

Close to Home

By

William A. Palmer, Jr.

It was one of those winter days when the weather forecasters didn't get it quite right. Children had arrived at school before the snow began to come down hard, and administrators were scrambling to get them back home safely. In the midst of general excitement about a shortened school day, one little boy sat at his desk with tears running down his cheeks. His teacher asked him why he was crying. In a faltering voice he admitted the cause of his upset: the closing of school meant he would get no lunch that day.

The teacher who told me this story also related a happy outcome for this particular child. The boy's teacher and helpful cafeteria workers saw to it that he was sent home with lunch. We may wish to think that this was an isolated incident and that hungry children are to be found only in places like Africa or Asia. But teachers, social workers, and clergy will testify that chronically malnourished children are closer than we think.

In Middlesex County, where thirty-eight percent of the schoolchildren are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, a group of concerned citizens launched "Backpack Buddies" this past September. This program is designed to address the nutritional needs of schoolchildren from preschool through the third grade. Every week, volunteers from Hands Across Middlesex gather at the Cryer Center in Locust Hill to fill 400 backpacks that go home from school with children

on Fridays. Each backpack contains foods to supplement the child's diet throughout the weekend. On Tuesdays, the children return the backpacks to school and the cycle is repeated. During the winter holidays, when schools were closed, two boxes of nonperishable food items were provided for each child. Families picked up the food at the Cryer Center or at a local church.

Most of the food items in the backpacks are the kinds of things kids can prepare for themselves, such as cereal or macaroni and cheese. About half the food comes to the program through the Central Virginia Food Bank; the other half comes from local sources. Dave Cryer, a community leader active in the program, estimates that \$200 provides a year's worth supplementary nutrition for a child. Unlike similar programs that operate in other parts of the country, the Middlesex Backpack Buddies program provides year-round assistance for the 400 children being served.

Jackie Wake, Family Services Coordinator for the Parent-Child Development Corporation, is a resident of Middlesex County who has been gratified by community support for the Backpack Buddies program. "Churches, Kiwanis, Rotary, businesses, and individuals all have stepped forward to fund this program," she says. "It's been a special blessing for our Head Start families in Middlesex." When the recent snowstorm made it impossible for many of the families served by Backpack Buddies to get to the locations where the boxes of holiday food were supposed to be picked up, Jackie and Karen Bridges, the Head Start Family Educator for Middlesex and Mathews counties, braved the weather to deliver food boxes directly to the homes of Head

Start children. “The car was spinning sideways,” Jackie admitted, “but the food made it to most of the homes.”

If hunger is closer than we may think, we can be thankful for concerned neighbors and community leaders who also are close to home. Well-nourished children are better able to learn, and students who have received “head starts” will be well on their way to success in school and in life.

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