The Meridian Food Bank
School Backpack Program
Evaluation Report

by
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SUMMARY

This program evaluation report is for the Meridian Food Bank’s School Backpack Program. It provides to qualifying and referred students, food sacks containing six easy to prepare meals, snacks and beverages, every week during the school year. The program is an entity operating within the entirely volunteer operated Meridian Food Bank. Managers and stakeholders are seeking, through program evaluation, information needed to improve and expand the program.

The goals are to improve academic and social skills through the easing of weekend food insecurity. The program would like to know if these goals are being met, how it can be improved, and if the program can sustain its current growth level while improving nutritious food choices. The current stage of the program is the summative evaluation stage, however formative evaluation information will be used for program improvement.

The program has benefitted from an evaluation because the program was starting its fifth school year and had not yet been evaluated. Stakeholders (board of directors and managers) would like documented feedback from school staff and from families on student classroom performance, socialization skills, attendance, and level of satisfaction with the foods. While they also want to explore the feasibility of program expansion and improvements in nutritional quality of foods, this evaluation focuses primarily on program goals and satisfaction.

This report has several audiences:

- Food bank management (program directors) - one of the decision-making audiences that will provide necessary parts of the report to the other audiences.
- Food bank board of directors - another decision-making audience that will receive necessary parts of the evaluation report from the program directors.
- School district administration and staff - program directors will share relevant evaluation report information such as the academic and social skills data.
- Parents of students participating in the program - to receive information on how the evaluation results influence program staff’s food purchasing decisions.

This report exhibits the results of the School Backpack Program’s evaluation. The program has grown tremendously each year and is meeting program goals for student academic and social improvement (over 50% of parents and school staff indicated some improvements in these areas). The program also provides for improved student preparedness for school, (as indicated by 69% of parents and school staff indicating some improvement). It is meeting goals for providing food security for the most needy of the designated population.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Meridian Food Bank School Backpack Program began in 2008. The idea and initiative for starting the program came from two teenage girls involved in the youth ministries program at Valley Shepherd Nazarene Church. They attended an out-of-state conference that challenged youth to make a difference in their communities. With their desire to help children
and some research, they found that school backpack programs were being started all over the country.

The Meridian Food Bank serves the schools in the West Ada (formerly Meridian Joint 2) School District. The first year approximately 50 students were provided with food sacks each week during the school year; that number has grown to 550 students. Students participate from all 53 West Ada School District schools, including one online school. Out of these 53 schools, nine are Title 1 schools.

At the beginning and during the school year, school counselors and teachers identify children that may be struggling with food insecurity that is affecting their ability to perform at school. During the school year, teachers and/or school counselors refer students to the program, based on observations and interactions with the student. Most of the children selected to receive a food sack are on the Free and Reduced Lunch Program, funded by the Federal Government.

The individual schools notify the Meridian Food Bank (via Dan Clark, Director) of the number of food sacks that are needed for that week. The names of the children are kept confidential. The number of food sacks needed fluctuates every week, normally increasing as the school year begins and decreasing as the school year winds down, and averaging 500.

Each student is provided with a new backpack at the beginning of the school year, or when they are added to the program. Each Friday, (or the day before the last day of the school week), the students designated to receive food take their backpacks to the school counselor or school nurse’s office and get their food sack. If a student is unable to pick it up, school staff ensures the food sack gets to the child’s classroom before dismissal. Each food sack contains two breakfasts, lunches, dinners, snacks, fresh fruits (when possible), and beverages. It is intended to provide meals for the child over the weekend. The meals are single serving sizes and easy for a child to prepare.

Trained adult volunteers purchase foods, coordinate delivery and storage into designated areas. Adult volunteers coordinate high school student volunteers to arrive at the food bank and in conveyor style, fill the appropriate number of food sacks. A team of teenage and adult volunteers assembles the food sacks on Thursday afternoons. Youth Ministry Pastor, Poe, of Valley Shepherd Church, organizes the teen volunteers. The sacks are then organized by and delivered to the schools. Monitoring is by food bank managers for program growth, cost savings, and nutritional quality of foods purchased by the designated volunteers.

