

OVERCOMING FOOD INSECURITY FOR TEXAS KIDS

| BY FRANCI ROGERS



FOOD INSECURITY is a problem for **ONE IN FOUR** Texas children, meaning a quarter of the youth population does not know if they will have food for their next meal. Texas has the second highest food insecurity rate among children in the nation.



FOR THESE 2.8 MILLION CHILDREN,

the school year is a time when they are less vulnerable. Five days a week, they can receive free or reduced school lunches. But weekends and holidays can be periods of difficulty. Summer break can be especially stressful, meaning months of food insecurity and poor nutrition. Summer meal programs are popping up across the country, but as few as 12 percent of eligible children receive meals through the programs.

"We set out to learn why such a low percentage of children are reached by these programs in Texas, and Texas is one of the worst," said Dr. Jeff Tanner, Jr., professor of Marketing and director of Baylor's innovative Business Collaboratory. "It's a challenge. The target group is not a homogeneous population, and it won't be a homogeneous set of solutions."

Tanner is studying child nutrition programs as part of a \$2 million, two-year renewable grant from the Walmart Foundation. Collaborating with the Texas Hunger Initiative, based in the Baylor School of Social Work, researchers across disciplines are looking at ways to improve the effectiveness of programs that feed children.

"Part of the grant is that we look at these programs from a business perspective, to employ business practices and principles to create effective models," said Tanner.

In the first year of the grant, researchers observed many programs in Texas in an attempt to identify the ones that are successful. Anthony Independent School District was one that stood out from the rest.

"About 50 percent of the eligible youth in their area, and even children from outside their area, are being served by their summer meal program," Tanner said. "We've spent a lot of time observing them to see what makes them successful."

In order to better understand summer meal program effectiveness, researchers broke the research into two studies: a sponsor study, which looked at supply, and a family study, which looked at demand.

Through site visits, focus groups and other research methods, they looked at how sponsors (like a school district) and sites (like a local church) operate.

"What we identified were best practices," said Tanner. "What we found were four areas: supply chain, operations, promotion and community engagement. In the programs that had a reputation for excellence, it was usually based on one of those four factors."

When they broke down individual components, some things became apparent. For example, a closer look at the supply chain revealed some universal truths.

"We found that not all vendors are created equal," Tanner said. "The supply chain is where one of the major struggles is. The food has to be nutritious, but if it tastes bad, kids won't eat it."

Pizza that is made healthier by having a whole-wheat crust and low-fat cheese, Tanner used as an example, tends to be lacking in flavor. And kids know it.

"But it doesn't all taste bad," he said. "One agency tested seven different vendors and found that one is quite good. Those programs that take the time to do that kind of testing can find products that are good."

And when they do that, Tanner said, word will get out.

"When programs realize that it's not about managing cost, but about creating revenue, that's when things change," he said. "When you have high quality food that tastes good, kids want to eat it. Then you have a school lunch program where the kids who do pay for their lunches, choose your school lunches. Then it becomes revenue based."

Leander ISD, Tanner said, is doing a great job in that area.

"They hired restaurant managers to run their programs," he said. "They treat the families like patrons, and they are getting satisfied customers. The kids who don't get it for free are willing to pay for it."

Operations is another area researchers studied. Here, planning plays a key role. Successful summer programs start planning as early as February, they found. They also set goals for things like average meal costs and labor, and then carefully monitor their sites to assure goals are being met.

Site selection is another key component.

"You have to go where kids are," Tanner said. "You need to go into the neighborhoods and find out where the activities like bookmobiles, athletic programs and vacation bible schools are. Find out where the water parks and recreation programs are. That's where kids will be in the summers."

Site selectors must take into consideration who the volunteers will be and who will speak out for and promote the program at the site.

Volunteer participation is a part of the community engagement component. To have proper community engagement, there has to be participation from the site (volunteers, activity partners, etc.) and overall community awareness.

Promotions are also closely tied to engagement.

"This is another area where we can look to local businesses to see what works for them and use it," Tanner said. Signage, vehicle wraps, door hangers, posters and even flags have been used to promote summer nutrition programs.

"Our Baylor students are playing a big role in figuring out promotions," he said. "A recent graduate is doing some design work, and another two students created and launched this summer's promotional campaign. One student even came up with the idea of chalking sidewalks, like they do on the college campus to promote events."

Promotion is also important when it comes to reaching out to families.

"We are testing two sets of messages; one to the parents and one to the kids," Tanner said. And although they are crafted differently, the messages of both are that summer feeding is important, and the food is good and nutritious.

When all four of the best practice components come together, Tanner said there is just one thing left to make the program a success.

"The key is passionate leadership," he said. "You have to have leadership that is committed to feeding children. In Anthony ISD, that's a child nutrition administrator who is willing to go out and get support from schools and the community. And that's why their numbers are higher than most."

Currently, in the second year of the grant, researchers are focusing on tool development and pilot programs.

If the grant, which is eligible for renewal, is extended another two years, Tanner said he hopes to start the new cycle with field testing, and finally dissemination and implementation.

"In the long run, our goal is pretty simple," said Tanner. "We want to feed more kids."

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