

**Technical Report:  
Dover Boys and Girls Club School Backpack  
Program Evaluation Project**

**University of South Florida  
&  
Feeding Tampa Bay**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

National data show that 14.5% of U.S. households experience food insecurity (FI); they have inadequate access to a sufficient, nutritious, and safe food supply. In Tampa Bay, 840,000 people (one in six people) seek food assistance through Feeding Tampa Bay (FTB) and its partner agencies because of FI. Aside from short-term problems of poor dietary quality and compromised health, research shows that FI has long-term consequences including poor child growth and cognitive development, impaired learning, and increased risk of chronic diseases. Therefore it's imperative to ameliorate FI in the short- and long-term.

This project evaluates the efficacy of a School Backpack Program (SBP) that FTB runs in partnership with The Boys and Girls Club in Dover, FL. The SBP provides food for the weekends to low-income children living in food deserts. While anecdotal reports suggest that SBPs are effective in reducing FI, there are little or no systematic data confirming this.

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups were conducted with 23 children (6-15 yrs.) that participated in the SBP, 24 parents/caregivers, and 5 personnel responsible for administering the program at Dover Boy and Girls Club. The evaluation was conducted in two phases which generated both quantitative and qualitative data. The Key findings show that:

- Over 58% of parents/caregivers responded that the SBP made “a lot” of positive difference for their child’s health and 2/3 said that it made a positive difference for themselves.
- Children reported that the backpack has helped them in school, makes them excited and happy, and provides food that may be lacking at home or school. For example, one child stated “*it [the backpack] helps me concentrate a little more,*” and another child added

that *“I would say happy because I have something at least to eat and I won’t be hungry the whole entire time.”*

- Parents/caregivers mentioned positive benefits of the program including that the backpack is nutritionally balanced, it provides food when there is none in the house, or when there is no time to prepare a meal. Parents/caregivers said that that the backpack food helps their children to stay focused in school. Personnel from the SPB affirmed the latter by indicating that it has helped the children with being more alert and energetic.
- A major theme mentioned by children and parents/caregivers is that the food from the backpack is shared among family and friends. For example, one child stated, *“then we share some [backpack food] with friends that my mom has because they don’t have a lot of money...”*
- Parents/caregivers requested that more healthy foods be included in the backpack (e.g., vegetables, rice, and yogurt) while children asked for a mix of healthier (e.g., fruit and vegetables, peanut butter) and snack items such a potato chips and candy.
- Children and parents/caregivers appreciated the variety of foods provided in the backpack. Children mentioned that they liked the cereal, crackers, and canned fruit while the parents/caregivers liked the cereal and milk, although the latter gave mixed reviews about the quality of the milk provided.
- Children, parents/caregivers, and personnel expressed dislike of certain foods including the canned chicken salad in particular. Several parents/caregivers also reported that their children did not like the juice because it was too sweet. There were differences in food likes and dislikes according to child age groups.

- Personnel pointed out the families cooked mainly traditional native foods at home and that some of the backpack foods were unfamiliar to them. They recommended that education about these foods should be provided.

Based on the findings from this evaluation, the following recommendations are offered:

- Fresh fruits and vegetables and culturally appropriate foods should be included in the backpacks.
- Teach families about the food provided in the backpack by including an informational pamphlet within the backpack that explains the nutritional benefits and proper preparation of food items.
- Explore food likes and dislikes among the younger and older children and put together backpacks with different food items for different age groups.

This evaluation shows that the SBP is viewed favorably by the child participants, their parents/caregiver, and the program personnel. A majority of parents/caregivers report that the SBP has positive health benefits to their children and themselves. The SBP fills in food gaps in food availability at home and at school and helps children to be more focused, engaged, alert, and energetic. While many of the food items in the SBP are liked, there are a few items that the children do not like to eat or that the parents/caregivers are not familiar with or know how to prepare. Based on the findings, it is recommended that fresh fruits and vegetables and culturally appropriate foods be included whenever possible, that an informational pamphlet be provided on use and preparation of food items, and that further research be conducted to explore food likes and dislikes of children across different age groups. The results for this research can be used to guide the choice of food items given to different aged children.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This project evaluates the efficacy of a School Backpack Program (SBP) which involves Feeding Tampa Bay (FTB) and The Dover Boys and Girls Club, a local non-profit in Hillsborough County (2820 Gallagher Rd, Dover, FL 33527). The SBP provides food to low-income children during weekends to ameliorate household food insecurity (FI). While anecdotal data suggests that SBPs are effective in reducing FI, there have not been any systematic efficacy studies. Using mixed methods, this project examined the efficacy of SBP regarding household food security status, dietary quality, and food-related behaviors among children and parents/caregivers. Additionally, SBP personnel were interviewed about program challenges and recommendations. The final results will be included in a federal grant proposal for a longitudinal study of local school-based food assistance programs and to develop recommendations for improving their dietary quality. Considering the long-term consequences of FI on health, academic performance, and work productivity, studies like this one are sorely needed.

