

# **Harvesters - The Community Food Network**

## **The BackSnack Program**



### **2008 - 2009 Academic Year Summative Outcome Evaluation**

**\*This document contains excerpts from the full evaluation including the Executive Summary, Evaluation Results and several child drawings**

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## Executive Summary

*“It is fun to have food for the weekend”*

*BackSnack Participant*

This child’s comment is voiced in the same manner many children would say “it is fun to go to a movie on the weekend.” But this child is talking about something most of us take for granted, with the excitement reserved for special treats not basic needs. Harvesters knows not all families have met this basic need. In an attempt to alleviate weekend hunger and reduce food insecurity, Harvesters implemented the BackSnack program. Since its inception in 2004, the program has grown from 30 students to 8,110 students in 2008-2009 and will reach 10,000 students in the 2009-2010 school year. As the program expands it is important to verify that its objectives are being achieved. In addition to food insecurity this evaluation focuses on six measurements potentially impacted through better nutrition. The six markers are:

Grades  
School Attendance  
Behavior  
Self Esteem  
Responsibility  
Social Skills

### **Methods**

Four groups of stakeholders were surveyed to evaluate these markers. Four distinct surveys were created to engage children, parents, teachers, and school officials. Surveys were completed by each stakeholder group in January 2009 and again in May 2009. The initial survey and post survey asked identical questions allowing for comparisons within each stakeholder population. The parent post survey also asked parents to assess certain characteristics after their child’s participation in the program. Additionally, each stakeholder group was asked for qualitative responses, and the children were encouraged to draw pictures of their experience.

### **Evaluation**

Responses from children, parents, teachers, and schools demonstrate BackSnack is achieving positive outcomes. Four of the six markers show significant improvement over the course of the survey period. Grades, school attendance, behavior, and social skills all improved. Self esteem and responsibility report mixed results, with some surveys showing improvements, and some not. Although chronically hungry children are identified for participation in the program, the evaluation does not confirm food insecurity in the home. Few parents agreed they ate less, or did not eat, because of lack of money, leaving little potential to improve on this category.

Grades increased in Math, English and Science for all students reporting grades on both the initial and the post surveys. There were 12 different grading systems identified from the participating schools. When comparisons were done on the four largest systems (based on number of students), one system showed no significant change in grades, one system resulted in all grades decreasing and two systems showed improvements in grades. The system that

decreased utilized the most subjective grading system<sup>1</sup>. Future surveys will use standardized options for responses rather than a fill in the blank as this survey utilized.

While absences for students with one or more absence in the initial survey improved, instances of being tardy increased over all groups of students. Perhaps tardies increased while absences decreased because when students were late they chose to go to school rather than stay home. While this may indicate attending school is becoming more important, our evaluation can only speculate at this point.

Behavioral measures showed improvement in almost all areas. The school reported discipline incidents were cut in half. Teachers report significant improvement in children being rated well behaved. In addition, the parents report their children are better behaved since participating in BackSnack. Children confirm the other stakeholders' findings by reporting they feel they are in trouble less.

Attention has a large impact on a child's ability to behave and to learn. Therefore we examined attention independently of other behaviors. While there are some conflicting results in this area, attention does improve overall. While children report that it is not easier for them to pay attention to their teachers, parents report their children better understand what they are taught in school. Children and parents both claim they are getting more homework done after participation in BackSnack. Two other measures, forgetfulness and being tired, do not support an increase in this variable. Children and teachers both rank the children as more forgetful. Children claim to feel more tired in the post survey. Lastly, strong support of increased attention is found in the parent and teacher surveys. Parents rated their children improved in independence, and dependability. Teachers rated children higher in attentiveness and independence. Teachers rated the children as less distractible, less immature, less impulsive and less suggestible over the period of the survey.

Social skills are represented by several traits, recorded by several stakeholders. Social skill traits include being friendly, being helpful, participating in class, being respectful, being responsible and being well-behaved. Being responsible produced mixed results across the surveys. All other variables except being helpful show improvement, thus supporting social skills are improved after BackSnack participation.

