same period. Those jumps came even as enrollment held roughly steady.

Free lunches have long been a staple for families stuck in chronic poverty. Now they're also a boon to those who suddenly qualify because their income dropped as parents lost jobs, took pay cuts or were reduced to part-time hours. In such traditionally middle-class enclaves as Clifton and Bergenfield, about one-third of the children get subsidized lunch. So do one-quarter of the students in Teaneck.

The number of American children who ate free or reduced-price lunches hit more than 19 million nationwide last year — including almost 417,000 in New Jersey.

“It’s a critical part of the safety net for families in an economic downturn like this,” said Cecilia Zalkin, executive director of the Association for Children of New Jersey. “Hungry children can’t learn.”

The rising demand for free lunch at school, just like the growing lines at food pantries, is a revealing reflection of families’ day-to-day financial strains. Census data shows about 250,000 New Jersey children — or one in eight — lived in poverty last year. Overall, 9.2 percent of New Jerseyans struggled below the poverty line last year, up from 6.8 percent in 2005, before the economy soured.

In North Jersey, Clifton saw one of the biggest increases in requests for lunch aid. This year 37 percent of Clifton students got lunch benefits, up from 21 percent of students four years ago.

One Clifton mother, who recently lost her job running a local business, expressed deep gratitude for help feeding her two little girls. Now she pays a total of \$12 a month for their lunches.

“I just managed the cutoff,” she said outside elementary School 2 on a blustery afternoon. “Thank God. It was a lifesaver.”

In Bergenfield, 965 children — or nearly one out of three students — qualify for free or reduced-

priced lunch this year. That's up 13 percent from last year. Superintendent Michael Kuchar suspects that's partly because last spring, the district rolled out an electronic system for buying lunch that masks who qualifies.

"Yes, the economy is down, but it's been down for quite a bit," Kuchar said. "Our jump is really following the implementation of the payment system. Listen, we're dealing with children, and children — I don't care how bravado they may be — they care what other people think of them. Their pride and egos matter."

Even affluent districts have seen more families apply. In Tenafly, 48 students get lunch aid this year, up from 19 in 2005-06. That's a small fraction of the 3,500 students, but a significant hike in a town known for its elegant homes and broad lawns.

Tenafly High School Principal Theodora Kontogiannis said she wasn't surprised. "The economy has impacted everyone," she said.

Cafeteria cashiers were introduced to students in the program early on so they would recognize who gets benefits. "This way, every day when they go through the lunch line, they don't have to produce anything," she said. "It's done very quietly so as not to embarrass anyone."

Some of the biggest percentage increases in students getting lunch aid came in districts with a high proportion of lower-middle-income residents, such as Carlstadt, Hawthorne, South Hackensack and Woodland Park. Even some middle-income areas, such as Fair Lawn and Bloomingdale, saw growth.

As the group of children getting free lunch has grown, some say any sense of stigma has faded. Even so, some people interviewed for this article were reluctant to give names.

"You go on the same line as everyone else and you can eat what they do," said one seventh-grader at Woodrow Wilson Middle School in Clifton, who has gotten free lunches since October. "My dad used to give me \$2 a day and it added up to a lot of money," she said. "It's a big savings."

To qualify for free lunch, a family of four must have an income less than \$28,665. For reduced-price lunch, such a household must make less than \$40,793. Child advocates have long argued that using federal thresholds for such entitlements is unfair to families in New Jersey, where housing prices and other costs of living are higher than in most areas. There have been debates in Congress recently over whether to reset the federal poverty rate.

Experts cite several more reasons why the school lunch numbers have gone up.

First, the U.S. Food and Nutrition Service recently pushed states to streamline their red tape so that children who get food stamps are automatically entitled to free lunch. Food stamp use has increased dramatically during the recession.

Further, New Jersey's new school funding formula uses the number of children on free lunch as

a trigger for school aid tied to disadvantaged students. “Districts have become far more conscientious and aggressive about enrolling eligible children because now it impacts how much funding they get from the state,” said Zalkind of ACNJ.

Robert Holster, superintendent of schools for the city of Passaic, cited simple compassion. “We try our best [to sign up families] because I recognize that for some children this might be the only hot meal they get for the day.”

While the most recent data from the state Department of Education comes from 2008-09, several districts that provided their own figures for the current school year showed the rising reliance on subsidies continues.

Some North Jersey districts, however, bucked the trend in recent years, including Allendale, Midland Park and Rutherford.

Districts get reimbursed for giving lunch to the poor. The federal government sent \$169 million to New Jersey districts and the state chipped in \$8.3 million for these meals. In many districts, students who pay full price cover any unreimbursed expenses for providing free lunch to their less fortunate peers.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture wants to enroll more students in the National School Lunch Program – including those who pay – because it says it provides healthier meals than children usually eat. The department says school lunch participants consume more milk, meat and beans. Among poor children, school lunch participants had higher scores for eating fruit.

Last year, 31 million children joined the National School Lunch Program. Of those, 52 percent ate for free, 10 percent paid up to 40 cents per lunch and the rest paid for a low-cost, nutritional meal. High-poverty districts serve free breakfast, too.

Meanwhile, plenty of teachers and nurses dig into their pockets to run their own informal snack pantries, as well. Anna Lalumia, a nurse at the Maywood Avenue School in Maywood, says she always buys Saltines for hungry middle schoolers. She doesn’t know if their families lacked the money, time or desire to have breakfast.

“You don’t want them to starve,” she said simply. “Your brain needs food to work well.”