

Correction: An infobox with this story originally misidentified how many meals were served in October 2016 and 2017. It has been corrected. Maybe a dozen kids took advantage of free evening meals when the YMCA began its supper program at three Tulsa elementary schools during the spring semester. Now upward of 100 show up after every school day to eat and talk with mentors. Organizers suggest the shift in participation for the new Welcome Table program aligns with a statewide effort to provide more free dinners to children from low-income neighborhoods. The Welcome Table serves children of all ages, regardless of family income. “I think we initially knew that there was a large problem in our community,” said Kyle Wilkes, vice president of mission advancement at the YMCA. “We just weren’t sure what the response would be.” Almost 15,000 low-income children in Oklahoma received after-school suppers on an average weekday in October 2017 — a 121 percent jump from the previous year, according to a new study by the Food Research and Action Center. That increase is the largest of any state during the same time frame by a large margin. North Carolina had the second highest increase at 67 percent, followed by Mississippi at 54 percent. According to the report, 35 states increased participation in general. Federally funded suppers for students became available nationwide through the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which authorized the U.S. Department of Agriculture to provide more meals to at-risk children via after-school programs. Richard Comeau, program director of Hunger Free Oklahoma, believes the state saw such a dramatic increase between 2016 and 2017 due to an initiative to raise awareness of after-school suppers. “The year before that, there were very few organizations in the state even trying it,” Comeau said. “So we’ve just had a lot of new organizations giving it a go this year, basically.” The Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma is perhaps the biggest provider of after-school meals in Tulsa, Comeau said. The food bank partnered with YMCA to create the Welcome Home program, which currently serves suppers and provides mentoring for kids at Eugene Field, Sequoyah and McClure elementary schools. Comeau said Tulsa

Public Schools offers free snacks for students after school through the National School Lunch Program, but the district is not involved in the program that provides a full supper. Hunger Free Oklahoma is working with TPS to expand evening meal options to other schools. Despite more than doubling its participation, Oklahoma's after-school meal participation last year still fell below the national average. Only one of every 22 children who participated in the National School Lunch Program for low-income families also received an after-school supper in October 2017. Nationally, the report found that 1 in 19 low-income children received an after-school supper. Food Research and Action Center official Crystal FitzSimons, coauthor of the report, said the 121 percent increase is diluted by Oklahoma's participation rates having been at such a low level. FitzSimons said it's important to not diminish Oklahoma's efforts to "move the needle" on free suppers and credited organizations like Hunger Free Oklahoma for its outreach and promotion. But she stressed that there's a lot of work to be done to make sure all at-risk children have access to three meals a day. "We know there are a lot of kids who go home to empty cupboards," she said, "and providing an after-school supper helps to ensure that kids are getting breakfast and lunch and supper and getting the nutrition they need to thrive and learn." The promise of an evening meal also helps draw students to supervised programs that keep them out of trouble and offer quality learning activities. Many parents benefit from after-school programs that look after their children while they work. "It's really a win-win," FitzSimons said. "The suppers provide nutrition to grow and be healthy, and the after-school programs provide the educational enrichment activities and day care for working-class families." However, the report states the limited participation in suppers mirrors the limited number of after-school programs serving low-income communities. These programs reportedly either don't exist or are too costly and out of reach for struggling families if they aren't supported with public or private money. The most effective way to connect more children to after-school suppers, according to the report, is to first ensure there are enough affordable programs

available. From there, FitzSimons encourages schools to transition from offering only after-school snacks to suppers, as well. She also said there needs to be more investment at the state and municipal levels to help expand outreach. Kyle Hinchey 918-581-8451 kyle.hinchey@tulsaworld.com Twitter