

# HUNGER IN AMERICA'S CLASSROOMS

Share Our Strength's Teachers Report



**“YOU DO NOT NEED TO ASK  
WHICH CHILD IS HUNGRY because you  
can see it in their eyes and their actions.  
They are less attentive in school and this  
shows on their grades and test scores”**

—LISA, ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER, SAEGERTOWN, PA

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Success in school is vital to every child and our nation. There are countless and often contradictory facts, theories and opinions on how to best achieve success. However, there is one unfortunate and preventable obstacle to our children's success in school, one that teachers witness every day — hunger. Alarming numbers of teachers, more than 60 percent, believe that children in their classroom regularly come to school hungry because they do not get enough to eat at home. Hungry children can't learn. Ninety-nine percent of America's teachers agree: proper nutrition and getting enough to eat affects a child's ability to learn.

For too long childhood hunger has been invisible or ignored. Our children deserve better. Share Our Strength® is the leading national organization working to end

childhood hunger in America by 2015. By weaving together a net of community groups, activists and food programs, Share Our Strength catches children at risk of hunger and ensures they have nutritious food where they live, learn and play. Schools and educators are the center of many of our strategies and programs. Most nutrition assistance reaches children through school breakfast, lunch and afterschool snacks via the USDA's Free and Reduced Price School Meals Program. However, making food available doesn't ensure it will reach children. Problems, as complicated as the stigma of accepting help and others as deceptively simple as getting to school on time, get in the way.

Rural. Urban. Suburban. America's teachers regularly see hunger manifest itself as illness, unruly behavior, and the inability to focus

and participate. We believe teachers are in the best position to tell this important story. Based on their experience, teachers offer insight and practical ideas. With the help of Lake Research Partners, Share Our Strength conducted a national survey of 740 kindergarten through 8th grade public school teachers and dozens of individual interviews. This report summarizes the survey and interview findings.

## “I DON’T KNOW IF MOST AMERICANS REALIZE, that there are kids relying on school for every meal”

—LAURA, HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER, MILWAUKEE, WI

### Teachers See More Hungry Kids and Want Action

- More than 80 percent of teachers want childhood hunger to be a high priority for their school systems — and nearly 90 percent believe it should be a high priority for our nation.
- Sixty-two percent of teachers say they see children who regularly come to school hungry each week because they are not getting enough to eat at home.
- A strong majority of teachers (64 percent) say most or a lot of students at their school rely on school meals for their primary source of nutrition.

### Growing Up Can Be Tough, Growing Up Hungry Can Feel Hopeless

Whether you’re a teacher or a student, the school day can be long and hard. One, two or a classroom full of hungry children makes it even harder. Hungry kids may often:

- Feel sick, tired, cranky or bored.
- Fight more with classmates and get in trouble with teachers.
- Feel anxious or unable to concentrate.
- Endure short- and long-term consequences of poor grades
- Suffer from poor health, weakened immune systems and increased hospitalizations.

- Go unrecognized: they may live in the city, suburbs or countryside; they can be obese and malnourished.

Without access to fresh and healthy foods, diets of processed fattening foods can be common, putting kids at risk for diseases like diabetes and high blood pressure. Hungry kids can suffer from poor health and be denied the opportunity to reach their academic, athletic and social potential.

**“Teachers are in a unique position to identify and provide food for students in need. It is only during the school day but it is a kind of safety net.”**

— Steve, Middle School Teacher, Washoe County School District, Sun Valley, NV

## “I BUY [SNACKS] WITH MY OWN MONEY and it is getting harder and harder for me to do this”

—LISA, ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER, SAEGERTOWN, PA

### **A Persistent Problem Meets Persistent People**

When nearly one in four children in America has limited access to nutritious foods, teachers notice.

- Of the teachers who estimate children regularly come to school hungry, **63 percent buy food for the classroom with their own money.**
- The pressure of the recession reveals itself in hungry kids: Almost two-thirds of teachers perceive more students have enrolled in the Free and Reduced Price Meals Program over last year.
- Thirty percent of teachers believe that students eligible for free or reduced price school breakfast program are not enrolled in the program. Stigma often prevents them from enrolling.

Schools are working to prevent hunger, but teachers still see gaps to fill. Helping students' families sign up for meal programs, an often complicated process, is the most common activity. Many teachers provide cereal and snacks. **Elementary school teachers spend an average of \$27 per month and middle school teachers spend an average of \$38 — of their own money.** Teachers have also been known to turn a blind eye to school rules that prohibit teacher-provided snacks in class. Teachers sometimes “forget” to follow the rules that require uneaten breakfasts (served in class) to be returned to the cafeteria. Every morsel is important to a hungry kid.

### **Share Our Strength Gains Knowledge and Skills from Teachers**

Share Our Strength has a national plan to end childhood hunger in America by 2015 which is built on public-private partnerships at the state level. We are working to increase awareness of federal food programs, remove barriers to enrollment and sign up eligible children for available federal nutrition assistance. Since 2004, our grant recipients and state partners have posted impressive results, including:

Through its advocacy efforts, the **Partnership to End Childhood Hunger in The Nation's Capital** helped achieve universal breakfast in D.C. Public Schools — free breakfasts to all students.

Since the **Partnership to End Childhood Hunger in Maryland** launched a year ago, it has increased the average daily participation

## “AS BIG A PROBLEM AS IT IS, it’s a solvable problem.”

—STEPHEN, SECOND GRADE TEACHER, ST. LOUIS, MO

rate for school breakfast by 7 percent (from nearly 123,000 children to more than 131,000 children in need).

**Thanks to the Partnership to End Childhood Hunger in Florida**, all 67 counties in Florida now have summer meal programs. 76% more children were served in June and July 2009 than in 2008. Summer meals fill the gap for families when school is out of session.

**“Childhood hunger steals opportunities and dims futures. With the help of America’s educators, Share Our Strength is raising awareness of hunger in our schools and working to make sure all kids receive the food they need to thrive. No child in America should grow up hungry.”**

— Bill Shore, Founder and Executive Director,  
Share Our Strength

**The Partnership to End Childhood Hunger in Washington** eliminated the co-pay for all reduced-priced school breakfasts and school lunches in Kindergarten through third grade.

In America today, nearly 17 million children are at risk of hunger. Too many of the children who need food assistance do not receive it. The programs are in place. People care. Share Our Strength connects the people and programs. Together we will end childhood hunger by 2015.

### **BREAKFAST IN THE CLASSROOM: A Great Way to Start the Day and Help End Childhood Hunger**

**Nearly 60% of teachers favor moving breakfast out of the cafeteria and into the classroom.** They know it’s hard for kids to get to school early to eat in the cafeteria and harder still for some children to receive public assistance. Share Our Strength provides schools with grants to eliminate the stigma and hassle by making breakfast available in the classroom to all students, regardless of income. Our grants often fund seemingly small needs such as carts to deliver those breakfasts and janitors to help clean up. But without funds for these items, the programs would not be realized. We’re listening, learning and working hard with schools to eliminate barriers and feed hungry kids.

