



From Roots to Soil: Creating Class Projects That Grow!

Community IMPACT

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Nourishing Our Community's Youngest Learners

Rising Leaders, Real Impact

Summer 2026 Edition
kidsfoodbasket.org

Nourishing News

From Roots to Soil: Creating Class Projects That Grow!

When you support Kids' Food Basket (KFB), you nourish minds and futures. As kids engage with experiential education at KFB about healthy food, how it's grown and why it matters, lessons stick and perspectives change. Lately, many classrooms are taking KFB education to the next level, using what they learned as a launching point for their own class projects. Our educators were part of each project to guide and inspire students, combining daily food access with immersive education today for a thriving tomorrow.

Coit Creative Arts Tests Hydroponic Growing

Through community generosity, our team was honored to facilitate a hydroponic growing project at Coit Creative Arts Academy in Grand Rapids this spring! During a KFB educator school visit for "March Is Reading Month," we uncovered a shared curiosity for how plants can thrive in water systems. Growing ever-bearing strawberries has proven fruitful in our own Kent County greenhouse. KFB provided some of our strawberry roots to the school so that students could get started on their own thriving project.

All spring, students have watched as leaves and tiny white flowers have emerged from the small hydroponic classroom system. This has sparked conversations about what plants need, the life cycle and beginning stages of a plant and how farmers can troubleshoot to get the best results. We have heard that the students found this project to be *berry* engaging and want to repeat it next year!

Three Oaks Academy Makes Garden Beds

Creating a raised-bed community garden has been a yearlong endeavor for students at Three Oaks Academy in Muskegon. KFB educators partnered with the school to facilitate education and materials for the immersive project. First, sixth graders planted KFB-provided heirloom garlic in garden beds that they cleaned out and prepared themselves.

According to Carina Freeman, a sixth-grade teacher at Three Oaks Academy, the planting taught garden skills, but it also taught another invaluable lesson: patience.

"When the snow disappears and you see something popping up, it's that delayed gratification that a lot of our students don't have because everything they are used to is instant," said Mrs. Freeman. "They cleared the beds, planted it and then waited all winter. By the end of the year, the plants are as tall as them, and it's just amazing to watch them through the whole process, especially when the first little peek comes through."



Continued on page 2

Community **IMPACT**

Our work is made possible through the generosity of the community. Whether you donated, volunteered or spread the word, you are the reason that kids have access to the healthy food and education they need to grow, learn and be their best. **Together, we:**



Hosted the first cooking demonstration and nutrition lesson in our Muskegon County education center with Three Oaks Academy sixth graders.

Expanded the education volunteer program to support nutrition and agriculture lessons on both of our farms.



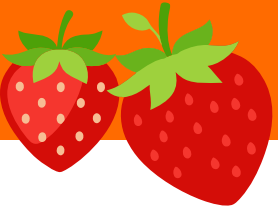
Created meaningful experiences through field trips to both farms for learners across West Michigan.



Broke ground on a sensory garden in Muskegon County with raised beds that will allow us to provide experiential learning and grow more fresh produce for our community.



Successfully produced hydroponic strawberries in our greenhouse to provide education and taste testing for students visiting the farm.



Took six schools off the waiting list for Sack Supper service this academic year, including four Head Start preschools.



Served **1,777,425** meals from July through April, including Sack Suppers, Weekend Meals, break bags, emergency response and other programs.



Provided **110,784** meals in break bags before Thanksgiving, winter and spring breaks.



Roots to Soil, continued

Fifth-grade students also worked on a year-round compost project after learning with KFB educators. The result provided nutrients for the garlic plants, and together, the classes teamed up to take care of their project.

"Once they see it's real and something is really growing, they get very protective over that space," said Mrs. Freeman. "It's amazing to watch them become gardeners. They really do. They really internalize it and take care of it."

This summer, the school transplanted KFB bean and sunflower seedlings, adding variety, nutrition and color to the space.