## **BACKGROUND**

National data show that 14.5% of US households (49 million people, including over 16 million children) are food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2013). In other words, these households have inadequate access to a sufficient, nutritious, and safe food supply. Hispanic households, in particular, have a 22.4% prevalence of food insecurity across the country, while households lead by a single mother have a prevalence of 35.3% (USDA 2015). In Florida alone, 13.8% of households across the state suffer from food insecurity and hunger on a daily basis, with the majority of these households concentrated in or near metropolitan areas (USDA 2015).

This consists of approximately 650,000 children whom are facing daily hunger across the state (Food Brings Hope 2016).

A recent study on the 10 counties that comprise Tampa Bay shows that 840,000 people (one in six people) seek food assistance through Feeding Tampa Bay and its partner agencies (Hunger America 2014). The findings also reveal that food insecurity (FI) is occurring in different demographic segments including children, seniors, college students, and working families. For example, 25% of food assistance recipients own their own homes and 71% rent or lease; 40% have a high school degree; and nearly 30% completed at least some college, while 9% are currently enrolled in college. Almost 200,000 are children, and 20% are seniors. In addition, 75% make tough choices choosing between buying food and paying utility bills. Nearly half report watering down their food and beverages to make them last longer, and about 60% eat expired foods (Feeding America 2014).

Aside from short-term problems of poor dietary quality and compromised health, there is mounting evidence showing that FI has long-term consequences, including poor child growth and cognitive development, impaired learning, increased risk of chronic diseases, and reduced work productivity in adulthood (Himmelgreen 2013). In fact, food insecurity among children has been shown to cause behavioral and emotional problems and impair a child's ability to learn effectively at school (Food Brings Hope 2016). More specifically, among low-income minority populations a risk of food insecurity is a major public health concern. Childhood obesity has been shown to be a significant problem among Hispanic immigrant populations who face difficulties in accessing adequate food resources (Papas et al. 2015). Overall, children living within a food insecure household are at higher risks of poor health and developmental issues.

Working in a partnership, University of South Florida (USF) Anthropology and Feeding Tampa Bay (FTB) have evaluated the efficacy of the FTB School Backpack Program (SBP) at The Dover Boys and Girls Club. Currently, the Dover Boys and Girls Club manages care for predominantly Latino immigrant families in the area. This SBP provides food to low-income children, living in designated food deserts, to take home during the weekends in order to ameliorate household FI.

While there is anecdotal data and limited research suggesting that SBPs are efficacious (Fiese 2013), more nuanced efficacy studies are needed. The improved efficacy of this program could provide a meaningful contribution to the lives of children and their families. Therefore, the purpose of this project is to demonstrate a clear understanding of children's, parents'/caregivers', and Dover personnel's perceptions of the SBP. The following sections details the methods of the evaluation project, the preliminary results mostly from Phase I of the project, discussion, and conclusion and recommendations.

## **METHODS**

The project team, consisting of USF researchers and FTB personnel, used a mixed methods approach utilizing surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The participants included 23 children (6-15 yrs.) and their parents/caregivers (N=24), as well as 5 organization personnel responsible for administering the SBP at Dover Boys and Girls Club. Data collection methods were broken into two phases; Phase I and Phase II.

Phase I consisted of short interviews with children, parents/caregivers, and personnel. Interviews looked at the general perceptions of the backpack program from all three groups. Parents/caregivers were then asked additional questions to measure food insecurity status and

food coping strategies. Focus groups were also conducted as part of Phase I. Children were broken into two focus groups (one with younger children between 8 to 10 years of age and one with older children between 11 to 15 years of age (N= 5 each)). One focus group was also conducted with 8 parents/caregivers. Furthermore, one focus group was conducted with all 5 personnel involved in the SBP regarding the effectiveness and challenges of the program and recommendations for making improvements.