# The Research

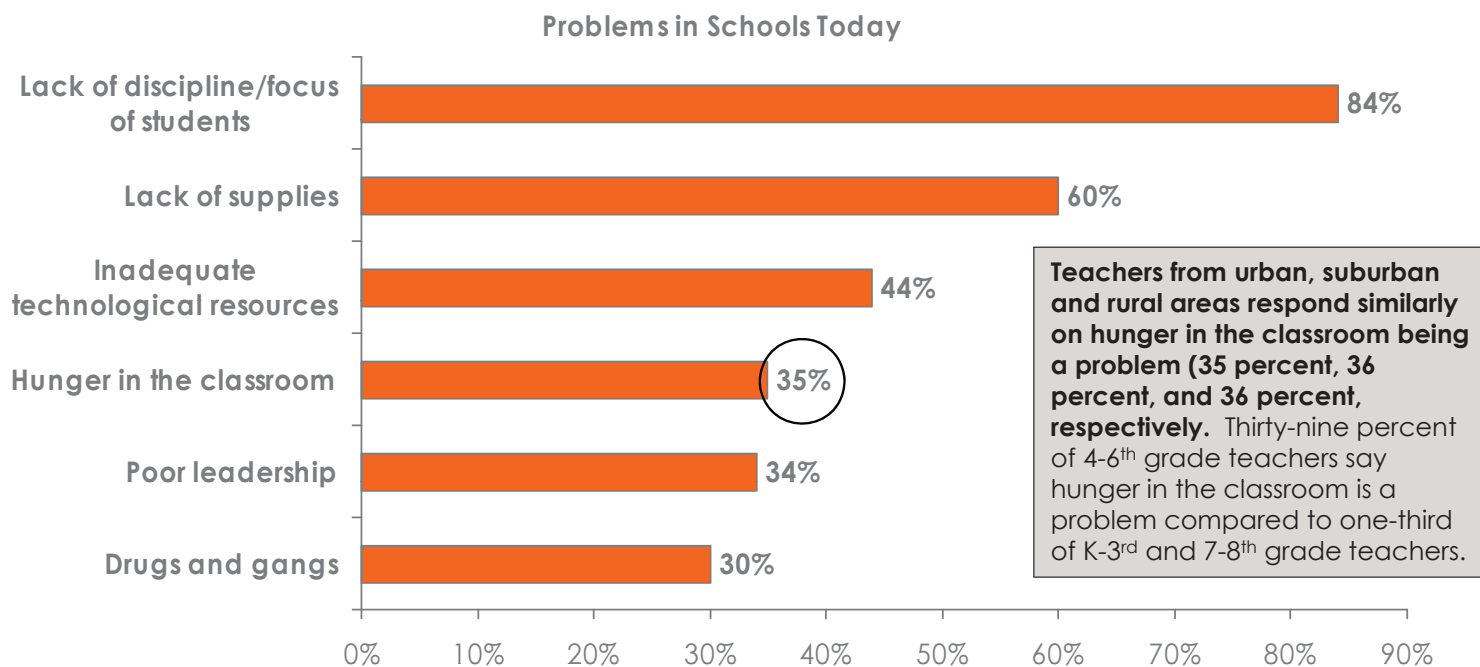
Excerpted from Lake Research Partners National Survey of Kindergarten through Eighth Grade Public School Teachers  
— *November 2009*

## Strategic Summary

- There is strong agreement among teachers about the link between proper nutrition and getting enough to eat and a child's ability to learn.
- Both elementary and middle school teachers see child hunger in their classrooms, and most say it should be a priority for school systems to address — regardless of whether they teach in an urban, suburban, or rural area.
- Child hunger in the classroom is a frequent, ongoing problem: over half of teachers say there are children who regularly come to school hungry because they are not getting enough to eat at home. Among these teachers, most say this is a weekly problem. This is not isolated to certain areas as strong majorities of teachers from urban, suburban, and rural areas say they see children who regularly come to school hungry.
- While the frequency of children coming to school hungry is higher in schools with a higher percentage of children under 100% of the federal poverty level, even teachers with lower percentages see the problem weekly.
- Classroom hunger is attributed to several factors, including an unstable home environment, parents/caregivers not having enough money to buy food, and parents/caregivers not being home to prepare food.
- Teachers believe a significant number of their students rely on school meals as their primary source of nutrition, and they also think more students are taking advantage of free or reduced price meals than in years past. Geographic setting and the proportion of students living under the poverty line play a role in the reliance on school meals.
- Teachers prove to be a first line of defense for students who come to school hungry: they say they address the problem by helping students sign up for school meal programs, buying food for their classroom, and referring students and their families to resources at school.
- Over half of teachers in urban and rural settings and a plurality of suburban teachers say they buy food for students at least a few times each month.
- Teachers are also aware of the serious consequences associated with child hunger. When describing the effects of hunger in the classroom, teachers point to students lacking focus, lacking energy, and academic underperformance. Many also think child hunger can lead to a path of long-term underperformance at school.
- Though most teachers say their school has a school breakfast program in place, the enrollment picture is more mixed in their view. Half of elementary school teachers and less than half of middle school teachers believe all the students who qualify for the program are enrolled. Further, teachers recognize that there are barriers to enrollment, such as parents not signing their children up, transportation, and stigmas. Stigmas among parents and students rank higher among middle school teachers.
- The majority of teachers favor an in-classroom breakfast program. Teachers in urban, suburban, or rural schools respond similarly.

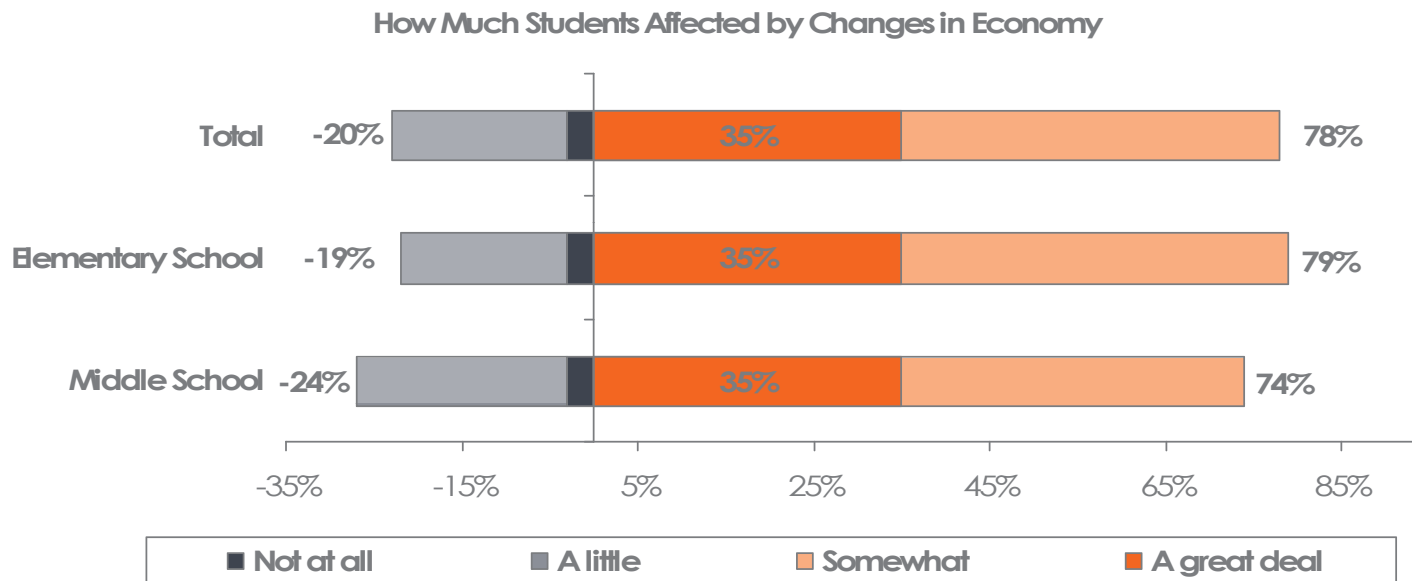
Over a third of teachers say hunger in the classroom is a problem in schools today.