Burton Elementary Grows Fresh Basil

Burton Elementary students in Grand Rapids have taken their plant growth lessons with KFB one step further. After a KFB lesson about plant parts and what's in a seed, the students planted their very own basil from the KFB farm in Kent County.

In the classroom, the tiny seedlings took root and provided an opportunity to talk about plant growth and the plant life cycle. After the students had watched their own plants grow on classroom windowsills and everyone had a better understanding of what the fragrant herb needed to stay healthy, a basil plant was sent home with each student.

We are honored by every classroom and educator who has taken the time to extend hands-on education beyond the lesson. Together, we are fostering a lifelong passion for and understanding of how food grows and empowering kids to plant seeds toward a better future.

KUDOS FROM Bridget



Dear KFB Community,

This school year, we served more than 1.77 million meals to West Michigan kids. If you are reading this letter, you have made that number possible.

We were also grateful to take six schools off the waiting list this school year, including four preschools, which you will read about in this newsletter. During this academic year, 68 schools received the 11,500 meals that KFB delivers each weekday. **That is 68 schools full of children who know where their next meal is coming from.**

In a tumultuous time of rising costs, your support has meant continual access. Families everywhere have seen their expenses rise. So have we. Grocery prices have risen by over 20% in the last five years. The cost of fresh vegetables and fruit, two food categories that are important parts of Sack Suppers, has skyrocketed. The cost of gasoline to deliver Sack Suppers and fresh vegetables has hit record highs this spring. **And still, we ended the school year serving more meals and schools than we had originally anticipated. Through community generosity, our daily meal distribution represents about 28% of the need in West Michigan.** We are grateful to every single person who has contributed to this impact as we sustainably scale to meet more of this growing need.

During the summer, there are even fewer opportunities and resources for our neighbors to get enough good food. In response, through support like yours, our meal program pivots from a school-based model and goes even further into the community, with over 100 distribution sites to meet families where they are and get healthy food into the hands and bellies of the children who need it most.

We are also preparing for the 2026-2027 school year, and we anticipate beginning the fall with at least 28 schools on our waiting list. About 403,000 children in Michigan experience food insecurity. The need is growing, and we are working to meet this need.

This work is hard. But it is work that is worthwhile. We have seen the difference consistent access can make. This work works.

Our friend and Muskegon Public Schools principal Okeelah McBride shared her personal experience with a young student at Bunker Elementary who was having a hard time focusing on school and participating in class due to hunger. After receiving daily Sack Suppers, he blossomed as both his confidence and grades rose. He engaged, made friends and even joined the football team, which he is still part of today.

Jackie Westover, advocate and Assistant Principal at Harrison Park Academy, shared with us that this past academic year, her school ensured access to Sack Suppers for student athletes before practices. She told us that Sack Suppers gave students the energetic edge to focus and be their best. And for the first time, both the girls' basketball team and the boys' soccer team won district championships.

You are the reason local children have the good food they rely on when the school bell rings, and the reason they have enough energy to grow, play and succeed.

Investing in community health means a stronger, healthier West Michigan for us all. Thank you for supporting this critical work, which is needed now more than ever. Thank you for standing up and taking action, because with good food, we have good health. With good health, we have good futures. And together, it all adds up.

With love,



Bridget Clark Whitney
President and Founding CEO

Making Meals for Muskegon Maritime Academy

In response to the sudden loss of school food service, we mobilized our resources to serve lunch to students at Muskegon Maritime Academy in the last semester of the school year.

The service began this winter after a budget crisis left nearly 100 students without school meals each weekday. We quickly partnered with school leadership to counter the impending cutoff.

"We are grateful for Kids' Food Basket stepping in to support the students of Muskegon Maritime Academy during a time of uncertainty," said Jessica Owens, Principal at Muskegon Maritime Academy. "The smile on our cadets' faces as they get their personally packed bag of food is a true indicator of the good works Kids' Food Basket continues to do for the kids of Muskegon."

