

Student backpacks get a boost

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Every Friday before leaving school, the fortunate ones get slipped into their backpacks a package of food that should keep them from going hungry over the weekend. Things like fruit cups and Vienna sausages.

The fortunate ones include 50 Wiley Elementary students selected for the Backpack Program, a project of the Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest North Carolina and Guilford Child Development. The grade schoolers are among the more than 12,000 children attending Guilford County Schools whose families live at or below 50 percent of the federal poverty level.

"Wiley is 99 percent free and reduced lunch, and any time you can supplement a household income, that's a benefit," said LaToy Kennedy, the school's principal. "The kids are excited about getting it, their parents are thankful and grateful, and we are just happy we were selected."

The program aims to address childhood hunger by providing elementary school children at risk of hunger with backpacks full of nutritious, kid-friendly foods to take home over the weekends during the school year.

"We are working hard to make people aware of the terrible statistics, and we are hoping people respond as we did — 'That's horrible' and 'How can we change that?'" said Clyde Fitzgerald, Second Harvest's executive director.

Wiley is the nonprofit's first Backpack partnership site in Guilford County, and is in its first month of operation. Second Harvest wants to expand, but that would take a commitment of \$200 per child per school year, or about \$10,000 for a minimum 50 participants.

Fitzgerald said it is a project that he hopes churches, civic groups or neighborhoods would consider taking on.

"According to the statistics, if a child doesn't eat on the weekend, it takes until Wednesday (after they've eaten meals at school) for that child to be alert enough to learn," Kennedy said.

The school's staff had been reaching in their own pockets and working with two local United Methodist churches — St. Matthews and Metropolitan — to provide for specific families.

College Park Baptist Church's Backpack Club ministry began a similar project in the spring of 2008 with five students at Peck Elementary. That effort has expanded to include nearly 30 children at two Guilford County schools. They pack special backpacks that the children return on Monday and are not affiliated with Second Harvest.

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