

# Hunger in Our Midst: Civic Learning in the Context of Difficult Issues

Jennifer Hauver and Glenda Shealey-Griffiths

One in four children in the state of Georgia is food insecure.<sup>1</sup> In our city of Athens, 60 miles northeast of Atlanta, the number approaches one in three. More than 33 percent of residents have significantly limited access to healthy foods, living in areas of the city that the USDA has identified as food deserts.<sup>2</sup> Insufficient income and lack of access to healthy foods puts children at greater risk of illnesses such as diabetes and asthma. From day to day, they are more likely to exhibit fatigue and poor concentration making it difficult to attend fully to academic tasks.<sup>3</sup>

The powerful role hunger plays in our community is evidenced by the recent determination by the federal government that the local school district meets the USDA's requirements for high-poverty schools. As a result, all students in our district receive free breakfast and lunch daily. It is evidenced by the extensive Food-2-Kids program, which delivers bags of food to children on Fridays to sustain them through the weekend. It is

evidenced by a growing network of charitable and faith-based organizations working together to supplement federal subsidies.

Hunger is everywhere—but it is hard to see. Adults, whether or not we wrestle with hunger ourselves, are not inclined to speak about it. In a culture that prizes rugged individualism—overcoming obstacles, pulling oneself up by the bootstraps—hunger is something to be ashamed of. It is a personal failing; revealing a lack of determination and perseverance. Shame relegates hunger to the dark corners of our public consciousness.

## Degrees of Food Security and Insecurity:

USDA's categories describe four levels of food security

### Food Security

- 1. High food security** (old label=Food security): No reported indications of food-access problems or limitations.
- 2. Marginal food security** (old label=Food security): one or two reported indications—typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house. Little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake.

### Food Insecurity

- 3. Low food security** (old label=Food insecurity without hunger): Reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake.
- 4. Very low food security** (old label=Food insecurity with hunger): Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.

**SOURCE:** [www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx](http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx)

## Food Deserts

The USDA defines “food deserts” as parts of the country void of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely a result of a lack of grocery stores, farmers’ markets, and healthy food providers.

While food deserts are often short on whole food providers, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, they are heavy on local quickie marts that provide a wealth of processed, sugar-, and fat-laden foods that are known contributors to our nation’s obesity epidemic.

The Food Desert Locator ([www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert](http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert)) is a part of the “Let’s Move” initiative to end childhood obesity.

**SOURCE:** [americannutritionassociation.org/newsletter/usda-defines-food-deserts](http://americannutritionassociation.org/newsletter/usda-defines-food-deserts)



Sadly, silence on the issue of hunger has a number of grave consequences for America's children, not the least of which are civic in nature. When adults are silent on the topic of hunger, children learn to be too. If they are hungry, they assume they must deserve to be. If they are not, hunger is not their problem. Silence bolsters ignorance, leaving us with little sense of responsibility for one another, and little felt need to take action.

### **“Hunger in Our Midst!” A Topic for an Enrichment Cluster**

The impact of hunger in the lives of children we teach—coupled with its seeming invisibility—is what inspired us to put it squarely on the table for examination. Enrichment clusters were a recent addition to the school's programming—weekly gatherings of groups of students from different grades “who share common interests that bind them together and a willingness to work cooperatively within a relatively unstructured learning environment.”<sup>4</sup> Enrichment clusters are grounded in a commitment to authentic learning around real-life problems that (1) are of genuine interest to the group's members; (2) the members wish to act upon; (3) are directed toward a real audience; and (4) lack an existing or clear solution.<sup>5</sup> Thus, enrichment clusters evolve in light of shared interest and a common desire to accomplish a goal.

At our school (where Jennifer is a professor-in-residence and Glenda a third grade teacher), enrichment clusters meet for one hour weekly over the course of ten weeks. Each semester (fall and spring), teachers, parents, and community members team up to offer cluster topics from which children choose. Once children are assigned to a topic, each cluster's specific focus and activities are designed collaboratively by students and facilitating adults. Topics range from the Chinese language, to dance, to gaming, to creative writing. The cluster we offered was called “Hunger in Our Midst!” and was open to children grades 1–5. Twelve students signed up spanning all five grade levels. They were representative of the larger school population in terms of race, gender, and socio-economic level.<sup>6</sup>

Because we share a deep commitment to growing students' understanding of themselves as members of communities within and outside of school walls, we have often included community engagement activities in the classroom while stressing their pedagogical aspect: to help our students examine issues facing their communities and to develop the skills necessary to address them.<sup>7</sup>