Which of the following would you say is a problem in schools today? (Check all that apply)



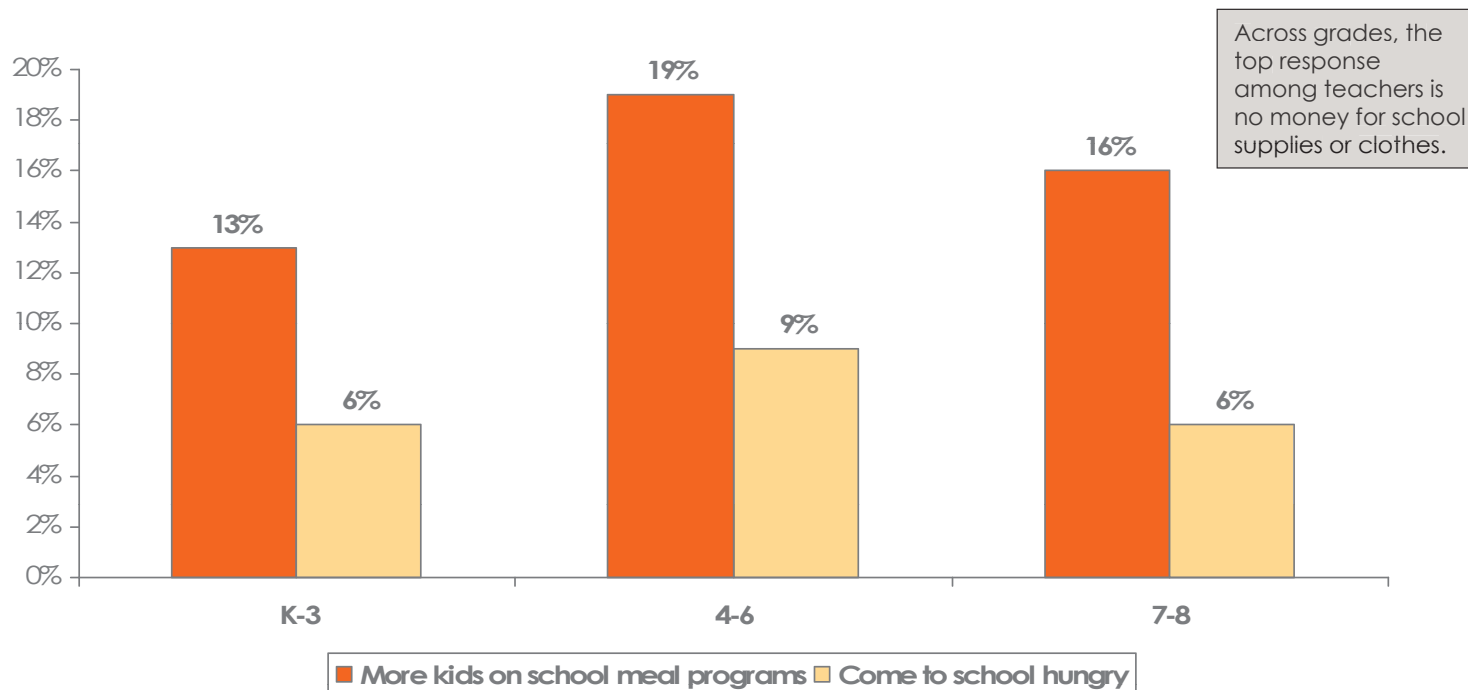
Most teachers say that the changes in the economy have had at least some impact on their students, with over a third saying the economy has affected their students a great deal.

Thinking about the past year, would you say that the changes in the economy have affected your students a great deal, somewhat, a little, or have the changes in the economy not affected your students at all?



**Almost one in five fourth to sixth grade teachers say more students are on school meal programs because of the economy.**

How have the changes in the economy affected your students? (Asked only of teachers who said their students have been affected a great deal, somewhat or a little/Multiple response question)