Phase II of the evaluation project consisted of longer interviews with 20 parent/caregiver and child dyads from the larger sample. Interviews during this phase were meant to examine dietary intake using food recall, food preferences using free listing and pile sorting, and food-related decision-making patterns. Parents/caregivers and children were asked to provide free lists of the 10 foods/meals that they buy/serve during ‘hard’ times, and 10 they buy/serve during ‘good’ times. Additionally, they were asked to provide free lists of the 10 foods/meals that they would ideally like to buy/serve to their families. Parents/caregivers were additionally asked how they make decisions about food purchases, how they stretch their food and food dollars, whether household and other expenses influence their food-purchasing decisions, and how they cope with FI in terms of diluting food and beverages and use fillers in meals.

## **RESULTS**

### **PHASE I & II: Quantitative Data**

Quantitative data from Phase I were analyzed using SPSS version 23. A total of 52 participants (24 parents/caregivers, 23 children, and 5 personnel) completed interviews.

Preliminary analysis reveals that most parental participants were female (91.67%), while the sex

ratio for child participants was much more equally distributed (56.52% female and 43.48% male; Table 1).

**Table 1. Sex of respondents**

	Parents	Children	Total
<b>Female</b>	22 (91.67%)	13 (56.52%)	35 (74.47%)
<b>Male</b>	2 (8.33%)	10 (43.48%)	12 (25.53%)

Parent/caregiver participant ages ranged from 27 to 56 years old, and child participants from 6 to 15 years old; the average (mean) age of parents was about 37 (36.79) and for children this was about 10 (10.1) (Table 2). The standard deviation of children’s ages (2.00) was much smaller than that of parents ages (8.44); this indicates that there is much more variation from the mean age in parent participants (i.e. the mean age for children is a more meaningful representation of child participants than the parents mean age is for parent participants) (Table 2). Across the project population, income ranged from \$0 to \$3,000 a month and the average (mean) income was \$1,999.05 a month (Table 2). However, it is important to note that the average income may not be representative of the population income as the standard deviation is quite large (748.88; Table 2).

**Table 2. Summary statistics in project population**

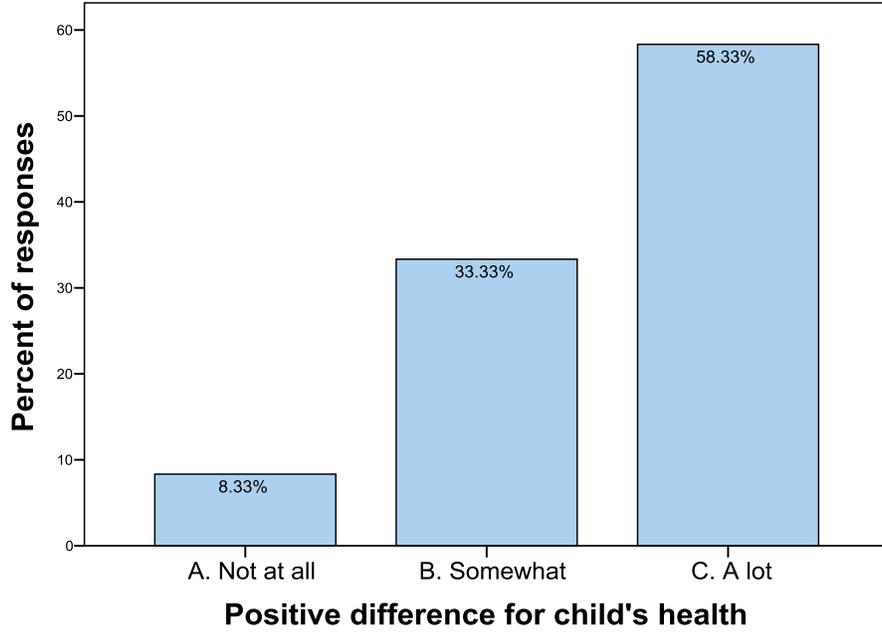
	Statistics					
	N	Mean	Median	Std Dev	Minimum	Maximum
<b>Child Age</b>	21	10.1	10	2.00	6	15
<b>Parent Age</b>	24	36.79	34	8.44	27	56
<b>Monthly Income</b>	20	\$1,199.05	\$1,200	\$748.88	0	\$3,000

Over half (66.7%) of parents/caregivers indicated that 2-3 children lived in their household, 29.20% indicated two children and 37.50% indicated three children (Table 3).