Self esteem items were asked on the child, parent and teacher survey. In support of increased self esteem, children report getting their feelings hurt less. Conversely, not in support of increased self esteem, the children report they like to try new things less, and the children report it is not easier to make friends. Also not in support of increased self esteem, are the children's reports of feeling sad and afraid more often. Parents' responses to self esteem questions include significant improvement in self esteem when those without self esteem in the initial survey are analyzed. The caveat to this statistic is that eighty-one percent of parents rated their children as having self esteem on the initial survey, so there was a limited sample with potential to improve.

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<sup>1</sup> A grade such as satisfactory and improved is more subjective than a grade such as exceeds standard or a letter grade corresponding to a numerical percentage – a B equal to 86 percent.

Teachers rated students as friendlier and less shy, both of which support increased self esteem. The mixed results for self esteem assessment may be due to question design. Asking children their feelings may garner a moment to moment response. Qualitative responses from parents and teachers support increases in self esteem.

Finally, the evaluation looked at responsibility. Our analysis in this area also produced mixed results. Only the teachers report that children's responsibility increased after participation in the program. As with self esteem, the qualitative responses provided by parents, teachers and schools support the increase of responsibility in the children throughout the survey period.

### **Moving Ahead**

As BackSnack continues to expand and serve more children, it is important to Harvesters to understand the outcomes and maximize the impact. In order to do this there are several adjustments that we recommend for future surveys and evaluations.

1. Provide standardized answer choices to the schools for grading systems.
  2. Explore causation concerning the decrease in absences and increase in tardies.
  3. Evaluate questions inquiring about children's feelings.
  4. Work to increase parents' response levels.
  5. Explore options to garner more consistent responses from all stakeholders, regarding students' growth in self esteem and responsibility.
  6. Increase options for qualitative responses, in order to add clarity, and additional information.
  7. Random sampling method of students rather than all students surveyed.
- Review the evaluation process; consider evaluating community partners.

## Outcome Evaluation Results

Outcome analysis examines the ability of a program to achieve its objectives. The aim of BackSnack is to alleviate weekend hunger. In doing so, it is believed children will do better in school and be better behaved. In pursuit of their objectives Harvesters has identified six variables potentially affected by alleviating hunger.

- 1) Grades
- 2) School Attendance
- 3) Behavior
- 4) Self Esteem
- 5) Responsibility
- 6) Social Skills

The stakeholders surveyed, strongly support improvement in some variables, and produce mixed support for others. The qualitative data helps to bolster some of the weaknesses, and clarify the value of the program, by allowing parents, and teachers to express their feelings without prompts.

### Grades

It is believed that when children are fed, and do not have food insecurity, they can focus more on being a student, and thus do better in school. Measuring changes in grades over the school year can evaluate this. Overall, and in the largest grading group, grades were significantly increased over the survey period. Parents also cited 40.8 percent of the time that children's grades improved over the course of the program. In addition, teachers and schools report better grades, and more homework done in their qualitative responses.

*"She is quite attentive and showing progress in reading"*

*"I have seen a huge improvement in his academic scores since starting the program"*

*"Focus is improving – homework is coming in consistently"*

While it can be determined that grades do increase after participation in the program, a challenge for this measurement is the variability in grading systems. A more standardized measurement of grades will be used in future surveys, to get a more accurate picture of grade variances.

### Attendance

Children that are not hungry, and do not have food insecurity, will be healthier and will attend school more often. Measures of absences and tardies look at the children's overall attendance rates. Absences were reduced significantly when children with no absences in the initial survey were eliminated; the reasoning being that if the children had no absence they could not improve upon that. The group of children reporting at least one absence in the initial survey reduced their absences by 22.5 percent, going from 3.79 to 2.94 in the evaluation period. Tardies have

increased for all groups of children. For all students the tardy rate nearly doubled, going from 1.09 to 2.04. It is unknown what is behind this increase. Perhaps in an attempt to attend school and reduce absences, the children now are not just staying home on a day when they get a late start.