We agree with the statement that competent and responsible citizens are informed and thoughtful, participatory, action-oriented, and concerned for the rights and welfare of others.<sup>8</sup> We draw inspiration from a passage in the C3 Framework:

“People demonstrate civic engagement when they address public problems individually and collaboratively and when they maintain, strengthen, and improve communities and societies... In civics, students learn to contribute appropriately to public processes and **discussions of real issues** [emphasis added]... They will also learn civic practices such as voting,



**Child in California - Alameda County Community Food Bank**  
A young girl stands in front of food donations in Oakland, CA. The California Association of Food Banks project that received U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) Federal-State Marketing Improvement program grants in 2006 and 2009 provided a new model for other states seeking to provide a new market for produce growers while meeting a vital food need.

Photo courtesy Alameda County Community Food Bank. www.flickr.com/photos/usdagov/8048265680

volunteering, jury service, and joining with others to improve society. Civics enables students not only to study how others participate, but also to practice participating and taking informed action themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

Our commitments as civic educators informed the design of our cluster. In line with the philosophy of enrichment clusters, we wanted students to determine the specific direction and form our inquiry would take. Yet we entered our ten-week session with specific goals in mind: (1) to examine hunger as it is present in our community; (2) to connect with and learn from local hunger activists; and (3) to take collective action. In what follows, we describe the ways in which our cluster unfolded, and reflect on the civic learning that resulted.

### **“Unpacking” the Issue**

During our opening session, students worked hard to get to know one another, talking about why each of them had chosen to join this group to study the topic of hunger. They shared what they hoped to learn from and accomplish in our cluster. We (Glenda and Jennifer) led some word association games with “hunger,” “healthy,” “home,” in order to gauge one another's understandings of these concepts.

From these word association activities, it became apparent that members of the group had varying experiences with and understandings of hunger. Associations for this word in particular included words such as “snack,” “Taco Bell,” “tired,” and “starving.” Maggie, a third grader, said that when she gets home from school, she feels very hungry and goes straight to the snack drawer in her kitchen.<sup>10</sup> Jackson, a first grader, said that sometimes he doesn't eat breakfast and he has a hard time staying awake in class until lunchtime.

We asked students to consider that people may have different understandings of words they use to describe feeling hungry. “Starving” for instance, is a word some people use to describe feeling hungry just before lunchtime, even though they’ve had breakfast. For others, a lack of food means that they may quite literally be starving their bodies of nutrients they need to live.

In week two, we introduced the term “food security” to the students and talked about the importance of having enough food, but also having enough healthy food. The students viewed some pictures of people (of varying age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and context), and we asked, “Who is hungry?” We aimed to disrupt the idea that hungry people are easily identifiable, revealing to students that one out of four children in Georgia is hungry, meaning they do not have enough food to eat each day. Students then cut out people chains and colored them, making one of the four different to remind us about hunger in our state.

### **Learning about Our Neighbors and Classmates**

This activity was particularly powerful in its ability to challenge some students’ understanding that hunger existed “out there.” As we talked about the idea that one in four children in Georgia was hungry, children began to ask if this was true even of our school. Hearing that the number was closer to one in three at their own school, students began to look around the room and to think about their friends sitting in other classrooms. Ben said, “That means some of our friends are probably hungry!” Liza added, “Even some of our friends in here.” It was then that Jackson quietly offered that he goes to the Food Bank each Wednesday with his grandmother to get food because they cannot afford to buy enough for the family. The room grew quiet, and then in a quiet voice, Angel asked, “What is that like?” Jackson replied that it was a little embarrassing. He always hoped no one saw him. But sometimes he saw other people from the school there, and so he knew others needed help too. The students let this sink in, and their desire to address the issue grew in fervor.

Together, members of the group decided that when they gathered each week, they would share a healthy snack and even try some new foods. The children wanted to learn more about what made a food “healthy,” so on week three, we looked together at food labels, discussing ingredients and nutritional information. Students cut out healthy food pictures from magazines and newspapers to make collages we hung around the school. Some of the older students decided to review the school lunch menu, highlighting healthy choices, which was information they could share with their classes. With some understanding of the importance of having access to food (and especially healthy food), and with growing awareness that not all people in our community had such access, the group activities turned toward researching organizations, setting goals, and taking action.