This response was made possible in part by our expanded service in Muskegon County with the 2025 purchase and renovation of our new home on Barclay Street. The expansion has allowed for the distribution of more than 500 additional daily evening meals to children in Muskegon County, as well meaningful community partnerships, educational opportunities and emergency response agility.

We are honored to be part of a community that takes care of our neighbors, in good times and in hard ones. Together, we are working toward a more nourished future!



Summer Food Service Program

When school buses stop running, kids need more ways for their meals to make it home. Kids who live in rural communities lose access to school meals over the summer and usually live far away from other ways to get similar meals. According to the Food and Agriculture Research Center (FRAC), special programs are important to address this time-sensitive gap.

This summer, we are expanding our work with the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), which addresses food insecurity beyond our cities and into rural communities that lack a city bus or a nearby grocery store, making it difficult for families to access healthy food.

SFSP is one of the few programs that we receive federal reimbursement for, diversifying our funding and allowing philanthropic dollars to stretch even further.

As part of the program, we deliver weekly family food boxes, each filled with 14 ready-to-eat meals per child, to six sites. Families can open a box and know that meals for the week are already prepared and within reach.





Jan's Garden:

Growing Serenity in Kent County

This summer, we are honored to invite the community to Jan's Garden, a newly renovated and accessible garden path, relaxation area and growing space on our Kent County farm.

The idea for the project came to Max Gibbs, a regular KFB volunteer, friend and philanthropist, as he sat in the sensory garden after the recent loss of his beloved wife of 59 years, Jan. Alongside her husband, Jan was a dear friend and champion of KFB, spreading warmth and care everywhere she went. She loved flowers and nature and was at home greeting guests under the farm awning during Farm to Table dinners.

Max pitched the idea of creating an accessible area around the sensory garden and barn to honor the 250 volunteers who power KFB each weekday. It would create a path where native plants bloom and everyone is invited to visit in tranquility, in dedication to the peace and warmth that Jan brought to everyone she knew.

The privately funded project broke ground in April. Plans to create an intentional environment were gifted by landscape architect Trevor Bosworth of Viridis Design Group, and Josh Rich at Airport Aggregate gifted excavation work. Kent Concrete donated the labor, and Hygrade gifted concrete to not only

finish the garden path but also create a new event patio next to the greenhouse to expand future event hosting. Edible trees and shrubs were installed by Katerberg VerHage to create a lush natural edge to the area.

Max and KFB Senior Farm Manager Jason Lundberg oversaw each step and witnessed more than just construction: From start to finish, the project was done with care and expertise, and with thoughts of Jan at every moment.

Jan's Garden opened in an official dedication on June 8. Max and Jan's children and grandchildren flew in to join the KFB community, which Max calls "our second family," to remember Jan while taking in the serene pathways.

Jan's Garden is now open and available to host you! Next time you visit KFB Headquarters in Kent County, have a moment of rest and renewal in this special space made for community and inspired by love.

Scan to join in the generosity with a gift to Jan's Nourishing Kids Fund.



COMMUNITY PARTNER SHOUTOUT

Frey Foundation

A heartfelt thank you to Frey Foundation for your transformational support. Your generosity is building a stronger future for local children by expanding access to healthy food. We're deeply grateful for your investment in our shared community.





Stories That Touch Our Hearts

Nourishing Our Community's Youngest Learners

It is critical that children have access to the healthy food their growing bodies need to thrive. This is why the focus of our work has been on getting food to elementary-aged children, who grow rapidly in both their brains and bodies from kindergarten to fifth grade.



But this growth does not start at age five. Young children are learning and growing at a quick pace and need nourishment to fuel their days of discovery. To address the access gap during this vital period, we have been honored to partner with Head Start in Kent County to deliver Sack Suppers to preschoolers in six schools.

In the winter of 2024, our programming team met with MaDonna Princer, Executive Director of Head Start for Kent County. She identified a need among the families her preschool program serves. The school neighborhoods featured a growing number of Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) families. These are families in which parental figures are working but are still not making enough to make ends meet. With food costs rising, ALICE families were often forced to leave behind healthy options at the grocery store to pay other necessary expenses.

