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Children hungry in Cayman schools

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Stacey VanDevelde of Feed Our Future makes a presentation to staff at Savannah Primary School in 2012. – PHOTO: Submitted

Almost one in four children in the public school system needed financial assistance to buy lunches last year.

Charity leaders say the statistic shows the scale of the issue the Cayman Islands is facing with child hunger. They say the figures only show part of the problem, with many teachers still digging into their own pockets to buy lunch for needy kids.

But education officials and some charities warn the problem is compounded by parents who have their priorities wrong and spend money on expensive cars and beauty treatments while their children go hungry.

The number of pupils getting support for school lunches has risen from 630 in 2009 to a record 967 in the last calendar year, according to figures released by the Department of Children and Family Services.

A further 157 children have received financial support for meals from the charity Feed Our Future, while the Kiwanis' "Buy a Kid Breakfast" scheme provides additional support for youngsters in need.

There were 4,890 schoolchildren enrolled in the public school system for 2011/2012, meaning almost a quarter of pupils are receiving some form of assistance for meals.

Stacey VanDevelde, chairwoman of Feed Our Future, said the charity had seen a spike in demand in recent years.

"A lot of families are struggling, particularly those that work in lower skilled jobs. If they have quite a few children and perhaps the father is not around, it becomes very difficult," she said. "For some children, the only proper meal they are getting is the meal they get at school."

Michael Myles, the department of education's liaison officer for at-risk youth, said there was a greater need for lunch provision. He said hunger was a prime cause of learning difficulties and anti-social behaviour, including bullying and theft.

But he warned against creating a dependency culture where parents believed feeding children was the responsibility of government.

"This service must empower our people to assume responsibility for their children, not remove it."

Mr. Myles said educators were prepared to do whatever it took to ensure children were fed because they knew the difference it made to their performance in school. He acknowledged that government needed to do more to weed out those who were exploiting the system and put the onus back on parents.

"I have worked with families who receive this service but have an expensive car, cable television, Internet access and several cell phones," he said. "If you can afford any of these items you do not need help with school lunches."

Paul de Freitas, who started the breakfast programme for Kiwanis five years ago, said many families were genuinely in need of help, but others made bad choices.

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"Part of the issue is about priorities," he said. "There is poverty in the Cayman Islands, nobody in their right mind would claim there is not, but at the same time there are a significant number of children whose parents have money for manicures and nail treatments but not for their children's food. It is pretty disgusting.

"There are other parents who drop their kids at the gas station and pick up a coke and a chocolate bar and call that breakfast."

He said studies had shown the link between hunger and anti-social behaviour in schools.

He said Kiwanis was doing what it could through regular collections to give schools money to provide breakfasts to youngsters.

Head teacher of George Town Primary Marie Martin said the school was grateful for the money it received. She added that the need was great and that teachers were still using their own money to provide food for some children.

"The charities provide much needed and much appreciated assistance in addition to what government offers," she said. "There are a lot of children in genuine need."

The Department of Child and Family Services provides a \$6-a-day allowance to qualifying children in the public school system for breakfast or lunch. The numbers, recorded for a calendar year rather than the academic year, have risen steadily over the past few years.

Aside from a spike in demand in 2008, the statistics had hovered around the 650-mark until 2009 when take-up started increasing dramatically. Last year's total of 967 was the highest recorded. There have already been 501 students who received money for

school lunches in 2013 so far, with the number expected to be much higher by December.

Jen Alicia Dixon, director of DCFS, said families seeking assistance typically indicated inadequate income, unpaid child maintenance or unemployment as the reason for needing help. She added that many were from single parent homes.

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Children hungry in Cayman schools
Posted by LB on 4/17/2013 1:19:13 PM

Hunter, it was not me. I said to Bubba (and others who do not like you) to leave you alone and use tact, as everyone has right to express his or her opinion.



agree (5)



disagree (1)



Children hungry in Cayman schools
Posted by Bodden. on 4/17/2013 12:34:05 PM

Some of you talk like you were never hungry before, or know what it is to be hungry. A child doesn't need to have a bloated belly to be hungry. If I am stop by an adult in George Town requesting money from me to buy him or her food, why should I right away surmise that this person is going to use my money for this and for that. Why would I start thinking up whole lot of what ifs. Put yourself in that persons shoes - would you want someone to refuse you food and drink when you feel you have a dire need of it and no money to buy it? Of course not. The best thing someone could do for me after begging them money for food on the street, is go to a nearby store and buy me the nourishment my body needs. Some of you commenters address this whole issue from a distance - there is no humanitarian it seems in you. Children are hungry. It is so easy to feed children. Why such a big fuss? Do you have children? Then why are you so quick to surmise that it must be their fault or their parents fault that