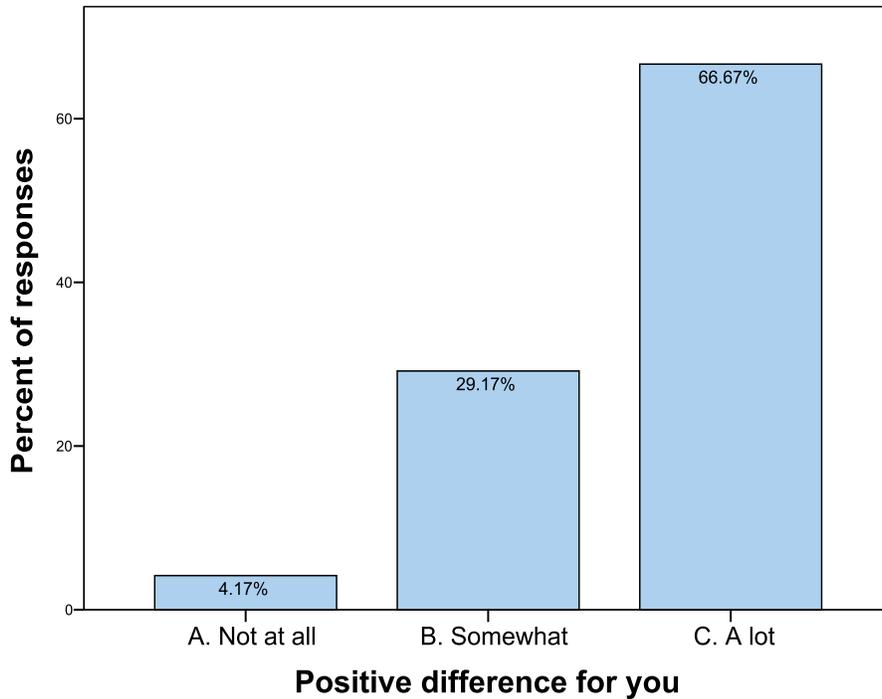
**Table 3. Number of children in household**

<b>How many children under the age of 18 live with you?</b>		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>1</b>	4	16.70%
<b>2</b>	7	29.20%
<b>3</b>	9	37.50%
<b>4</b>	4	16.70%
<b>Total</b>	24	100%

Parents/caregivers were asked whether they thought the backpack program had made a positive difference for their child’s health and for themselves. 58.33% of parents/caregivers responded that it had made “a lot” of positive difference for their child’s health, and 66.67% said it had made a positive difference for themselves (Figures 1 and 2, respectively). Over 58% of parents/caregivers also responded that the program has made “a lot” of positive difference for *both themselves and their child’s health* (Table 4).



**Figure 1. Do you think the backpack program has made a positive difference for your child's health?**



**Figure 2. Do you think the backpack program has made a positive difference for you (the parent/caregiver)?**

**Table 4. "Do you think the backpack program has made a positive difference..."**

		For your child's health?			Total
		A. Not at all	B. Somewhat	C. A lot	
For you?	A. Not at all	1 (4.17%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (4.17%)
	B. Somewhat	0 (0.0%)	7 (29.17%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (29.17%)
	C. A lot	1 (4.17%)	1 (4.17%)	14 (58.33%)	16 (66.7%)
Total		2 (8.33%)	8 (33.33%)	14 (58.33%)	24 (100%)

Parents/caregivers and children were both asked about what kinds of foods they would like to see in the backpacks. Of those who suggested food items, parents/caregivers tended to ask for healthy foods (like vegetables, rice, and yogurt), while children asked for a mix of healthier foods (fruit, vegetables, peanut butter, and a sandwich) and snack items (potato chips, candy, etc.) (Table 5).

**Table 5. Desired foods for backpack**

<b>Children</b> ( <i>What foods do you wish were in the backpack?</i> )	<b>Parents</b> ( <i>What food would you like to see in the backpack?</i> )
Can of spaghetti	Beans
Candy/chocolate	Bread
Cereal (more)	Canned foods
Chicken	Cereal (more)
Chips (potato chips, Doritos, Sun Chips, Takis, etc.)	Fish (tuna)
Fruits and Vegetables (“healthy stuff”, “oranges”, “peaches”)	Fruit (“real fruit”)
Granola bars	Milk
Macaroni and cheese	Yogurt
Juice (orange juice)	Orange juice
Peanut butter	Rice
Powerade	Vegetables
Salad	Water
Sandwich	More variety

## **PHASE I: Qualitative Data**

Qualitative data from Phase I were analyzed using MAXQDA 12.0.2. A total of 52 participants (24 parents/caregivers, 23 children, and 5 personnel) completed interviews, with 23 participants completing focus groups (8 parents/caregivers, 10 children, and 5 personnel). Six major themes were revealed, including foods liked in the backpacks, foods not liked in the backpacks, foods wished to be in the backpacks, sharing of foods from the backpacks, positive help provided through the backpacks, and neutral feelings about the backpacks.