Soon, we began serving daily Sack Suppers to two Head Start preschools. After this pilot proved successful, we were honored to begin the 2025-2026 school year with an additional four schools on our service list, providing daily evening meals to six Head Start preschools in Kent County.

This academic year, we served more than 48,000 meals to Kent County's youngest learners through this expansion, including extra meals during our response to the SNAP gap this fall.

The response has been inspiring.

After receiving service through the program, educators reported that Sack Suppers meant not only increased access to healthy food for their students but also increased students' exposure to and willingness to eat fruits and vegetables. More than half of families surveyed said that the program has both saved them money and made them feel supported by community.

"My child has chosen to eat new things in the Sack Supper, making it so I can spend money on other necessities."

-Head Start Parent



This is just the beginning of our work to nourish West Michigan's youngest students. Each meal is made possible by you, our generous community. Thank you for making this expansion possible.

Hundreds of children attend Head Start programs within our service area. Many of these schools are on a waiting list until we receive the funding necessary to responsibly expand programming. Through community support, we look to expand this program and add additional schools when possible.

To make a gift nourishes minds and brightens futures, visit kidsfoodbasket.org or scan the QR code.



"My child refused to try new foods. The Sack Suppers have a variety of foods that she tries and likes."

-Head Start Parent

"My son is excited to come home and see what is in his [Sack Supper]. He typically eats everything. It brings him joy."

-Head Start Parent



COMMUNITY PARTNER SHOUTOUT



Chobani

Thank you, Chobani, for donating over 18,000 pounds of yogurt to West Michigan kids! Your generous donation adds a delicious, protein-packed dairy option to Sack Suppers while showing children across West Michigan that their community cares about their well-being and future.

Chobani®

Volunteer Spotlight

Delivery Driving for a Difference

All three of our locations are full of energy each weekday while volunteers gather to prepare and pack thousands of meals. Bags are packed and counted into plastic totes, which get stacked in coolers, ready to make their way to local kids.

What comes next is a crucial part of getting meals across West Michigan: Totes are loaded into vans, and volunteer drivers deliver them to a total of 68 schools across four counties.

We often hear transportation come up as a barrier to healthy food access. Whether it is food deserts, where no grocery store is within walking distance, lack of convenient public transit or not having a reliable vehicle, many families face difficulties obtaining healthy food simply because they do not have a way to reach it. This is why volunteer drivers and our school-distribution model are critical.

Meal delivery drivers are usually regular volunteers who drive the same local route each week, becoming the friendly face of KFB for each school on their path. Their impact is astounding: This year, volunteers have delivered more than 1.77 million meals a total of 68,000 miles; that's enough to circle the Earth 2.5 times.

What Drives Our Drivers

For married couple Reed and Deb Ottenwess, who began a Kent County route this winter, it's a way to give back to the community while connecting with neighbors. Reed enjoys giving back through driving, and with Deb in the passenger seat, the two already have their Thursday afternoon shift down to a pleasant routine.

"You meet such great people volunteering, and it doesn't matter who you are or what you look like," said Deb.

"Everyone from the staff at KFB to the personnel at the school are always so appreciative and pleasant. ...We have a blast, and we always leave feeling great."

Jim Kubiak has been driving Sack Suppers to schools in Ottawa and Allegan counties for more than two years. After driving long distances during his career, delivering for KFB has been a way to utilize his skills while enjoying the sunshine.

"I have experienced unique situations [while driving] which reinforced the value of the program," said Jim. "I expect to stay involved with KFB for the foreseeable future."

Want to drive change for local kids? Become a delivery driver at any of our three locations. Shifts are weekly, flexible and a fun way to stay active and connected. To learn more and get started, email liz.collver@kidsfoodbasket.org.



