

In need of a full stomach

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Breakfast at Durham Public Schools costs \$1.60 per meal, \$0.30, or absolutely nothing.

No matter how you slice your toast, that's a good deal for parents or for taxpayers — and a plateful of turkey sausage, waffles and fresh apples is good for children, too.

But the kids have to eat it, and paying for food is just the first hurdle.

Gov. Beverly Perdue was in Durham this week to promote a laudable campaign, "No Kid Hungry," that's being tested at Lakewood and North elementary schools.

At Lakewood, where 98.5 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced-price meals, fewer than half of the children make it to breakfast.

Part of it might be that the kids just aren't hungry, of course.

Part of it might be the early hour, which is why No Kid Hungry is designed to have in-classroom breakfasts during regular school hours.

And part of it might be the stigma.

If you don't believe that children are sensitive to being perceived as free lunch kids — even in a high-poverty school — just consider one thing that a Hillside High School student, a softball player with a lovely smile and the highest GPA in her freshman class, told the Durham Partnership for Children in a Q&A that was posted on the group's blog:

"My least favorite part of high school is lunch," she said. "They serve the same thing every day. The worst part is the free and reduced lunch line. Everyone knows what that line means. The line is so long it winds outside the cafeteria door. And that doesn't include the people who are too ashamed to stand in that line."

Sixty-five percent of the kids at Hillside qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. They are not the minority.

With kids like that in mind, No Kid Hungry is serving breakfast to every student in Lakewood's classrooms, regardless of their ability to pay.

We expect that this will, at some partisan moment, be pointed out as an example of a lavish government program, still more fat to be hacked from the hog.

But one in four children in North Carolina is so poor that they are seriously at risk of hunger. North Carolina ranks 11th in households with children who go hungry.

Those aren't sloppy, flabby, inflated numbers. Federal poverty guidelines are like something out of Charles Dickens: The child of a single parent doesn't count as "impoverished" until that household's income drops below \$14,570.

We are in a time of tough choices, and every penny of government spending demands careful consideration, so consider this: The cost of children's free and reduced-price meals in Durham are covered through federal tax dollars, which are then spread to local farms and warehouses that supply the Durham Public Schools. As for the children whose families can afford breakfast, their share is covered with donations, grants and partnerships with corporate sponsors.

These are our dollars coming back to the state, helping our kids who need it most, and if we have, by social contract and basic decency, agreed to feed these children, why not do it in the most effective, dignified way?

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