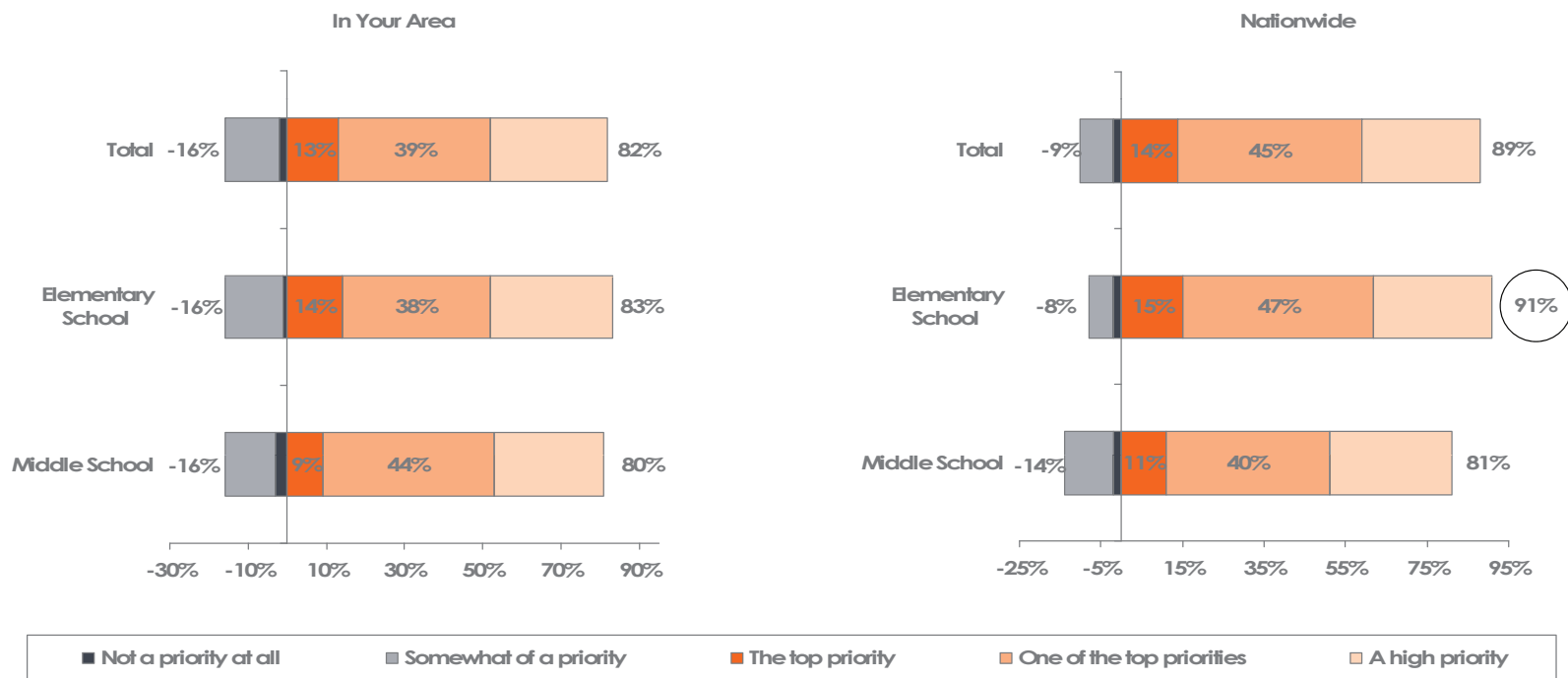


## HUNGER IN THE CLASSROOM

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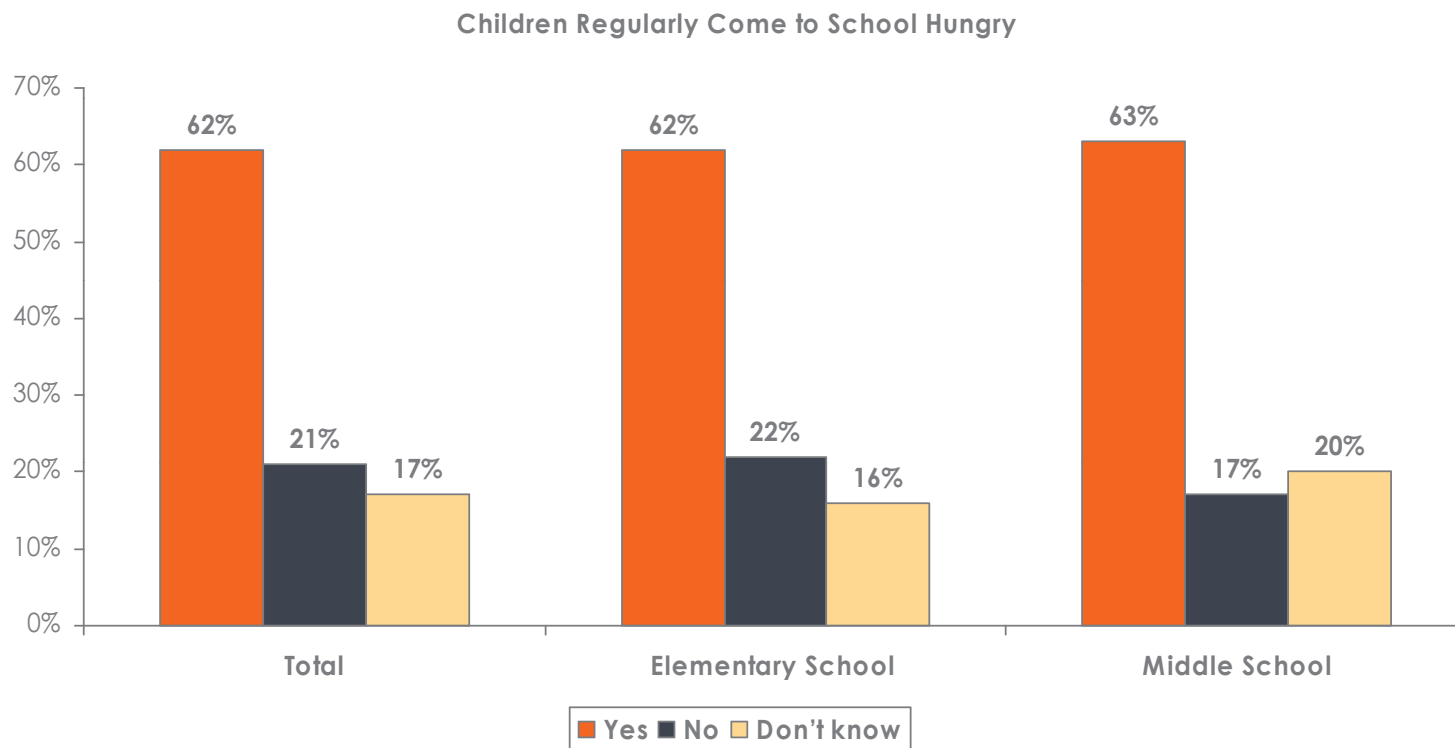
Most teachers believe addressing child hunger should be a priority for school systems, both in their area and nationwide. Elementary school teachers are more likely to think this should be a priority for school systems nationwide.

What priority should addressing child hunger be for school systems **in your area/nationwide**—the top priority, one of the top priorities, a high priority, somewhat of a priority, or not a priority at all? (split-sampled questions)



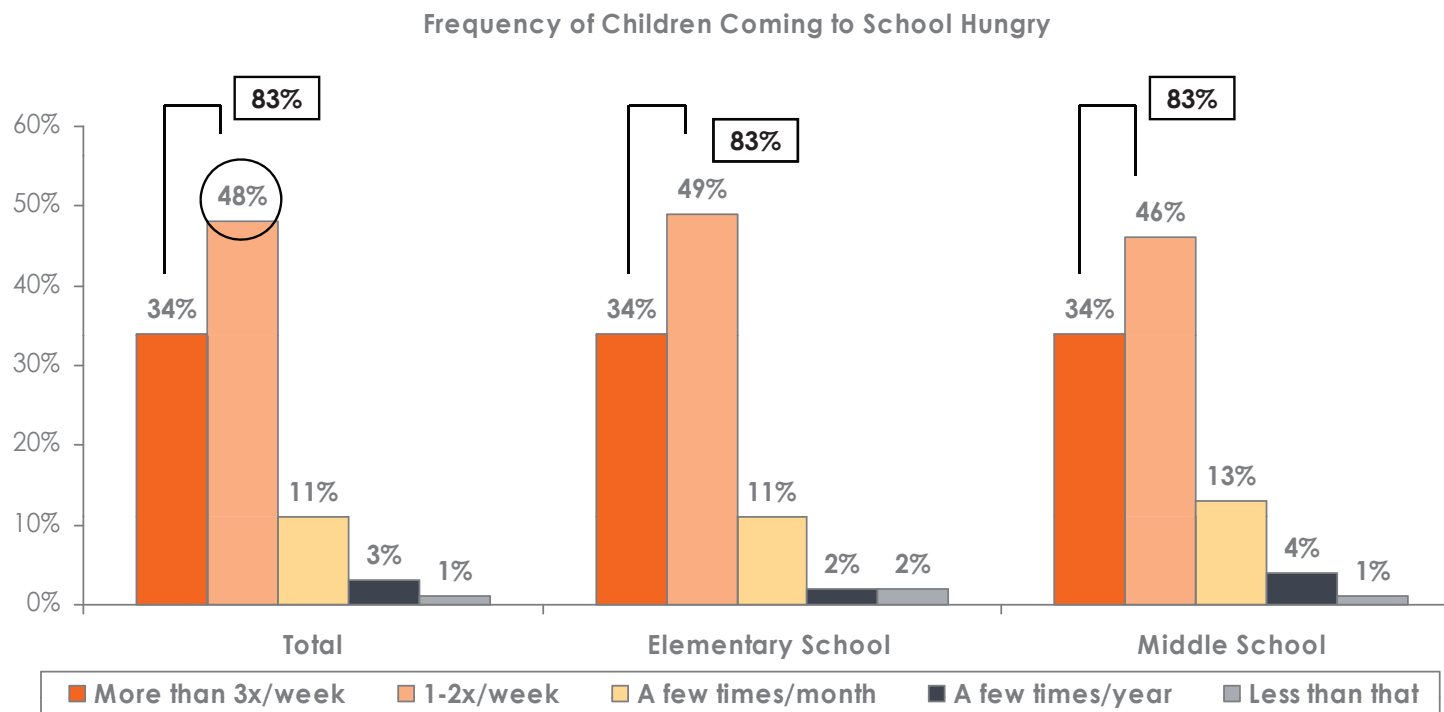
Over 60 percent of teachers think there are children who come to school hungry because they are not getting enough to eat at home. A significant minority also report that they do not know if this is a problem for students.

Based on your classroom experience are there children who regularly come to school hungry because they are not getting enough to eat at home?



Hunger in the classroom is an ongoing problem, with almost half of teachers who report consistent child hunger saying they see children coming to school hungry one to two times a week. Another third report this problem occurring more than three times a week.

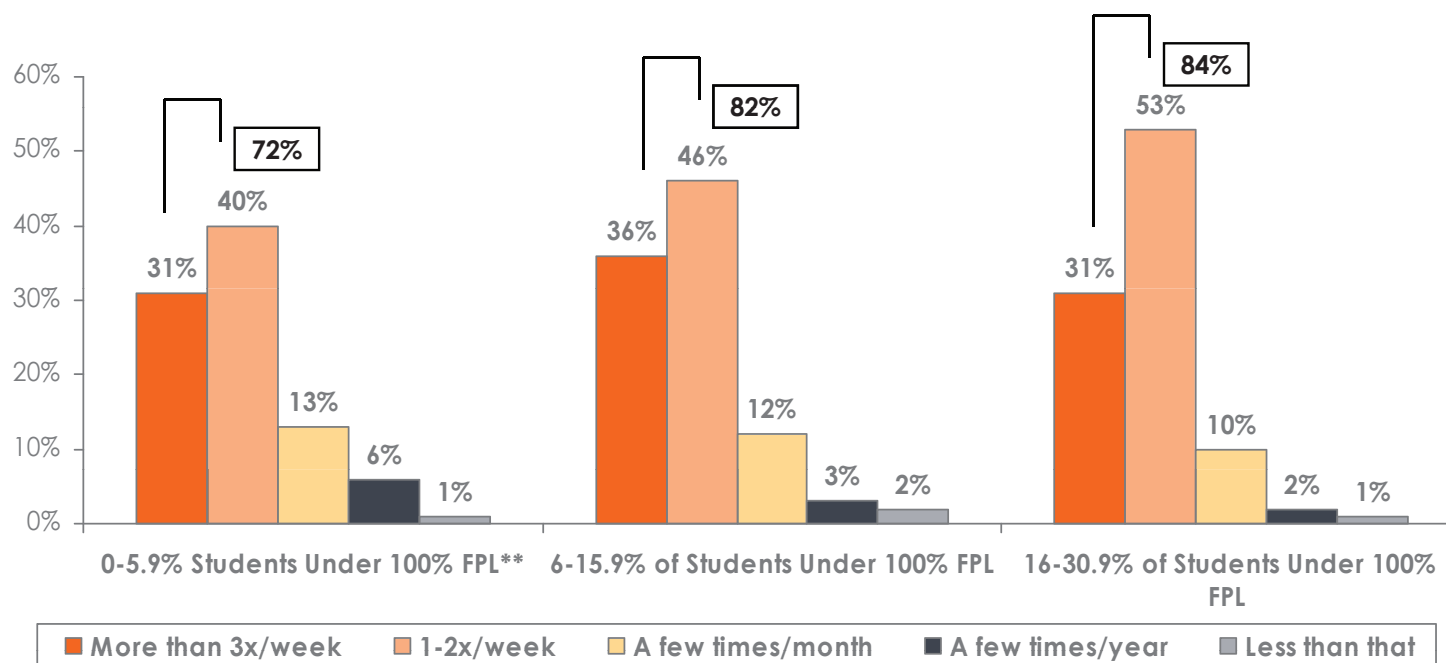
How often do you see children in your classroom coming to school hungry — more than three times a week, one to two times a week, a few times a month, a few times a year, or less than that? (Asked only of teachers who say students regularly come to school hungry)



