

Closing the Nutrition Gap

Research shows proper nutrition is key to boosting academic achievement among low-income students

By [Kevin Hart](#)

Napoleon famously declared that an army marches on its stomach. So does an army of students, according to a growing body of research – and keeping students well fed is one of the keys to closing achievement gaps.

During a recent address to the NEA Board of Directors, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan discussed a program he started during his tenure as CEO of Chicago schools, where low-income students would be sent home each weekend with a bag of groceries. Otherwise, he reasoned, the students might not eat a solid meal until Monday – and it's hard to focus on school when you're worried about your next meal.

And, in fact, poor nutrition creates major learning challenges for many low-income students – in some cases, those challenges begin even before the students are born.

According to a report released this year by the [Educational Testing Service](#), students between the ages of 4 and 17 who were born underweight were more likely to be enrolled in special classes, repeat a grade or struggle in school. That same report found that low-income students given a free breakfast at school gained three percentile points on standardized tests and had improved attendance.

During a recent discussion on [NEA Today's Facebook page](#), educators from across the country said it's not just the quantity of food they'd like to see improved – they're also focusing on quality. Educators spoke of a “nutrition gap,” where wealthier schools often have access to more fresh fruits and vegetables, while some lower-income schools relied more on junk foods.

Current school lunch guidelines set a minimum number of calories, but [a 2009 report from the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies](#) recommended setting an upper limit as well, to minimize the use of junk food and to help combat childhood obesity. That same report recommended new guidelines that would emphasize more fruits, vegetables and whole grains in school lunch menus.

School nutrition has been a major emphasis for both NEA and the Obama Administration. First Lady Michelle Obama visited a Virginia elementary school this month to discuss good nutrition. NEA President Dennis Van Roekel and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan held two separate meetings in the past month with Education Support Professionals from Rhode Island and Virginia where school meals, among other important issues, were discussed.

During a visit to John Adams Elementary School in Alexandria, VA, on November 18, celebrated as ESP Day during American Education Week, Van Roekel and Duncan even donned chef's hats and handed out healthy lunches to school children.