### **Connecting with Other Concerned Citizens**

The group took a field trip to UGArden ([ugarden.uga.edu](http://ugarden.uga.edu)), a project of the College of Agricultural and Environmental

Sciences at the University of Georgia. We toured the vegetable garden, the mushroom garden, the bee hives, and the greenhouses to learn about the services provided by this community partner. We learned that most of this garden’s harvest is taken to the food bank, although one section is farmed and harvested by members of the community who do not own a yard where they could grow food. The garden is also a site for educating the community about sustainability.

Some of the children had experience gardening and had even been to a community garden before. Students asked many questions about which foods were growing, how to grow and care for the plants, and how children might participate. Our host was Farm Manager Johannah Biang, who explained the various crops, described the tending of a plant from seed to maturity, and encouraged students to think about growing their own food plants even with limited space and materials.

Next, we invited a spokesperson from one of three regional food banks to visit our group and teach us more about the community garden and the large number of people who rely on the food bank each week. “The visitor also shared with us that the food bank partners with the local chapter of the Junior League to provide bags of food to children in the district who may not have enough food to get through a weekend. Some of the children recalled seeing these bags given to classmates and were surprised to learn what they contained. They pointed out that the school also sometimes gave out winter coats and school supplies. Mia, a third grade student, said that she was proud that “in our school we try to take care of each other.”

### **Setting Goals and Taking Action**

We were now mid-way through our ten-week session, so we turned our attention to naming ways that we wanted to help. The children had many ideas, but we eventually settled on three areas of interest: giving, growing, and teaching:

- **Giving:** Some students wanted to cook healthy inexpensive meals that could be served at a homeless shelter in the city.
- **Growing:** Some students were interested in mimicking the service that the community garden provided, but on a small scale, growing a few vegetables in containers and donating the harvest to the food bank.
- **Teaching:** Some students wanted to teach other children and adults what they learned about hunger and about organizations in our community that are here to help.

With these goals in mind, we split into three teams and got to work.

Over the next few weeks, the Giving Team connected with a local organization, the Interfaith Hospitality Network, which shelters homeless families for a period of time as they try to get back on their feet.<sup>11</sup> We arranged to serve dinner at a local church one evening. We then prepared a menu and shopping list for the dinner (we had a small amount of money for our cluster to use, which was donated by the PTA). On the day of our

service, all members of the cluster gathered at Jennifer’s house to cook together. We then drove together (accompanied by a few of the children’s parents) to the church to serve the meal.

The Growing group invited UGArden Farm Manager Johannah Biang to help them start a small indoor garden. She brought with her a few used pots and some seeds. We purchased a bag of soil and borrowed gardening hand tools. The children planted beans and, over the remaining weeks, tended them, and watched them grow. They were not ready to harvest by the end of the ten-week session, so the students asked Johanna to take the plants back to the community garden to tend and donate to the food bank, which she happily agreed to do!

The Teaching group designed a tri-fold board for displaying at our enrichment cluster celebration at the end of the session, which would be attended by other students, families, and community members. The students called their presentation “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” and included photos from our projects as well as statistics about hunger in our community. They encouraged visitors to think about the impact of hunger on children’s ability to focus in school or have energy for sports. Alongside their board, they placed a laptop that showed a short video in which two of the cluster’s members explained what they had learned about hunger.

### Reflecting on the Experience

Not every school or teacher can set aside one hour a week for student-led inquiry into topics of their choosing. But this shouldn’t stop us from creating opportunities for children to engage in shared inquiry into real problems facing their

communities. Whether it is in the context of a social studies course, during an early morning class meeting, as lunchroom conversation, or in the in-between spaces of the school day, there is time for asking important questions and identifying shared concerns. Given our experience facilitating Hunger in Our Midst!, we believe there are good civic and pedagogical reasons to do so.

Competent citizens are informed and thoughtful, participatory, action-oriented, and concerned for the welfare of others. In the immediate space of our ten-week session, children demonstrated each of these civic qualities. We saw children grow in their understanding of a complex and difficult issue. We saw them wrestle with the impact of hunger in their state and community. Some students realized for the first time that their own friends and neighbors may very well be hungry. Those who struggled with hunger personally assumed leadership for projects, eager to educate and serve their peers and communities.

We marveled at how the children bridged previously intimidating barriers (grade-level, social group) to ask difficult questions of one another and to challenge one another. Such conversations led to a sense of shared responsibility and a desire to act. Students were genuinely committed to addressing the issues via the projects they undertook, and so their motivation and engagement were genuine too. They were excited to work with community members, and were proud of the impact they had, whether it was serving dinner, growing food, or raising others’ awareness. Sarah, a third grader, reflected, “When you know how important it is, you really want to do something real. And you want other people to do it too.”