Frequency of children coming to school hungry is greater in schools with a higher percentage of children below 100% of the Federal Poverty Line, but even teachers with lower concentrations see the problem on a weekly basis.

How often do you see children in your classroom coming to school hungry — more than three times a week, one to two times a week, a few times a month, a few times a year, or less than that? (Asked only of teachers who say students regularly come to school hungry)

Frequency of Children Coming to School Hungry

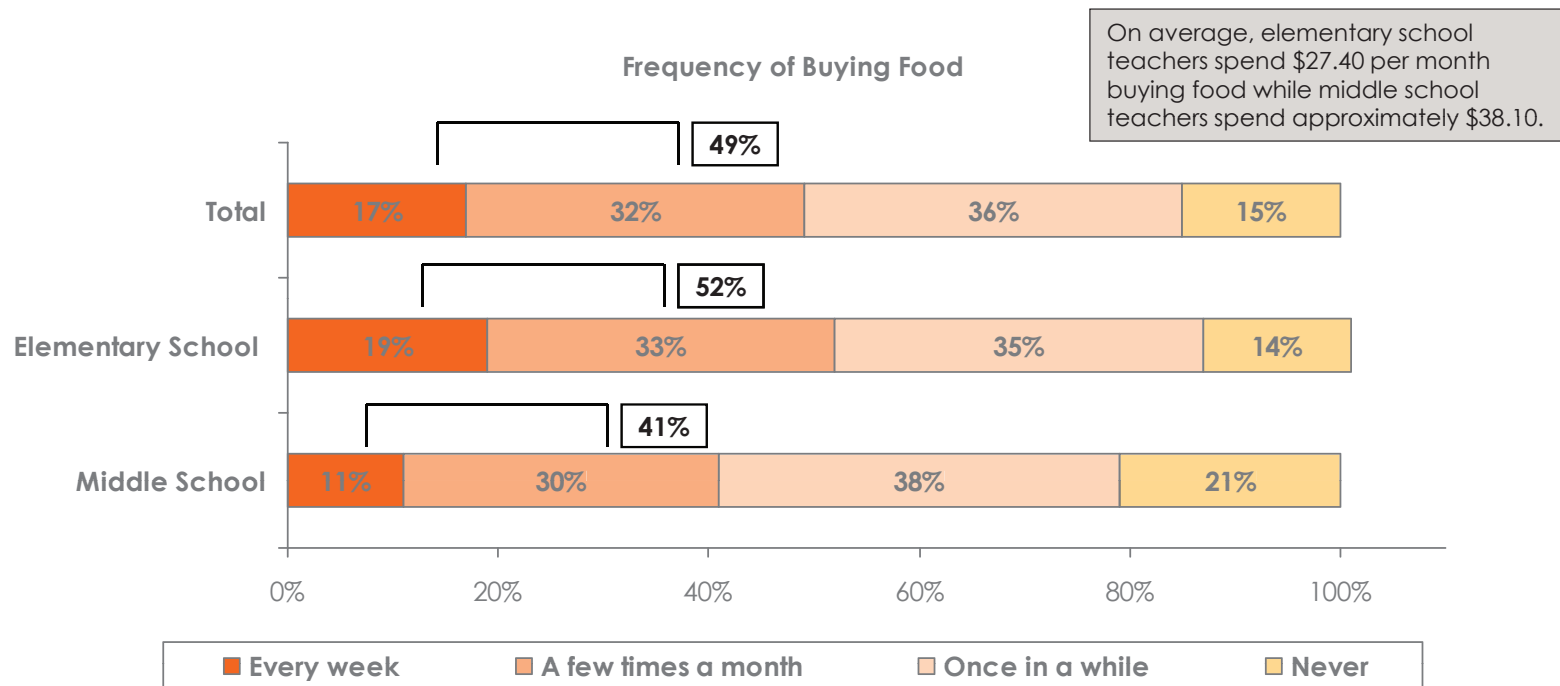


\*Numbers may not sum exactly due to rounding

\*\*small n size

Buying food for the classroom is more common among elementary school teachers. Though middle school teachers are less likely to frequently be buying food, they do spend — on average — more on food for their students each month than elementary school teachers.

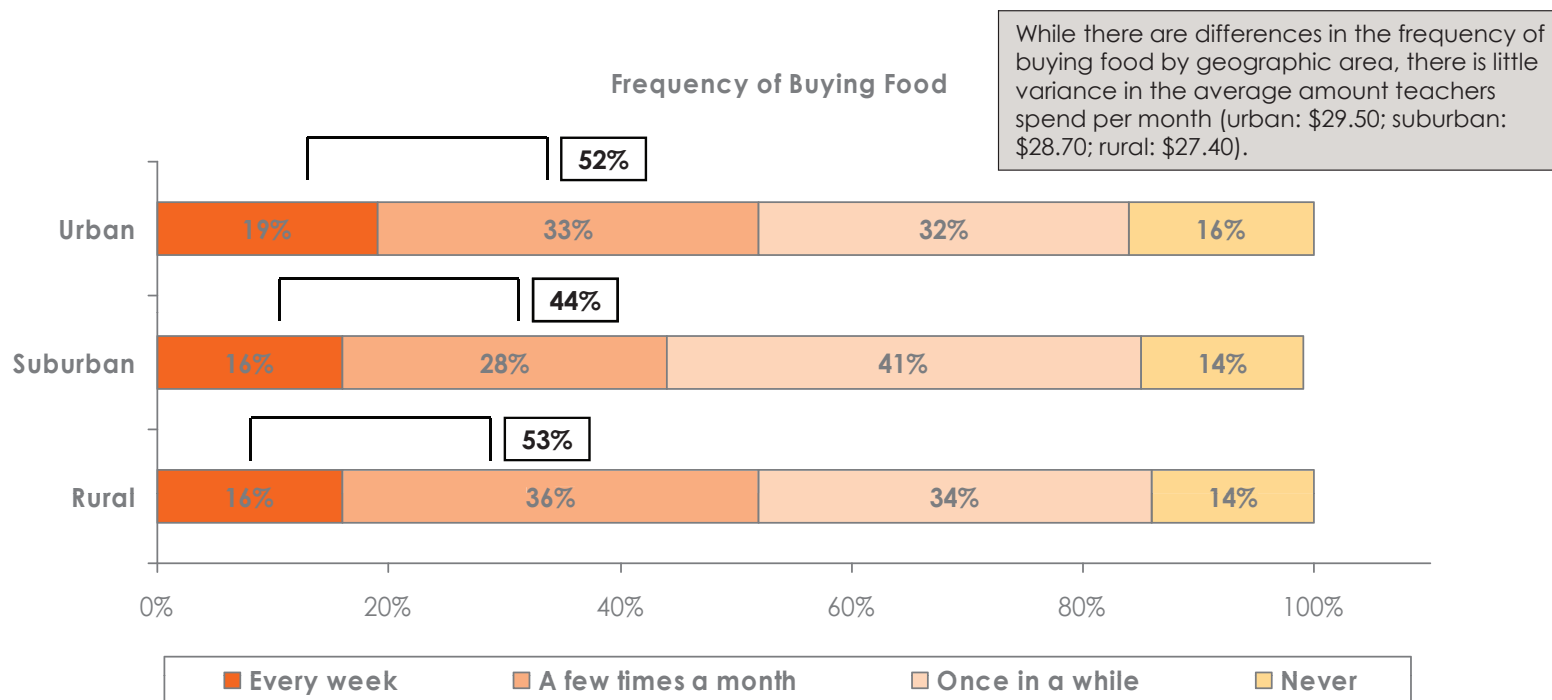
How frequently would you say you have been buying food on your own for your students who are not getting enough to eat at home — every week, a few times a month, once in a while, never? (Asked only of teachers who say students regularly come to school hungry)