### ***Foods liked in the backpacks***

Children and parents/caregivers expressed a general appreciation for a variety of foods provided with the backpacks. Children, in particular, spoke frequently about foods they enjoyed the most from the backpacks. Based on discussion, cereal was defined as a common favorite among the children in regards to taste and size and because it can be used as a snack at a later time. One child stated, *“Because I don’t just always use it just for like breakfast...I think it’s just the right size for me.”* Often times the children expressed their excitement for the backpack *“because it has good food in it.”* Other kids mentioned their like of the crackers and the canned fruit; with one child mentioning in regards to the canned fruit, *“It’s easy to open, but it has a lot of fruit mixed in.”* Even during the focus group discussion with both age groups of children, the cereal and canned fruit was highlighted most often as favorite food items within the backpacks.

Parents/caregivers expressed similar like for the foods within the backpacks. One parent mentioned, *“There is a variety of food [in the backpack]. My child eats everything.”* Again the cereal and fruit were mentioned by the parents as common favorites from within the backpack which they witnessed their children enjoying. During the focus group discussion with the

parents/caregivers, a point of conversation surrounded the cereal and milk provided in the backpacks and their children's extreme like for particularly the cereal. Mixed reviews were discussed in regards to the milk. One parent, who expressed a general like for the milk from the backpack, mentioned a benefit of the milk; that *"that milk [store bought milk], you have to drink it quickly [or else it expires], and this milk [the milk from the backpack], it last longer."* Overall, parents/caregivers and children expressed their views on favorite foods within the backpack and general like of the backpack's variety.

### ***Foods not liked in the backpacks***

Alternately, children, parents/caregivers, and personnel expressed some dislike of certain foods within the backpack. These expressions of dislike were never directed at the entire backpack, but rather were directed at certain types of food. One food item mentioned often by the children was the canned chicken salad. A simple reasoning behind this dislike was often that *"I just don't want chicken"* or *"because I don't really like it."* A few children equally mentioned their dislike for the juice because it's not the ideal flavor and *"is kind of stale."* While some children mentioned their dislike for the granola bars because *"they have too much honey"* or *"they are really hard, and I need this tooth to come out."* Similarly, during the focus groups with the children, chicken salad was again discussed in detail as the least favorite of all the foods within the backpack for *"it smells weird."*

During discussions from the parents'/caregivers' focus group, juice was an item highlighted for its dislike by some children because of the high sweetness content and like by other children, particularly those younger. As mentioned previously, parents expressed mixed reviews of like and dislike in regards to the milk provided in the backpacks. While one parent

liked the type of milk provided for its shelf-life, another parent mentioned her children's dislike for the milk because it tastes different than store bought milk the children are used to. One parent mentioned, *"The thing is, the kids are used to Walmart or milk from Publix. So other milk tastes different."*

This same theme of dislike for certain foods surfaced during the focus group with the personnel. Their discussion surrounded the type of food provided in the backpack was unlike common food served at home for most of these families, therefore, parents and children were unsure of certain foods, which in turn led to dislike. One personnel member mentioned, *"...some of the food was introduced for the first time to the kids, so they don't know what it was."* The personnel discussed how *"traditionally they just strictly stay to Mexican food,"* so sometimes they do not know the food and therefore dislike certain items.

### ***Foods would like to see in the backpacks***

In a discussion of certain foods children and parents/caregivers would like to see in the backpacks, often times fruits and vegetables were mentioned, along with more snack items, such as chips. One child, in particular, mentioned, *"I would like to see some healthy stuff"* when discussing a desire for more fruits within the backpack. Another child expressed her hope for *"...peaches, because I like peaches, and they are good and my body gets energy."* Other children commonly mentioned that they wished for chips to be provided in the backpack. *"Like some Sun Chips or something along the lines of that,"* one child mentioned. These desires for certain food items within the backpack are consistent with those listed in the quantitative analysis from the previous section.