A team of volunteer drivers picks up the food sacks on Friday morning and delivers them to the schools. Wally Johnson coordinates the delivery schedule and number of food sacks for each school, according to the numbers received by Dan Clark, (Valley Shepherd Nazarene Pastor and Meridian Food Bank Board President). A driver will generally deliver to 4 or 5 schools. Numbers vary from 1 to 60 food sacks per school. Food sacks are not distributed during weeks school is on break.

In the 2013-2014 school year, the program supplied an average of 405 food sacks each week, for a total of 15,368 food sacks distributed. Program monitoring is done by food bank managers for program growth, cost savings, and nutritional quality of foods purchased by the
designated volunteers. There have been recent upgrades to the facility to allow for larger quantities of food storage for the School Backpack Program. Another goal of management is to have the purchase and inventory process procedures able to withstand an audit.

**EVALUATION METHOD**

A mixed-method approach was used, and the chosen evaluation methods are within the Goal-based Model, also known as the Objective Attainment Model. The basis of this evaluation is based on the stated objectives and program goals. The evaluation consisted of both quantitative and qualitative methods to measure the outcomes. The program has been operating for over four years now, so formative evaluation information will be gathered in order to answer certain evaluation questions.

The program sustainability piece will be evaluated using methods from the Decision-Making Model, because those questions focus on decisions that need to be made for the future. This piece involves looking into costs of current food choices and will investigate costs of foods with higher nutritional value.

Using a monitoring and feedback system was logical here. Elements measured through surveys and monitoring were process measures and outcome measures. In order to gain critical viewpoints on the history and quality of the program, interviews with some key participants (i.e. the volunteers who purchase the foods and who share in program oversight) were conducted in this evaluation. For this purpose, the school staff survey included an optional “provide your contact information here.”

**Participants**

- 500 parents of participating students were given paper surveys.
- It is unknown exactly how many school staff received the electronic survey request.
- Interviews were conducted with two key program volunteer staff persons. **Pat Porter**, a full-time volunteer Meridian Food Bank Manager, also performs all financial responsibilities for the School Backpack Program, including ordering and inventory control. **Bev Duddles**, whose role is also to order foods, maintains inventory, and oversees the actual food bagging process.
- The observation included the volunteer teens and adults who supervised and filled the food sacks on that particular day.
- A school counselor provided information about the school’s referral process.

An overwhelming majority (69%) of school staff survey respondents are School Counselors, followed by Classroom Teachers (19%). These two populations work closest with the participating students. The School Counselors are responsible for making the official referrals to the program. Participation length in the program indicated by parents show at least 46% have been in the program two years or more, when counting this year as one. School staff was asked a similar question, and indicated 87% of their students have been in the program two years or more, when counting this year as one. This data does not take into account families relocating, and teachers reassigning, retiring, or relocating.
Procedures

- Met with program staff (Pat) to discuss program goals and objectives, formulate questions for evaluation, identify data sources, and gain program background information. (September 2014)
- Created surveys, reviewed with program staff, and distributed them. (September-October 2014)
- Retrieved survey results, compiled data. (October 2014)
- Performed interviews and observation. (October-November 2014)
- Analyzed data, made recommendations. (November 2014)
- Wrote and presented evaluation report. (December 2014)

Data Sources

A variety of data sources supported the evaluation of the School Backpack Program. Data was collected both quantitatively and qualitatively through the following methods:

Quantitative data - collected through accessing existing data found in public school district records, and Meridian Food Bank School Backpack Program records.

- Number of free/reduced (qualifying) lunch status for children in the district.
- Percentage of this population that the program is serving.
- Current average costs of a food sack.
- Current and future budgets allocated for this program.

Qualitative data - collected through sources of new data in the forms of observations, interviews, and surveys.