\*Numbers may not sum exactly due to rounding

**Over half of teachers in urban and rural settings say they are buying food for students at least a few times each month.**

How frequently would you say you have been buying food on your own for your students who are not getting enough to eat at home — every week, a few times a month, once in a while, never? (Asked only of teachers who say students regularly come to school hungry)



\*Numbers may not sum exactly due to rounding

Lack of concentration is the top symptom teachers associate with the students who are not getting enough to eat at home. Middle school teachers are more likely to think their students are lethargic and have headaches, while elementary school teachers are more likely to report having students complain of hunger or who have stomachaches.

Which of the following symptoms or behaviors do the children who are not getting enough to eat at home experience in your classroom? (Asked only of teachers who say students regularly come to school hungry/check all that apply)

SYMPTOMS OR BEHAVIORS ASSOCIATED WITH HUNGER IN CLASSROOM			
	Total	Elementary School	Middle School
Lack of concentration	92%	92%	94%
Lethargy or general fatigue	72%	70%	77%
Students complain of hunger	69%	73%	56%
Stomachaches	68%	71%	57%
Students ask for extra food	62%	65%	51%
Headaches	60%	57%	69%
Irritability or mood swings	53%	49%	67%
Disciplinary problems	51%	46%	67%
Visits to the school nurse	44%	43%	50%
Increased aggression	26%	24%	35%
Other	4%	4%	2%

Teachers in suburban areas are the most likely to say their students complain of hunger because they are not getting enough to eat at home, while asking for extra food and disciplinary problems are most common among teachers in urban settings.

Which of the following symptoms or behaviors do the children who are not getting enough to eat at home experience in your classroom? (Asked only of teachers who say students regularly come to school hungry/check all that apply)

SYMPTOMS OR BEHAVIORS ASSOCIATED WITH HUNGER IN CLASSROOM			
	Urban	Suburban	Rural
Lack of concentration	91%	91%	94%
Lethargy or general fatigue	73%	73%	69%
Students complain of hunger	69%	77%	63%
Stomachaches	68%	68%	67%
Students ask for extra food	67%	61%	58%
Headaches	55%	64%	61%
Irritability or mood swings	52%	51%	57%
Disciplinary problems	61%	43%	49%
Visits to the school nurse	44%	49%	40%
Increased aggression	30%	24%	25%
Other	4%	3%	4%

Teachers think lacking focus and lacking energy describe the effects of child hunger well. These are also the top behaviors that teachers think are likely to happen due to child hunger in the classroom.

Effects Associated with Child Hunger: How Well it Describes Impact/How Likely to Happen*		
	Mean (% 6-10)	% Likely (% Very Likely)
Students lack focus	7.3 (71%)	92% (69%)
Students are chronically lethargic or lacking energy	7.1 (68%)	90% (59%)
Students underperform on tests and other assessments	6.9 (66%)	90% (60%)
Students are disengaged from classroom activities and experiences	6.7 (63%)	83% (45%)
Students start down a long-term path of underperformance at school	6.6 (59%)	81% (41%)
Students are consistently behind in academic development compared to others in their class	6.4 (57%)	81% (43%)
Students are withdrawn	6.1 (54%)	71% (32%)
Students are resistant to instruction	5.9 (51%)	71% (32%)

For most of these behaviors, elementary school teachers are more likely than their middle school counterparts to say they would occur due to child hunger.

\*split-sampled questions

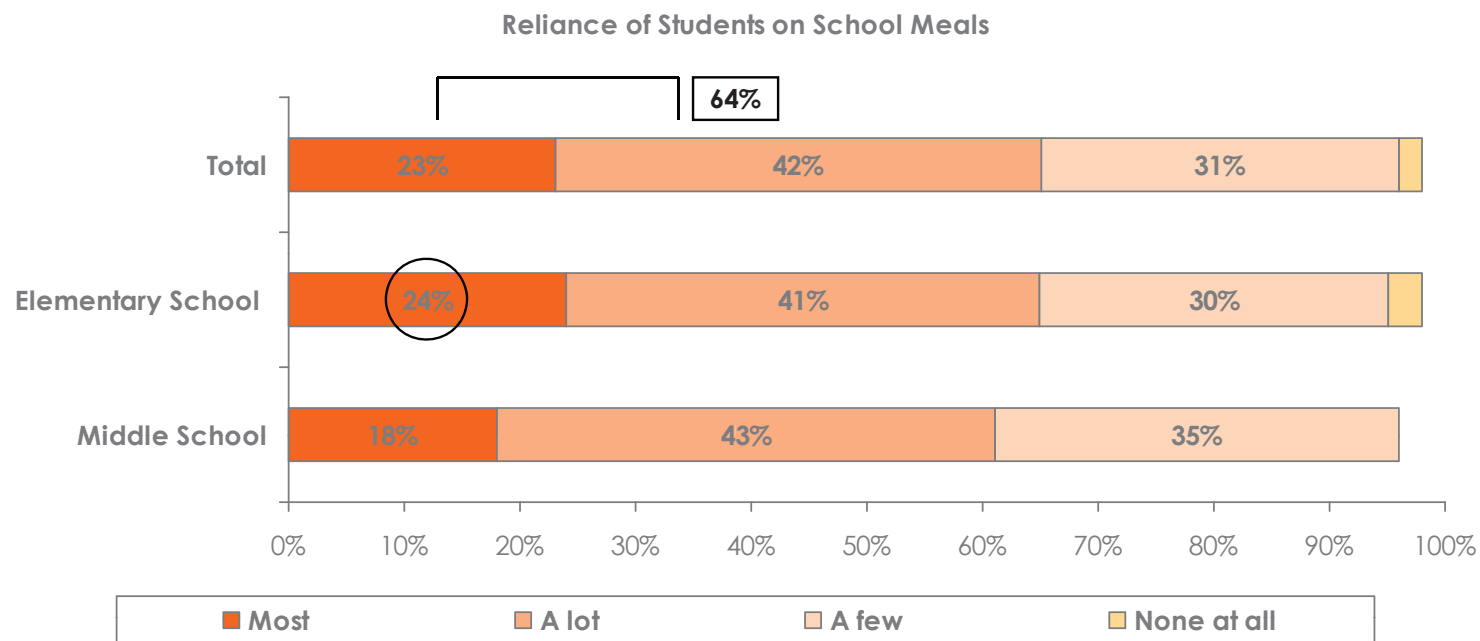
Most of the solutions to address hunger in the classroom prove more common among elementary school teachers than among middle school teachers. The most common activity is helping students sign up for school meals.