Parents/caregivers also often mentioned their desire to see “*a little bit more fruit*” within the backpacks. Another parent expressed, “*I would like to see fruit for him.*” The parents’ discussion was in regards to fresh fruit and vegetables, rather than the canned fruit that already comes within the backpacks. Furthermore, a parent mentioned the want for more variety within the backpacks, such as “*one week to be something and then the next week to be something else.*” Other parents mentioned beans and bread which they wish to see in the backpack, because they are confident the children would like those items, and even tuna salad instead of the chicken salad. During the focus group, parents spoke about drinks provided in the backpacks and a desired to see other types of juices such as orange juice or even just water. Again during the parent/caregiver focus group tuna salad and fresh fruits and vegetables were discussed in regards to foods they wished to see in the backpacks. One parent even mentioned how “*tuna salad would be better because it has omega.*”

### ***Positive help provided through the backpacks***

Overall, the backpack was often discussed in regards to the positive help it provided to both the children and parents/caregivers. This was equally expressed by the children, parents/caregivers, and personnel. In general, the children talked about how the backpack has helped them with school, makes them excited and happy, replaces a lack of food from home or school, and provides a snack for later. One child mentioned, “*I go home...but there may be nothing made right now, because we might not eat until later, so I eat my cereal [from the backpack].*” Another child mentioned when talking about school that “*it [the backpack] helps me concentrate a little more.*” In fact, many children talked about how the backpack helps them with school by providing them a snack either for the morning or the afternoon. Another child talked

about how the food helps them focus better such that they are not hungry. The child mentioned that

Because when I eat some stuff it makes me learn and learn more. Because when I don't eat, I don't learn. If I don't eat breakfast, I can't learn.

Similarly, another child mentioned that *"it gives me focus."*

Overall, the children expressed happiness for the backpack and general excitement to receive the backpacks on Fridays. One child stated, *"I would say happy because I have something at least to eat and I won't be hungry the whole entire time."* Another child spoke of her happiness because *"I see all my favorite stuff."* When talking about the backpack food items replacing food otherwise not available at home or at school, a child mentioned *"since we don't have snacks in the house, we can get those."* Another child spoke about how *"sometimes in [the] classroom, I ask my teacher if I can eat some of the food [from the backpack]."* Not only did children talk about eating the backpack food items when food is not readily available at home or at school, but children also mentioned how they simply saved food for later. Often times, food from the backpack received on Friday would last into the weekend or into the following week. One child mentioned, *"I still have food next week, until I get the new one."* In the end, children often expressed the positive help from the backpack resulting in the fact that *"sometimes you don't have food to eat."*

Parents/caregivers also spoke often about how the backpack food items provide positive help and allow the children to save food for eating later. During the parents'/caregivers' focus group, positive thoughts were exchanged about the backpacks, and in general discussion focused on how the backpack helps kids with school. One parent expressed how the backpack has made a

positive difference for her child's health "*because it is very balanced.*" Another parent talked about difficulties in keeping food on the shelves at home and mentioned how

the food they give me here helps for the smallest because sometimes the gallon of milk is almost empty, but I have what they give me in the packet.

Another parent talked about lack of time for preparing meals; that "*When I don't have the time, they'll eat the cereal.*" Similarly, another parent stated, "*They're [children] so happy because they have something leftover to eat. You know we're worried from one meal to another.*" Lastly, another parent mentioned, "*Because sometimes I don't have something to eat or snack, they [children] know where to go get some. They have it there.*"

During the parents'/caregivers' focus group, similar discussions of positive feeling about the backpack food items were addressed. One parent made clear that the backpack has been extremely helpful because

I think it has helped all of us in every way because you are bringing food to your house that maybe most of the time, because of time or money, one doesn't go out and buy...but the backpack the kids bring home [provides] things to eat.

Parents/caregivers further discussed the help it provides while the children must wait to eat dinner, but feel hungry. "*When I am making food, they can grab something until the food is ready.*" Another parent expressed how

You might not have [food] for tomorrow and you would run to Walmart dragging the kids, but not now. No, it's not that they [the parents] don't go to the store and buy food for their kids, but the food [from the backpack] helps so that the kids can eat and parents have a little more time not to be rushing around.

Finally, the parents/caregivers also discussed how the backpack helps their children to focus better in school. In expressing how the backpack has made a positive difference for her child, one parent notes, *“When you are well nourished and aren’t hungry, you are focused.”* Overall, the parents/caregivers see the excitement their children express when receiving the backpacks and notice the positive help it has provided to not only their children, but also themselves.

