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Proper nutrition is critical for growing minds and bodies

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As the new school year begins this month, many of us may reflect back on fond memories of the "back to school" routine: new clothes, new books and freshly sharpened pencils; the anticipation of a new teacher, new friends, and a new schedule. But for the one in five children in Yolo County facing food insecurity — the government's label for what we commonly know as hunger — returning to school may not be something to look forward to.

On the first day of school, children experiencing hunger will have already fallen behind their classmates. These children will have more difficulty concentrating in class, be more likely to have behavioral and emotional problems, be sick more often during the school year, and struggle with low educational achievement.

Proper nutrition is vital to the growth and development of children, which is of particular concern for children in low- income families. And the consequences of child hunger extend far beyond this school year. Children who grow up poor are more likely to be unemployed and to receive public assistance as adults, continuing the cycle of poverty.

Ending child hunger is an investment in America's future. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama announced a goal of ending childhood hunger in America by the year 2015. Since taking office, President Obama and other members of the Administration have reiterated that commitment. The Food Research and Action Center, a national policy and advocacy group, has put forth seven essential strategies for achieving this goal. These strategies focus both on improving and expanding the nation's nutrition programs, and bolstering the economy and strengthening supports for working families in order to move more out of poverty, the root cause of hunger.

Many of these opportunities to improve the health and wellbeing of schoolchildren are included in the federal Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act which is currently making its way through Congress. This important legislation covers funding and nutritional guidelines for the school breakfast and lunch program, after school sites, and summer meals in addition to more innovative ideas like farm to school programs which have had such success locally.

But while policies and priorities are discussed and debated at the national level, the Food Bank of Yolo County is working to address childhood hunger here in our local community every day. Through our partnerships with schools, day cares, and other organizations serving children we are working to ensure that the children of Yolo County have the nourishment they need to grow and learn

We can solve child hunger in our community. Together, we can ensure that all children get the nutritious meals they need every day and provide a better tomorrow for children in need.

— **Frances Johnson** is the director of programs at the Food Bank of Yolo County

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