- Observations were made, obtrusively, with the evaluator participating when able, and noting relevant actions and statements made during the food sack filling process. The delivery method and pick up process at the schools were not observed but described during informal interviews.
- Interviews of two program volunteers and one school counselor were conducted using standard interview questions for each interview. Interviews sought data on program processes, performance, and satisfaction. (See Appendix)
- Surveys were created using Google Forms for both school staff and program participant parents, using open-ended questions and scale items, with only one idea per item. Surveys sought data on program satisfaction, effectiveness, and impact.
  - Parent Surveys (paper) were distributed to 500 parents of participating children, with a two-week turn-around time asked. There were forty responses received. (See Appendix)
  - Electronic surveys were distributed through the West Ada School District system for appropriate school staff to fill out. There were 86 responses received. (See Appendix)
RESULTS

IMPROVEMENT IN ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE
One of the main objectives of the School Backpack Program is improvement in academic performance in students participating in the program. The evaluator acknowledges that many factors influence, both positively and negatively, a child’s academic performance. Prior to the question being asked, surveys indicated this acknowledgement. Both parents and school staff were asked the same question, with wording appropriately adjusted based on the populations. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of parents indicated at least “Some” improvement has been observed. Fifty-percent (50%) of school staff indicated at least “Some” improvement has been observed.

![Pie chart showing improvements in academic performance](chart1.png)

IMPROVEMENT IN SOCIAL SKILLS
Another main objective of the School Backpack Program is improvement in social skills in students participating in the program. The evaluator acknowledges that many factors influence, both positively and negatively, a child’s social skills. Surveys indicated this acknowledgement prior to the question being asked. Both parents and school staff were asked the same question, with wording appropriately adjusted. Fifty-six percent (56%) of parents indicated at least “Some” improvement has been observed. Fifty-three percent (53%) of school staff indicated at least “Some” improvement has been observed.

![Pie chart showing improvements in social skills](chart2.png)
PREPAREDNESS FOR SCHOOL

The Meridian Food Bank also wanted to know if there has been any effect on preparedness for school, so surveys to both parents and school staff included this question. Again, the evaluator acknowledges there are many factors that can influence a student’s preparedness for school, and states this prior to asking the survey question. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of parents indicated they feel their child is at least Some better prepared for the school week, as a result of having the weekend food sacks. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of school staff indicated they feel their students are better prepared for the school week, as a result of having the weekend food sacks.

From having the weekend foods, how much do you feel your child is better prepared for the school week?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>None</th>
<th>0</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much more</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Have you seen any improvements in your child’s social skills?

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<tr>
<th>None</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>18%</th>
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<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much more</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To what degree have you seen an improvement in social skills in students receiving School Backpack Program food sacks?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>None</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>17%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
SATISFACTION

The School Backpack Program follows nutritional guidelines provided by the West Ada School District nutritionist. These guidelines include: Whole grains, No trans fats, Low sugar, Low fat, Low sodium, and Calorie intake. According to both the parent and school staff surveys, respondents are primarily (98%) satisfied with the foods provided in the sacks:
Below are the parent responses to questions asking for suggestions of foods to include and to not include. If the item was listed more than once, the number beside the item indicates how many times it was listed. Nearly 13% indicated their child will not drink the milk (shelf-stable milk). Nearly 20% indicated more fruit was desired. Additional parent comments included an overwhelming number of those dissatisfied with the over-ripe fresh fruit. (See Appendix)

**Are there any foods that are provided in the sacks, that your child will not eat?**  
(*# of Responses*)  
The milk (5), Ramen noodles/pasta cups (3)

**Are there any foods that you would like to see provided?**  
More fruit (7), Juice (4), Veggies (3)

**PROGRAM COSTS**  
The Backpack Program is operated entirely by volunteers. The majority (90%) of the food needed for the program has to be purchased, as it is not typically donated through food drives. The program costs over $60,000 to operate each year.

During the 2013-2014 School Year, food purchases for the program totaled $62,575. According to the January 1-November 6, 2014 Profit and Loss Detail, the Backpack Program received $48,221 in donations, averaging $5,000 monthly. Food purchases for this time-period are listed at $47,886. An additional $813 was spent on miscellaneous and building expenses. The Backpack Program currently has a $21,000 bank savings account balance.