Personnel from Dover also mentioned how the children express excitement for the backpacks, and that they see how the backpack has helped the children with being more alert and energetic. One personnel member mentioned, *“They’re [the children] excited about the food, knowing they’re going to eat.”* Another stated how *“for the most part, they’ve been very happy.”* When asked about whether they notice a positive change in the children’s general physical appearance and energy levels, most personnel agreed intently that the backpack has helped in this manner.

During the personnel focus group discussion, members talked about similar positive outcomes from the backpack such as general excitement, saving the food throughout the following week for snacks, and seeing more energy in the children. Overall, the personnel agreed that *“they’re [the children] more active.”* The personnel also admitted that since they are not at home with the children, their general observations are that *“they’re [the children] excited to get the food”* when it is handed out on Fridays. Furthermore, personnel mentioned that *“some of them are bringing it on Mondays. When it is time for snack, they are bringing some [food from the backpacks] from home.”* Overall, the personnel witnessed the general excitement from the children on the Fridays when the backpacks are handed out and witness the children often times saving food for later dates to eat as snacks.

### *Sharing of foods from the backpacks*

Another major theme from the qualitative analysis is that generally the children are sharing their food from the backpacks. This was discussed not only by the children, but also by the parents/caregivers and the personnel who witnessed the sharing activities. Often times the food from the backpacks is shared among the family. For example, one child stated “*my dad eats the crackers,*” while another said “*my brother usually helps eat it.*” Another child noted how “*the left-overs, my mom takes it to work.*” Other children expressed how they even share amongst their friends. One child stated,

Then we share some with different friends that my mom has because they don’t have a lot of money and they are often going to the market to buy stuff.

Even during the focus group, children discussed about sharing the food from the backpack with family and friends and that even “*my parent take it to work and give it to somebody else that likes it.*”

Parents/caregivers equally discussed during interviews and the focus group how the food from the backpack will be shared with family and friends. Often times, parents/caregivers mention how they will not throw the food away, but rather will share the leftovers. One parent noted, “*The stuff that they don’t like, like the raisins and stuff...we will give them to our neighbors.*” Other times, food is simply shared with siblings, cousins, or close friends of the child. Even personnel from Dover mentioned during interviews and the focus group discussion how they have heard of families sharing the food from the backpack, either with family or friends. “*They will usually give it to somebody else they know who will eat it.*”

***Neutral feelings about the backpacks***

At points throughout interviews, children and parents/caregivers would sometimes express neutral feelings about the backpack; that they neither disliked the backpack nor were overly excited about the backpack. In fact one child mentioned, *“Sometimes I do like it. Sometimes I don’t like the stuff.”* Another child mentioned how *“sometimes we don’t eat it and sometimes we do, because it will be sometimes too much.”* A parent further mentioned, *“They don’t see a difference [because of the backpack]. They [the children] eat everything.”* In the end, neutral feelings about the backpack were overall less likely to be heard from parents/caregivers and children.

**DISCUSSION**

Findings present some key areas for discussion. Overall, interviews with children, parents/caregivers, and personnel revealed an excess of excitement and enthusiasm towards the backpacks supplied by Feeding Tampa Bay. Mostly positive thoughts and appreciation were portrayed when discussing the backpacks. The backpack was critiqued at certain levels, but most comments were directed toward the types of food provided in the backpack; commonly foods that were not liked because of taste or consistency.

As demonstrated in the results, the chicken salad was most commonly discussed as an item of dislike within the backpacks. Alternatively, parents/caregivers suggested tuna salad for their belief that the nutrients provided would be better. It is further important to bring attention to the one child who mentioned the hard-like texture of the granola bars, as these were too hard for his delicate new teeth. This is an interesting point of discussion when thinking about foods appropriate for children in regards to not only taste, but also texture and consistency. What types

of food are good for a growing child with sensitive teeth during the process of both losing baby teeth and growing adult teeth? This also presents a need to discuss divisions in backpack production. Could foods be packed based on age brackets; where younger children receive slightly different foods than older children?

It is also interesting to point out the common discussion of milk by both the parents/caregivers and the children. Where some children and parents/caregivers liked the milk because of its shelf-life, other children did not like it because it tastes different than the milk they are used to drinking from the grocery store. Overall, children expressed the most interest in and excitement for the cereal and milk. In fact, the cereal was mentioned most often by the children as a favorite food, not only because of its taste but also because of its versatility. Children could keep the cereal for later times to snack on when they are hungry and do not have access to other foods while at home or at school. They would eat it both dry and with the milk. This demonstrates a preference towards foods that are easily packable and mobile, as well as kid-friendly.

