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**Kids caught in rising foodbank tide: breakfasts in schools urgently needed, say child advocates**

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)'s latest report, "Hard to Swallow: Foodbank Use in New Zealand," presents a picture of widespread food insecurity (where food runs out sometimes or often) in our food-producing nation. However the report says an adequate, nutritious diet can reverse most of the harm this causes to children's health and development. Quality breakfast programmes in decile one to three schools are the best way to start addressing huge urgent need, it argues.

"Over 100,000 New Zealand households experience low food security," says Donna Wynd, author of the CPAG report. "Foodbanks such as the Auckland City Mission have been reporting record demand for their services, for the first time ever under robust economic conditions. Clearly, while some families have been able to take advantage of recent improved economic conditions those who have not have fallen further behind. This was confirmed by the increasing levels of inequality reported in the government's Social Report 2005."

Evidence shows school breakfast and lunch programmes reduce the physical and psychological harm to children caused by food insecurity, including lowering their risk of obesity. Children become more likely to attend school regularly and achieve higher test scores.

"School breakfasts in some schools are absolutely essential," says Shirley Maihi, Principal of Finlayson Park School. Along with other schools serving low income communities, Finlayson Park provides breakfast for pupils on a daily basis even though it is not currently funded to do so. Maihi says this is because both the need and the rewards are so great. "We call it brain food," she says, "and it makes a huge difference to our students. Children simply cannot learn effectively if they are hungry. We've seen too many promising students fall behind, right from the very beginning of their school days, trying to learn through a hungry haze."

There is no comparable foodbank story to tell in Australia, and Donna Wynd notes that in New Zealand there was almost no call for foodbanks prior to the 1990s. "Two decades ago we were a much poorer country as measured by economic statistics, but we could feed our children without resort to foodbanks. If this is the trend in economic good times, what of the future when the next recession strikes?" she asks.

Without adequate food the day-to-day reality, as well as the future, is bleak for the nation's most vulnerable children. Yet the reasons for increased foodbank demand are clear. "Lack of income is the key cause of foodbank use" says Wynd, "and incomes for foodbank users have fallen in real terms since the 1991 benefit cuts. While most foodbank users are beneficiaries increasing numbers are low-paid workers."

The report traces foodbank use to the downward spiral of poverty, fuelled by inadequate income, rising costs and debt. "Approximately 80% of foodbank users report being in debt, especially to WINZ," Wynd reports.

Counting those who fall below the poverty line is undeniably necessary but must be supplemented by other indicators, of which foodbank usage is one. The government must take up child poverty issues in their own right. Child Poverty Action Group urges the adoption of a courageous long-term vision prioritising the security and future of all children, particularly the most vulnerable.

Other recommendations include:

- Taking full account of foodbank data as bottom line indicators of ongoing desperate need in our communities.
- Concerted measures to reduce food insecurity among New Zealand children and in consequence the likelihood of obesity.

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