

# Food for Thought

## Backpack program helps curb childhood hunger

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COLUMBUS — In just a matter of minutes, the volunteers filled dozens of bags with food.

What only took a moment of their time will provide a weekend's worth of nourishment for local school children through the Food for Thought Program.

Since the start of the second semester, 100 elementary students at Emerson and West Park schools have been receiving backpacks full of food that they take home on the weekend. The program is designed to help curb childhood hunger in the community.

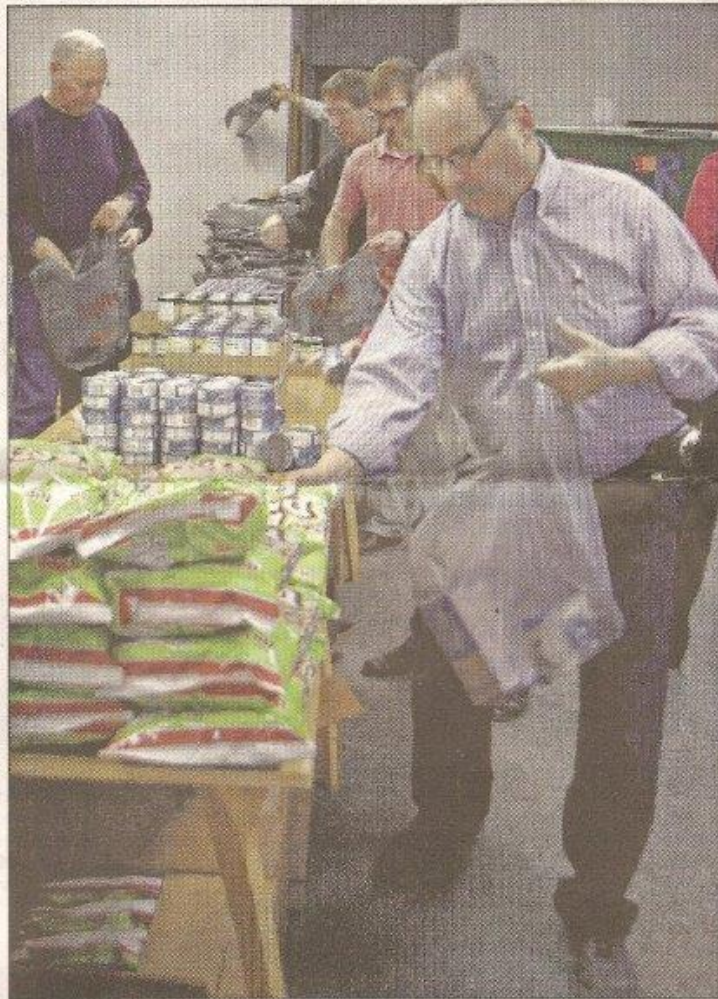
Columbus has a summer lunch program that offers free meals to children. But Food for Thought helps combat hunger by giving children food during the school year.

With about half of the students in public school in Columbus receiving free or reduced lunch, it was a good fit, said Jason Rosenkranz, coordinator of the program.

Food for Thought is in other urban areas, like Polk County, where Rosenkranz established it four years ago. He said since then the program has expanded to rural areas like Columbus.

"The need has long been

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Telegram photo by Julie Blum

Rod Supencheck puts cereal in a bag for the Food for Thought Program, which provides a backpack of food for students in need on the weekend. This is the first year the program has been offered in Columbus. About 100 students at Emerson and West Park elementary schools receive food. Centennial and North Park schools will be added next month.

here," he said.

Rosenkranz said about a third of all students receiving free and reduced lunch experience "food insecurity" at some point at home, meaning they will lack access to food. They could show up for school not having a full meal all weekend.

Most free and reduced students eat breakfast and lunch at school during the week, ensuring they are getting two nutritious meals a day. But it is the weekend that can be a problem, Rosenkranz said. That is

where the program steps in. It helps bridge the gap between the school week and the weekend.

Through the program, students that are at-risk are identified by school administration. Backpacks full of easy-to-prepare food are stuffed and delivered by volunteers to the school. Staff there give them out to participating students on the last day of the school week to ensure confidentiality.

The backpacks contain enough food for more than one child. At the end of

the weekend, students are to return the backpacks to school.

A menu rotation is used that features six different options. For example, one week a backpack is filled with spaghetti, sauce, canned corn, oats/fruit breakfast bars, fresh apples and a voucher for milk.

The next week the menu includes peanut butter, jelly, cereal, apple juice, fresh bananas and a voucher for bread. The vouchers can be used at local grocery stores.

The program is privately

funded, with food donations coming from Hy-Vee, Super Saver, churches and individuals.

Rosenkranz said they also will be receiving food from the Food Bank for the Heartland in Omaha to help meet the needs for the remaining weeks of the program.

The number of students participating will more than double next month when Centennial and North Park elementary schools are added. Hopes are to continue to expand the program to other schools and have it

be totally supported through community resources, Rosenkranz said.

To help raise donations for the program, a soapbox derby will be held Aug. 17 at Powerhouse Park on Third Avenue. The event is open to anyone 8 years old and older. All proceeds will be used to support Food for Thought.

Questions about the derby or the Food for Thought Program can be directed to Rod Supencheck at [rjsupen@frontiernet.net](mailto:rjsupen@frontiernet.net) or Rosenkranz at [jasonandkellie@windstream.net](mailto:jasonandkellie@windstream.net).