COMMUNITY PARTNER SHOUTOUT

ADAC

From supporting Feeding Our Future: A Campaign for Muskegon Children to sponsoring events and showing up as one of our Go Orange challenge winners, ADAC continues to make an incredible impact through partnership and community spirit. Thank you for helping raise awareness around childhood hunger and for investing in healthier futures for local kids.





Rising Leaders, Real Impact

Volunteers of all ages power KFB. Mason Babiak (Wayland Union High School) and Maria Christopoulos (Forest Hills Eastern High School) show what is possible when teens lead. As graduates of the Class of 2026, they reflected on their years of service at KFB.

Mason first discovered KFB during his freshman year through a friend and found himself drawn in. "There was a story [Bridget] shared about a boy who saved his decorated Sack Supper bags because they were 'his own.' That was the hook," Mason shared. "I wanted to keep coming back to see what more I could do."

Maria's connection to KFB began in childhood, packing meals with her faith community. In high school, she deepened her involvement by joining her school's KFB Club, taking on a leadership role. What was a club of 30 bloomed to 130 members, a reflection of Maria's leadership. "Young people coming together; that was really cool and inspired me," Maria stated. "With KFB, it was a tangible difference."

For both students, volunteering is about connection and seeing the transformative powers of access and education in action. "I didn't like vegetables before KFB," Mason said. "But I started prepping them, and I thought, 'Maybe I should give them another chance.' And now I like vegetables!"

Maria recalls meaningful moments connecting directly with children. "It is impactful to see kids right here in our community that experience food insecurity. It isn't a far-away problem."

What keeps them coming back is the community. Volunteers of all ages, backgrounds and abilities work together, united by a shared purpose. One of Maria's favorite moments is seeing



all the volunteers of varying backgrounds. "It's a mix of people I would never otherwise get to know, coming together for good."

Mason agrees, saying, "Whether you're cutting peppers, helping on the farm or working an event, there are so many ways to get involved."

Both credit their volunteer experience with shaping them as leaders. They have gained confidence and fostered a deeper understanding of the community. Their efforts earned them both the 2025 Outstanding Youth in Philanthropy Award last November at the Association of Fundraising Professionals conference. But their impact is not something they are waiting to grow into. "We aren't the leaders of tomorrow," said Mason, "We are the leaders of today. We don't have to wait for someone else to tell us it's our time to help."

Their advice to other young people looking to get involved is simple.

"Take the leap," Mason encourages. Maria echoes this, saying, "You can make a difference. Everyone can make a difference."

Maria and Mason remind us that leadership does not have to wait. They show us that anyone, of any age, has the power to change lives. When asked to sum up volunteering at KFB in one word, Mason easily answered, "Awesome." Maria took a moment, coming up with two: "Either community or love." Now, we invite you to join this awesome community of love.



Mason plans to attend Indiana University and study nonprofit management in leadership, with ambitions to one day work at Kids' Food Basket.



Maria plans to attend the University of Notre Dame to study business and become a better leader.

Save the Date



Farm to Table Dinners

June through September

Experience the beauty of the KFB farms while dining on chef-prepared, locally sourced cuisine.



One Meal One Mission

September 24

Delight in an exquisite culinary experience as our greenhouse is transformed into a magical dining room.



Brown Bag Decorating Month

October

Add a smile to a Sack Supper by decorating paper bags and dropping them off at any KFB location.



Gobble Wobble

November 26

Run, walk or wobble to the finish line with the whole family on the most popular running day of the year.

For more information on how to sponsor, purchase tickets or join us at any of these events, visit kidsfoodbasket.org/events or email events@kidsfoodbasket.org

COMMUNITY PARTNER SHOUTOUT

Champion Force Athletics

KFB events are stronger because of partners like Champion Force Athletics. As a Premier event sponsor, your commitment creates meaningful community gatherings that raise awareness and inspire generosity to nourish children across West Michigan.