With the current kinds of foods being purchased, the average cost per food sack is $4.10. The program staff recognizes the nutritional need to decrease the amount of carbohydrate foods and increase the amount of protein-rich foods. Survey results indicate parents’ desire for healthier options.

**DISCUSSION**  
This evaluation was conducted in order that stakeholders and future donors may be informed of the program’s successes. The program strives to meet food insecurity needs for children so that they may improve in their academic and social skills. Program stakeholders wanted to know whether program goals are being met and receive information as to whether the program can sustain growth while improving the nutritional quality of foods. Further examination into food costs is needed to make these latter decisions.

The evaluation was able to provide data to support the meeting of program goals. At least 50% of students are showing some academic improvements and at least 52% are showing some improvements in social skills. Students are showing better preparedness for school by at least 69%. Parents are primarily satisfied with the foods provided, indicated by 98% satisfaction. Based on parent responses, the evaluator recommends seeking a source for less costly packaged
fruits in lieu of fresh fruits, as well as for higher protein foods. Parent responses provided ideas for more satisfactory foods to be provided. Responses also proved that most parents and students are both appreciative of and satisfied with receiving the foods. Some responses indicated reliance on the weekend food. Some responses indicated students’ apparent sense of relief as being noted by teachers and school staff through their observations. (See Appendix)

The March 2014 national school lunch data, provided by the Idaho State Department of Education CNP Lunch Eligibility Report, indicates that there are 35,441 students in West Ada School District. Out of that total 8,690 (25%) qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch. Out of that number, the backpack program serves an average of 500 (6%) students. The School Backpack Program began at 50 children participating in 2008, to over 500 this year. With the historic program growth and the identified population much larger than being served, it is likely that this program will continue to grow.

The program interviews and observation provided much information as to how the program is operated. Several key people each perform a specific function (such as managing financials, receiving #s of food sacks per week, and driving), while some perform more than one function (such as oversight, management, and ordering), and some people share roles (such as ordering). Each of these key volunteer staff persons also has full time responsibilities outside of the School Backpack Program.

The evaluator wants to note the strong mentoring that was observed during the food sack filling process. Several adults were present, and while physically participating, they worked more in the role of facilitating the group. It was noted that two of the more experienced teens took on leadership roles, leading the process very appropriately, and checking with the adults to confirm their actions. The group was well-organized, very respectful toward one another, and made the process fun.

However fragmented in design, the program is strong with communication, as evidenced by strong relationships formed with store managers, and between key program staff. Also observed was strong organization skills among its key volunteer staff, as evidenced by each of their ability to perform their program duties well, in addition to the full-time duties they have outside the program. The evaluator recommends that a program of this size and documented strong growth pattern, would benefit by having a Program Manager or Program Director to make the program more streamlined. With the data providing need for improved nutritional quality of foods, and with program growth rates, a person in this role could seek and increase funding from outside sources, and work toward maximizing food purchases at the least costs.

**EVALUATION COST**

Budget Narrative:
The evaluator spent an estimated 96 hours (12 days) on conducting the elements of the evaluation to include: interviewing program staff, observing program operation, designing surveys, collecting and analyzing data, and writing the evaluation report. The report was presented to the Board on 12/9/2014 during their scheduled monthly board meeting.
Evaluator cost 12 days at $500/day $6,000.00
Mileage 50.00
Total Cost of Evaluation $6,050.00
Total In-Kind Donated Services -6,050.00
Total Billed to Meridian Food Bank School Backpack Program $0.00

APPENDICES

The following items are attached:

- School Backpack Program Parent Survey (electronic and paper copy)
- School Backpack Program Parent Survey Results
- School Backpack Program School Staff Survey
- School Backpack Program School Staff Survey Results
- Interview/Observation Questions and Summaries
- Additional Evaluation Information Noted