## The School Breakfast and Lunch Programs

### 1. What is the School Breakfast Program?

The School Breakfast Program is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. It began as a pilot project in 1966, and was made permanent in 1975. The School Breakfast Program is administered at the Federal level by the Food and Nutrition Service. At the State level, the program is usually administered by State education agencies, which operate the program through agreements with local school food authorities in more than 78,000 schools and institutions.

### 2. How does the School Breakfast Program work?

The School Breakfast Program operates in the same manner as the National School Lunch Program. Generally, public or nonprofit private schools of high school grade or under and public or nonprofit private residential child care institutions may participate in the School Breakfast Program. School districts and independent schools that choose to take part in the breakfast program receive cash subsidies from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for each meal they serve. In return, they must serve breakfasts that meet Federal requirements, and they must offer free or reduced price breakfasts to eligible children.

### 3. How can we learn more about the National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs?

Read the whole Q&A at [www.fns.usda.gov/sbp/fact-sheet](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sbp/fact-sheet). For information on the operation of the School Breakfast Program and all the Child Nutrition Programs, contact the State agency in your state that is responsible for the administration of the programs. A listing of all such State agencies may be found at [www.fns.usda.gov/cnd](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd), select “Contacts”.

You may also contact us through the office of USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, Public Information Staff at 703-305-2286, or by mail at 3101 Park Center Drive, Room 914, Alexandria, Virginia 22302.

It is hard to know what such an experience means for students after it has come to a close. Much more longitudinal study is needed. While we were together, however, children's talk and action signaled to us that they learned valuable lessons about what can happen when we tackle real problems together. Our one regret is that in the weeks and months that followed the end of our cluster session, we did not work harder to keep the conversation going and to maintain our connections as a group. Students returned to their classrooms, we turned to other responsibilities, and the fast pace of the school day and year took over. Perhaps "hunger in our community" could also be a topic for the middle school curriculum, a vehicle by which students would learn about how citizens can work together with elected officials and government agencies to help to address a social problem. We remain committed to continuing the work we started, believing that civics is best learned when it is lived. 🌐

**Notes**

1. Georgia Food Bank Association. "Surprising Facts about Hunger in Georgia," [georgiafoodbankassociation.org/make-a-difference/surprising-facts-about-hunger-in-georgia](http://georgiafoodbankassociation.org/make-a-difference/surprising-facts-about-hunger-in-georgia).
2. US Department of Agriculture. ERS Food Access Research Atlas, [www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas.aspx](http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas.aspx).

3. American Academy of Pediatrics, "Poverty Threatens Health of U.S. Children," [www.aap.org/en-us](http://www.aap.org/en-us).
4. Renzulli Center for Creativity, Gifted Education, and Talent Development (Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut). "How to Develop an Authentic Enrichment Cluster," [gifted.uconn.edu/schoolwide-enrichment-model/authentic\\_enrichment\\_cluster](http://gifted.uconn.edu/schoolwide-enrichment-model/authentic_enrichment_cluster).
5. Renzulli Center.
6. The student population at the school is 46% white, 39% African American, 7% Asian, 5% Hispanic, and 3% multi-racial; and 64% socio-economically disadvantaged).
7. Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, "What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy," *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (2004): 237-269.
8. NCSS Position Statement, "Revitalizing Civic Learning in Our Schools," [www.socialstudies.org/positions/revitalizing\\_civic\\_learning](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/revitalizing_civic_learning).
9. NCSS, "College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards," (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), 31, [www.socialstudies.org/system/files/c3/C3-Framework-for-Social-Studies.pdf](http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/c3/C3-Framework-for-Social-Studies.pdf).
10. Students' names are pseudonyms.
11. The Interfaith Hospitality Network offers families the opportunity to remain together; to build up savings, and to make connections with volunteers from Host and Support Congregations who are motivated to help them succeed.

*JENNIFER HAUVER is an Associate Professor in the College of Education, University of Georgia, in Athens, Georgia*

*GLENDA SHEALEY-GRIFFITHS is a third grade Teacher at Esther F. Garrison School of Visual and Performing Arts in Savannah, Georgia*

# 57 Issues Free for NCSS Members

Lessons and handouts published since 1998. See all 57 covers at [www.socialstudies.org/publications/ml](http://www.socialstudies.org/publications/ml)