Overall, it is important to discuss the overwhelming positive feelings directed towards the backpacks. As discussed above, children, parents/caregivers, and personnel from Dover expressed various comments that generated positive feelings towards the backpack program. The majority of children were excited to receive the backpack each week, while the majority of parents/caregivers and personnel could see positive improvements in the children's energy levels and attentiveness during academic activities. An important feature of the backpacks which emerged was the saving of food items for later use when other food or meal supplies were not yet available. This presents positive assistance not only for the children to be able to snack on food when feeling hungry, but also demonstrates positive assistance for the parents/caregivers; snacks

can be instantly available to their children at a time when they are unable to provide immediate food due to a wide variety of reasons likely related to schedules and finances. Finally, the backpacks also demonstrated positive help through the redistribution of foods to wider social networks. Not only were the children who directly received the backpacks benefiting from the program, but those individuals whom the food supply was shared with, whether it be family or friends, were also benefiting. External persons, other than children and adults, also in need but not directly involved with the SBP were often times receiving helpful food items of which the children directly benefiting from the program were willing to share. In the end, the positive assistance provided through the SBP is demonstrated clearly by all three groups of participants.

When thinking about foods not liked in the backpack, it is important to address the comments relayed by the personnel; that some families are unfamiliar with certain foods in the backpacks. At Dover particularly, the families are often Hispanic and Latino immigrant families that have newly arrived in the United States. At home, they tend to cook their traditional native dishes. Some foods provided in the backpacks are new to these families. Personnel from Dover recommended the need for education on foods provided in the backpacks. Simply informing the families, both parents/caregivers and children, what types of food come in the backpacks and how one eats them or their nutritional aspects might be beneficial for the families. This also brings forward the need to discuss how the backpack program could potentially cater to different ethnic groups throughout the United States.

In final regards to critiques of the backpack, it is important to open discussion on the need for more fruits and vegetables to be provided in the backpacks. Though this presents difficulty in the ability to store and package fresh fruits vegetables, it remains important to discuss nonetheless. Findings from this project, through both the qualitative and quantitative

analysis, demonstrate the overwhelming desire from both children and parents/caregivers to see fresh fruits and vegetables within the backpacks. Looking forward, a discussion of how fresh fruits and vegetables could be packed within the backpacks or handed out to the children along with the backpacks is necessary.

In the end, the backpack program is a major success and has demonstrated an important form of assistance for these families. Children often spoke of how the food has provided them with snacks throughout the week both at home and at school. Parents/caregivers mentioned how the food has enabled them to manage their time better in shopping for food and preparing meals because their children have a snack to eat and therefore maintain patience. It is important to note the appreciation demonstrated by the children and parents/caregivers and even personnel. An overall boost of excitement and enthusiasm is generated every Friday the backpacks are handed out to the children and their families.

## **CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

Findings from this project suggest recommendations in regards to the packaging and distribution of the backpacks. One recommendation is to teach families about the food provided within the backpacks. This could entail the insertion of an informational pamphlet within the backpacks that explains nutritional benefits of the food and proper preparation of the food items. The second recommendation is to explore the division of the backpack food supply between younger and older children, as this project demonstrates a division of likes and dislikes based on age of the children. The third recommendation is to attempt the distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables for the children. This recommendation outweighs all other recommendations as discussions of wanting more fresh fruits and vegetables by both the children and

parents/caregivers occurred most often throughout the interviews. In relating back to studies looking at poor health, discussed earlier, among food insecure families, this demonstrates further importance to include fresh fruits and vegetables within the backpacks, providing a better balanced diet for the children.

The limitations of this project were generalizability and population size. As this project targeted the Dover Boys and Girls Club in a rural setting of Florida, the ability to generalize this project across schools and organization is difficult. Furthermore, the project population was restricted to the children and parents/caregivers who attended the Dover Boys and Girls Club and the staff at the organization. The population was quite small and lacked in diversity.

Overall, this project has demonstrated the need to further assess the school backpack program across other organizations and schools in order to better understand its benefits and areas for improvement. This project has shown significant appreciation for the backpack program by children, parents/caregivers, and staff at the local organization. There is a definite need to keep the backpack program by Feeding Tampa Bay active while it continues to provide useful food products to children and families in need.

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