

## **The Food Bank of Central and Northeast Missouri and Columbia Public Schools**

In 2005, one hungry student unknowingly put in motion a domino effect that now assists 7,500 kids from more than 150 schools in a 32-county area on a weekly basis. Some 1,400 of those assisted are Columbia Public Schools students. When the relationship between CPS and The Food Bank started 20 years ago, it was limited to one school in Columbia. But when this one student resisted going home after school because there was no food in the house, the dynamic forever changed.

The Buddy Pack program was created, which provides students in need with ready-to-eat meals for weekends and holidays. These bags contain kid-friendly nutritional items that often serve as the only food a child receives while not at school. School personnel identify hungry children and send them home with a backpack full of food on Fridays or the day before a school break, oftentimes with extra food to help feed brothers and sisters at home. Once the bag is empty, the student returns it and the process is repeated, as long as necessary.

“Unfortunately, one in five children in our area experience food insecurity,” says The Food Bank’s Executive Director Lindsay Young Lopez. “It’s a pervasive epidemic. We hear back from some students who are hopeful and thankful for the Buddy Pack program, and we get others who paint a pretty dire picture. These packs often are the only food they’ll get to eat all weekend.”

The Food Bank also engineers the Summer Feeding Program, which helps fill the gaps for children who rely on subsidized meals during the school year. Throughout the summer, lunch is hosted at sites with high poverty rates to ensure children can enjoy weekday lunches at parks, churches, schools and other central locations.

The partnership between CPS and The Food Bank is two-sided: in addition to helping those in need, numerous schools and student groups in the district volunteer their time at The Food Bank, which teaches students the importance of community service, builds team and school spirit, and helps the organization save on operating costs. Schools also participate in fundraising and food drives.

“We experience a downturn in volunteerism during the summer, and it’s a direct correlation to kids being out of school,” Young Lopez says. “Their participation is instrumental in what we do. Athletic teams and school groups get an introduction to community service, and it helps build camaraderie. They help us help others.”