In your classroom, what are some ways you have tried to address the problem of students coming to school hungry because they are not getting enough to eat at home? (Asked only of teachers who say students regularly come to school hungry/check all that apply)

WAYS TO ADDRESS HUNGER IN CLASSROOM			
	Total	Elementary School	Middle School
Help students sign up for free or reduced price school meals	76%	78%	68%
Buy food for the classroom	63%	66%	51%
Refer the student and their family to resources in the school	52%	52%	55%
Provide healthier food options in the classroom	32%	34%	24%
Refer the student and their family to resources outside of the school	28%	29%	24%
Talk to the parents about the situation	21%	22%	16%
Ask other parents to send in food for the classroom	17%	19%	8%
School provides food/snacks	10%	10%	12%

Almost two-thirds of teachers believe most or a lot of their students rely on school meals as their primary source of nutrition. Elementary school teachers are more likely than their middle school counterparts to say most of their students rely on school meals.

Would you say most children in your school rely on school meals as their primary source of nutrition, a lot of children rely on school meals, a few, or no children in your school rely on school meals as their primary source of nutrition?

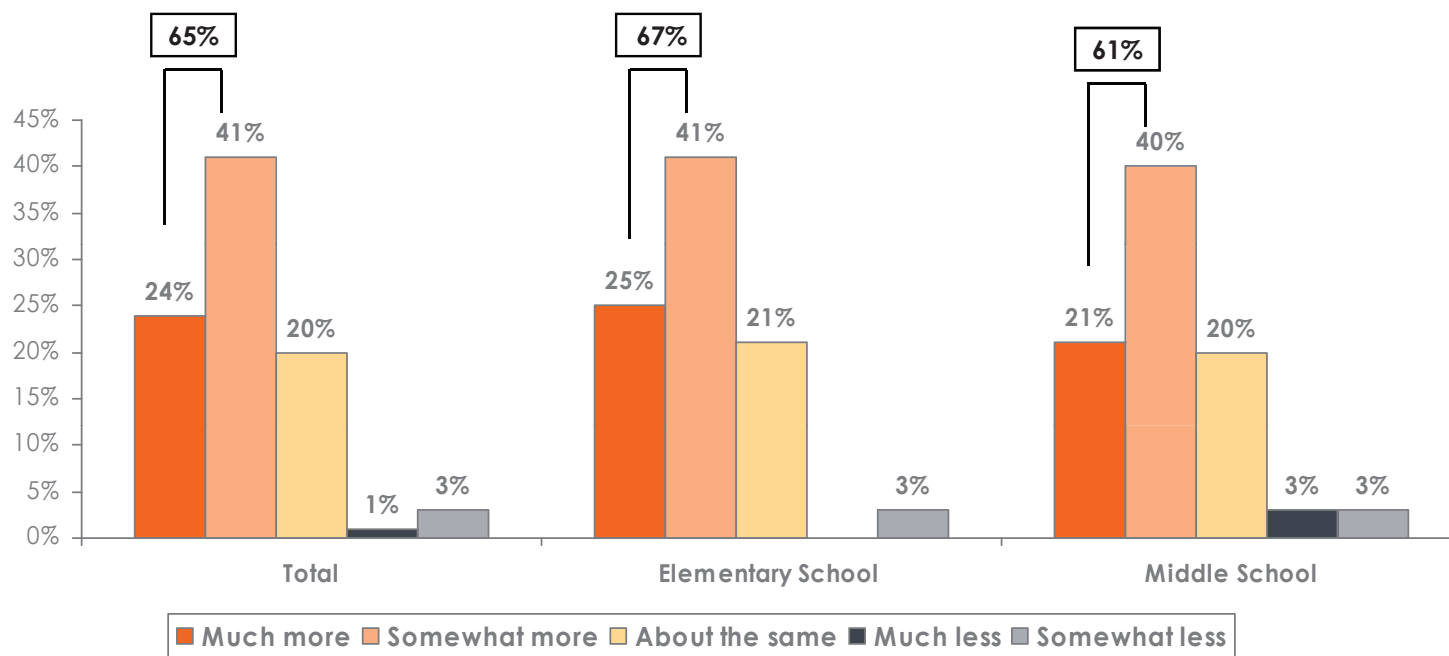


\*Numbers may not sum exactly due to rounding

Two-thirds of teachers think more students are taking advantage of free or reduced price meals than in years past. One in five believe uptake is about the same.

Would you say more or less of your students are taking advantage of free or reduced price meals available at your school this year or is it about the same as in years past?

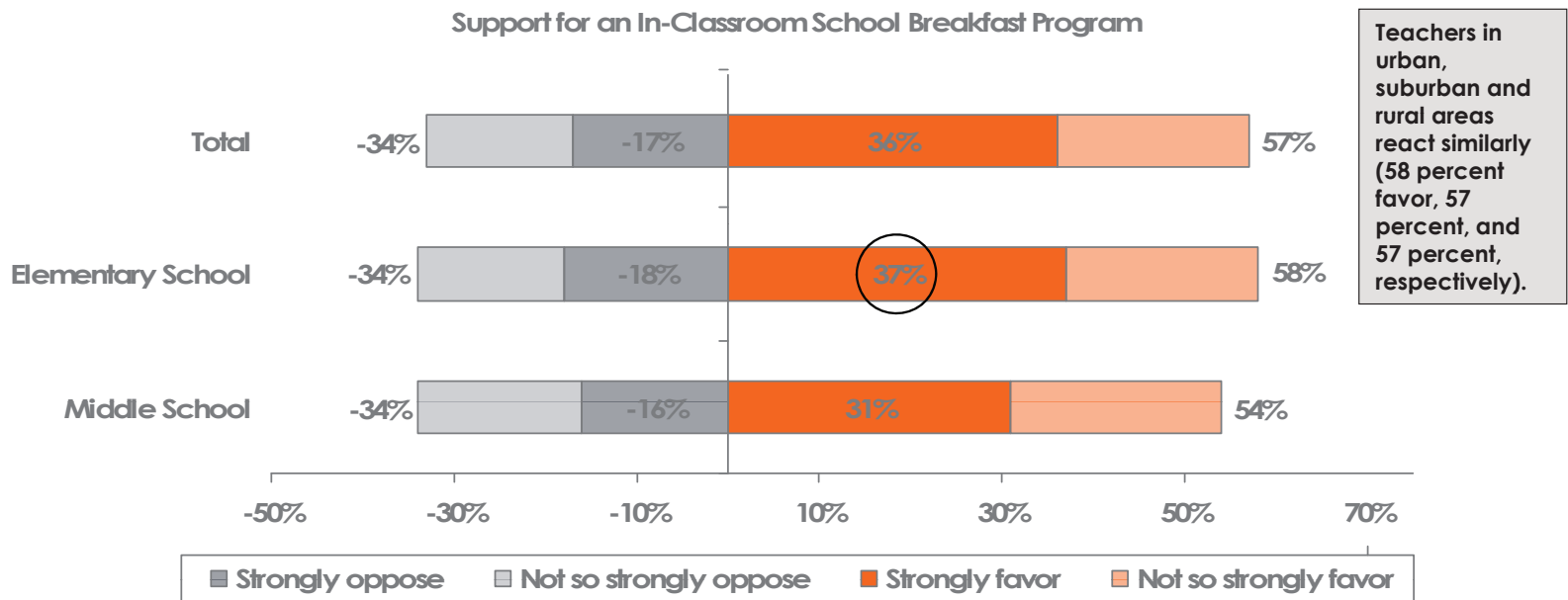
Change in Students Getting Free or Reduced Price School Meals



\*Numbers may not sum exactly due to rounding

The majority of teachers favor an in-classroom breakfast program. Intensity is higher among elementary school teachers.

Thinking about your school, do you favor or oppose an in-classroom breakfast program, where breakfast is served to all students in the classroom before the start of the school day?



The most common barrier to accessing the school breakfast program is parents not signing their children up for the program. This is more likely to be a barrier reported by middle school teachers, though half of elementary school teachers also report it happening at their school. Stigmas also play a role, especially in middle school.