Also influencing a child's attendance is their health condition. When asked if their child's health has improved since participating in BackSnack, parents report 61.7 percent of the time that it has improved, and only 3.8 percent of parents say their child's health has not improved since participating in BackSnack. Parent's assessments are a strong and valued gauge of improved children's health. Nurse visits were also seen as a way to measure health of the children. This did not turn out to be a particularly accurate measure, as many children go to the nurse daily for medications, schools have different recording systems, and confidentiality regulations prevent full reporting.

### Behavior

Improvements in behavior are statistically significant for all those surveyed.

1. Children feel they are in trouble less.
2. Parents report children are better behaved at home and in school.
3. Teachers rate the children significantly more well-behaved after participation in BackSnack,
4. Schools report discipline incidents are cut in half, 2.72 per child to 1.35.

Overall, the results support that the children are better behaved in school, and at home, after participation in BackSnack.

Attention or concentration is such an important component of a child's school performance, and behavior. Several surveys report improvements in children's attention. Children report they get more homework done. Parents rated their children as having significant increases in independence, being dependable. Parents report their children better understand what they are being taught in class. Teachers report children's levels of attentiveness, and independence increased significantly. Teachers report children are less distractible, less immature, less impulsive and less suggestible over the course of the survey period. However, children report increased feelings of fatigue and a very slight increase in forgetfulness. Children reported a decrease in their ability to pay attention in class from the initial survey to the post survey. Overall, attention improvements are supported by the data.

### Self Esteem

Results for self esteem are mixed. Children report having their feeling hurt less and the teachers report the children are less shy, and more friendly. These results support increases in self esteem. On the other hand, the children report that they find it less easy to make new friends and less easy to try new things. These results do not support increases in self esteem. Children also report an increase in sadness, and fear. When parents were asked on the post survey their perception of changes in their child's self esteem after participating in BackSnack, the parents agreed or strongly agreed 40.9 percent of the time that their child's self esteem had increased. The fragility of the statistic is that eighty-one percent of the parents said their child had self

esteem on the initial survey. This leaves a small group, nineteen percent of the parents, reporting negative or neutral answers that have potential for improvement in this trait. Qualitative data from the parents and teachers suggests that self esteem is enhanced through program participation.

*“She enjoys it, makes her feel special”*

*“She is really starting to trust us; her immature behavior has really improved”*

*“My child feels great”*

*“Gives my oldest his little bit of independence on the weekend that only he gets”*

*“It makes him feel very important”*

*“He feels proud to be part of the program”*

### Responsibility

Analysis of responsibility also produced mixed results. Children, parents, and teachers were asked about this trait. The children report a decrease in feelings of responsibility from the initial survey to the post survey. However, teachers report a significant increase in the children’s sense of responsibility over the survey period. Parents were also asked to assess whether their child’s sense of responsibility increased after participation in BackSnack; 48.4 percent of parents agree or strongly agree that their child’s sense of responsibility did increase, 42 percent reported no difference, and 9.6 percent of parents disagree or strongly disagree, with an increase in their child’s sense of responsibility.

Qualitative data from children, parents, teachers, and schools cite responsibility as a benefit of the BackSnack program.

*“BackSnack is useful to our family for food and responsibility”*

*“She gets new snacks and helps with responsibility”*

*“It means more responsibility”*

*“He learned some responsibility”*

*“Child works real hard and has made lots of progress”*

*“Very Responsible”*

## Social Skills

Several characteristics represent social skills. Traits from the child, parent, and teacher survey are used in this analysis. The children's survey asks if a child feels helpful. This variable decreases over the survey period, the children feel less helpful in the post survey. This does not support an increase in social skills. Responsibility is also a measure of social skills and it produces mixed results. The teacher survey looks at five characteristics concerning social skills; they all show significant improvement. The teacher survey shows the children to be more friendly, more participating, more respectful, more responsible and more well behaved.

~~That~~  
I think backshack is a wonderful program. I think so because so many people are helping kids. When ever I get home I always run to the table and eat some of my food and put the rest up for ~~another~~ another day. This is how I feel about this program.