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Volunteer Opportunities

Philanthropy Corner

KENT COUNTY

- **Monday**
 - 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. - General Farm
 - 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. - Food Prep
 - 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. - Meal Packing
 - 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. - Farm Landscaping
 - 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. - Farm, Produce Washing and Packing
 - 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. - Meal Packing
- **Tuesday**
 - 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. - General Farm
 - 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. - Food Prep
 - 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. - Meal Packing
 - 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. - Outdoor Beautification
 - 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. - Farm, Produce Washing and Packing
 - 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. - Meal Production
- **Wednesday**
 - 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. - General Farm
 - 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. - Meal Production
 - 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. - Farm Landscaping
- **Thursday**
 - 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. - General Farm
 - 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. - Outdoor Beautification
- **Friday**
 - 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. - General Farm

MUSKEGON COUNTY

- **Monday**
 - 9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. - Food Prep
 - 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. - Meal Packing
- **Tuesday**
 - 9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. - Food Prep
 - 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. - Meal Packing
- **Wednesday**
 - 9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. - Meal Production

OTTAWA + ALLEGAN

- **Monday**
 - 9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. - Food Prep
 - 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. - General Farm
 - 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. - Farm, Produce Washing and Packing
- **Tuesday**
 - 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. - General Farm
 - 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. - Farm, Produce Washing and Packing
- **Wednesday**
 - 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. - General Farm
- **Thursday**
 - 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. - General Farm
- **Friday**
 - 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. - General Farm

A gift through your appreciated investments can maximize your ability to nourish children today! These gifts are simple to set up and can often provide considerable tax savings.

Donating appreciated stock can be a meaningful way to support KFB while potentially receiving tax benefits. To initiate a stock gift or obtain account information, please contact philanthropy@kidsfoodbasket.org. We also encourage you to consult your financial, tax or legal advisor to determine what is best for you.

Donating through your IRA can be a tax-smart way to support KFB if you are age 73 or older and are required to take an annual required minimum distribution (RMD). By making a qualified charitable distribution (QCD) directly from your IRA, you may be able to avoid paying taxes on that distribution. Individuals can begin making QCDs at age 70.5. To make an IRA gift, contact your IRA administrator to request the necessary paperwork. Please notify KFB of your intent, as IRA distributions may arrive without donor identification.

Questions? Please contact philanthropy@kidsfoodbasket.org or call 616.235.4532 and dial 4 to reach our philanthropy team.

Your Impact at Harrison Park Academy



Scan the QR code to hear from Assistant Principal Jackie Westover and the Clay-Bradshaw family about how healthy, nutritious food for all is making a difference for schools like Harrison Park Academy.





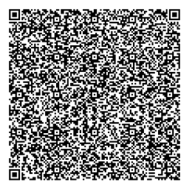
Let Your Impact **GROW**

Growing season is well underway, and we need your help to capture the harvest. Volunteering on our farms in Kent County and Ottawa County is a wonderful way to connect with nature, the beautiful Michigan weather and your neighbors.

Want to learn more about agriculture? Our friendly farmers and farm facilitators happily share their knowledge, and volunteers often enjoy applying what they learn in their home growing spaces.

Sign up any weekday morning to tend to the farm, harvest crops or even prepare vegetables for community distribution. Extra help is needed on our Ottawa County farm, conveniently located for our lakeshore neighbors and just a 30-minute drive from our friends in Kent County.

Scan the QR code to sign up today:



Fill the Basket

We're gearing up for the third annual Fill the Basket in partnership with The Free Beer and Hot Wings Show! In its first two years, this inspiring day of giving has made a tremendous impact to nourish West Michigan kids, removing two schools from our waiting list and creating lasting change.

On Thursday, August 6, tune into 97.9 WGRD from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. as Gregg "Free Beer" Daniels, Chris "Hot Wings" Michels, Steve, Kelly and Maitlynn host a radiothon to make a difference for local kids. Throughout the day, listeners will hear stories from our neighbors as educators, community organizers and more share how KFB's mission has touched their lives and hearts.