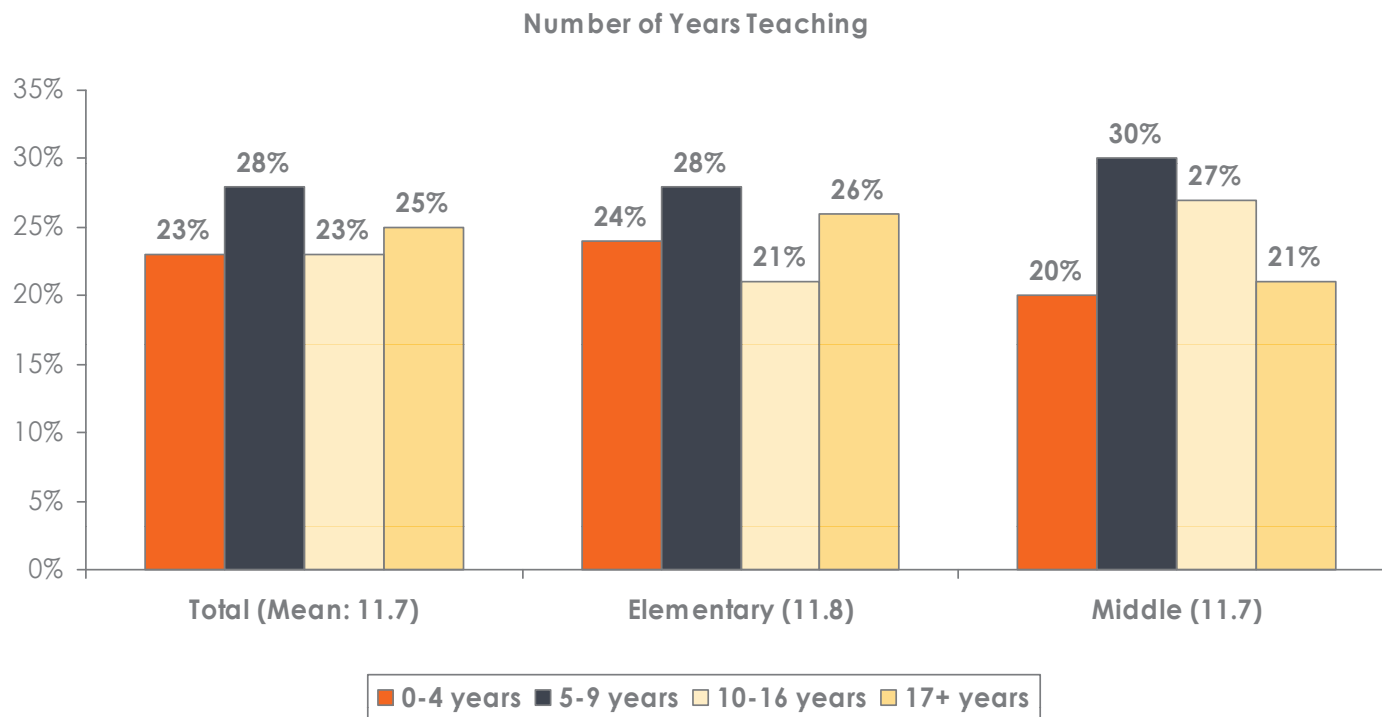
Even if your school does not offer school breakfast, which of the following do you think are barriers to enrolling in or accessing this food program? (Check all that apply)

BARRIERS TO ENROLLMENT IN SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM			
	Total	Elementary School	Middle School
Parents do not sign their children up	50%	49%	56%
Transportation (parents cannot get their children to school early enough)	43%	45%	34%
Stigma among parents	31%	29%	39%
Buses are late	28%	27%	32%
Parents do not know about the school breakfast program	24%	25%	22%
Stigma among children	21%	16%	38%
Taste of food	21%	22%	17%
Other	6%	7%	4%

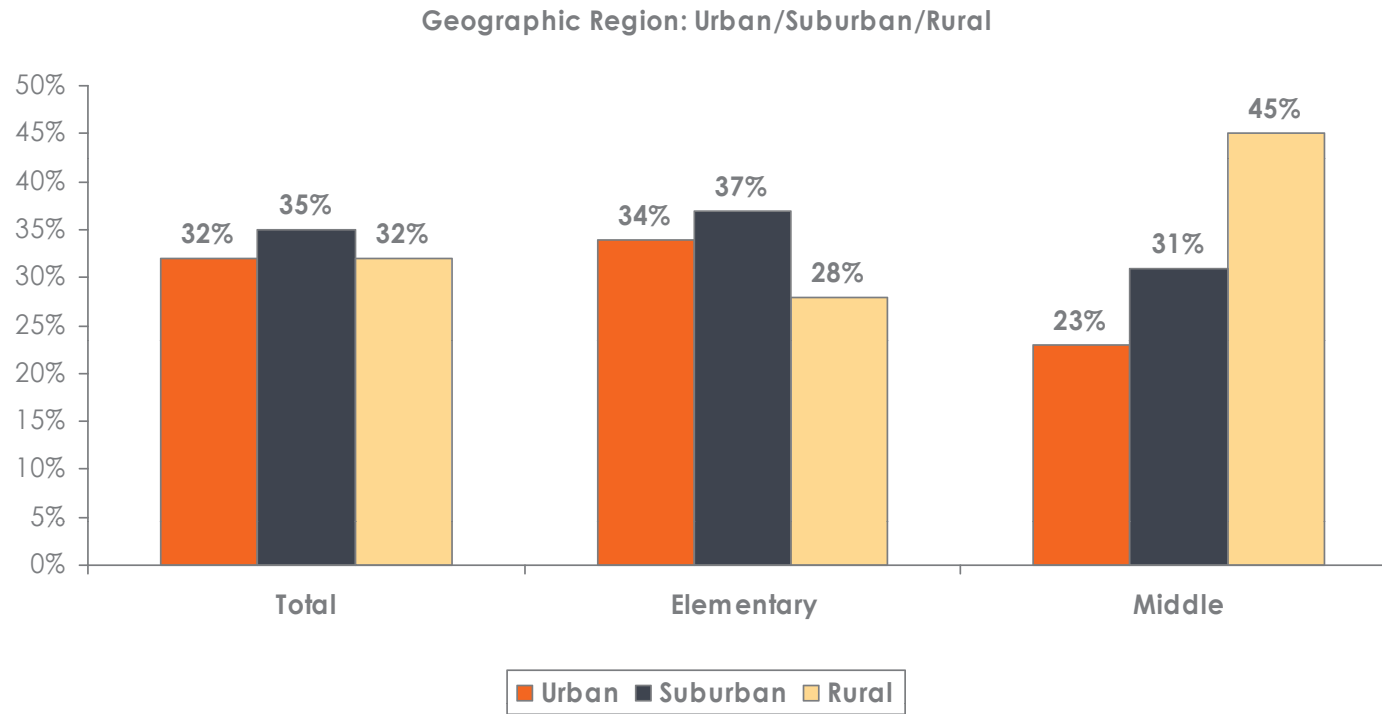
TEACHER, CLASSROOM & SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS

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79% of teachers surveyed were from elementary schools, and 21% were middle school teachers. Teachers have been in the classroom for approximately 12 years.



Across all of those surveyed, teachers were almost evenly divided among urban, suburban and rural areas.



## **Survey Methodology**

Lake Research Partners designed and administered this survey, which was conducted online. The survey reached a total of 740 K-8 public school teachers nationwide. The survey was conducted October 21 to October 28, 2009.

Email addresses were drawn from a list provided by MDR, who gathers the information for their teacher panel from several sources, including the US Department of Education and state departments of education. The margin of error for the survey is +/- 3.6%.

In interpreting survey results, all sample surveys are subject to possible sampling error; that is, the results of a survey may differ from those that would be obtained if the entire population were interviewed. The size of the sampling error depends upon both the total number of respondents in the survey and the percentage distribution of responses to a particular question.



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