



A Union of Professionals

## AFT News Release

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### **Teachers Are the First Responders to Hunger in the Classroom**

**WASHINGTON**—Teachers across the nation report that, with increasing frequency, they are witnessing hunger among their students—which affects the ability to concentrate and learn—despite government and private nutrition programs intended to ensure children have enough to eat in and out of school, according to a new survey of classroom instructors released today.

Teachers catalogued an array of issues confronting the nearly 17 million U.S. children considered at risk of hunger at some time during each school year. In the nation's classrooms, teachers are the first responders to students who often are thinking less about the day's lesson and more about where they will get their next meal. The problem has worsened over the last year of economic recession, teachers said.

“That any child in America comes to school too hungry to learn is a travesty,” American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten said. “We must find ways to make sure that all eligible students have access to nutritious food programs, such as free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch in school; and afterschool, weekend and summer programs when out of school.” She noted that nearly two-thirds of the teachers surveyed reported spending their own money to buy food for students.

Students' performance is affected by factors inside and outside the classroom, Weingarten said. “Student hunger is one of those ‘outside the classroom’ problems that could be addressed in part by community schools that become not only centers for education but also places where students and their families can access a variety of social and public services and information,” she said.

More than 60 percent of teachers responding to the survey commissioned by the Washington-based Share Our Strength anti-hunger organization said most or many of the students at their schools rely on school meals for their primary source of nutrition. But that often is not enough, and teachers are dipping into their wallets to fill the gaps. Elementary teachers reported spending an average of \$27 a month to buy snacks and other food items for their students; for middle school teachers, the average was \$38.

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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“School administrators must increase their efforts to help families sign up for meal programs available through the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other public and private agencies,” Weingarten said. Steps also should be taken, she said, to help children avoid the stigma that teachers say keeps many eligible students from enrolling in the nutrition programs.

One approach backed by nearly 60 percent of teachers is to serve school breakfast in the classroom. In schools where this happens, every student receives breakfast regardless of family income—removing the stigma that low-income students experience.

Christine Gottshall, an AFT member and fifth-grade teacher in Roxbury, Mass., participated in an online webinar today at which the results of the Share Our Strength survey were discussed.

AFT members – who include paraprofessionals, classified staff and food service workers, as well as teachers – will continue to track hunger in their schools by responding to a question posted on the union’s Web site—giving examples of how the problem affects their students and identifying steps they believe would alleviate it. In addition to what the Share Our Strength survey found about teachers’ responses to hungry students, AFT members have related other stories of cafeteria workers handing out extra food and classified staff keeping a snack drawer in the school office.

The survey of 740 elementary and middle school teachers was commissioned by Share Our Strength. It was conducted by Lake Research Partners through an online questionnaire Oct. 21-28. The results were released today during an SOS-organized webinar that featured the stories of teachers who participated in the survey.

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The AFT represents more than 1.4 million pre-K through 12th-grade teachers; paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; federal, state and local government employees; nurses and healthcare workers; and early childhood educators.