If you asked most people what they thought of Social Studies when they were in school, you would likely get many responses containing the word “boring.” Getting students to feel connected to the lives of people in distant places or decades is a daunting, but never more relevant challenge, for schools to approach. If students could walk a mile in the shoes of a colonial soldier at Valley Forge or take a field trip to see the Great Rift Valley in Africa, it stands to reason that they would find more meaning in their previously “boring” two inch thick text-books. With this premise in mind, students and teachers of St. Francis de Sales Jr. High Academy organized an in school banquet. The banquet was held in honor of an infamous guest….Hunger.

Each student from grades 4-7 at St. Francis drew a fictitious name tag out of an opaque bag just before lunchtime. Printed along side their new name for the day was the name of a country and that countries’ per capita income. Students were then segregated according to their income bracket. A select group of students from wealthy, developed countries made up only ten percent of the student body. They dined on steaks, shrimp, baked potatoes, asparagus, salad, fresh rolls, sparkling grape juice, and Mountain Dew. Their heavily ornate table was located in the center of the room with classical music playing softly nearby.

Twenty percent of the student body resided in middle-class developing countries. Those students sat at the normal lunch tables and ate the school lunch that was on the menu for the day, Hammie Sammies. The remainder of the St. Francis students drew name tags from generally impoverished countries. Countries such as Bangladesh, with a per-capita yearly (PPP) income equivalent to $1,400 or The Democratic Republic of the Congo with a per capita yearly income (PPP) of a mere $300. These students endured a meal consisting of a small bowl of rice and a plastic cup of water. They ate their lunch sitting on the floor.

“Many people aren’t aware that the majority of the people on earth live in poverty.”, stated Jr. High Social Studies teacher Allen Stenberg. “Kids are prone to thinking that many people live lives that are economically comparable to ours here in America and unless you live in the developed
countries of Europe, that’s just simply not the case."

The seventh grade class at St. Francis had been studying Sub-Saharan Africa and they spearheaded the banquet. Seventh grader Jen Desjarden was in charge of delivering the cherry cheesecake and Oreo pie to the head table for dessert. She liked the event and stated, "It taught kids how people in Africa and other parts of the world live and what they eat. I do wish I could have gotten in the poor group though, because I didn’t eat breakfast or anything. I wanted to see what it was really like, but I had to eat Hammie Sammies instead. Sixth grader P.J. Birr did fall into the impoverished income bracket and he said, “I felt jealous of the people from the developed nations who got the better food than I did. It taught me how people feel in other countries.”

During the course of the meal, various teachers and even Father Glenn Theoret took turns on the microphone reading facts about the state of poverty worldwide. The facilitators also addressed the feelings of contempt aimed at those who were fortunate enough to land a seat at the head table. The students from developed countries were not allowed to share their bounty with the lower classes. Some of them felt very empathetic and even guilty about being in a higher class than their peers. Fifth grader Hailey Hoholik said that she felt, “Very guilty. Everybody was begging and I really didn’t like seeing my best friends eating on the floor.”

When forth grade teacher Auna Oman took her turn at the microphone, she pointed out that although we don’t usually see or think about those living in poverty, they are there everyday looking in at those of us who live in developed countries, with great envy. She told the students that they owe something to the less fortunate and that at the very least, they should realize that hunger is a very real problem for many people around the globe.

The present fast-paced state of education makes it increasingly difficult for educators to justify taking time to focus on any one subject in depth. State standards don’t allow for teachers to cover poverty to the degree it deserves. It is unlikely to assume school budgets will be able to afford class trips to Sub-Saharan Africa in the near future. St. Francis de Sales Jr. High Academy decided to bring the hunger to its students in hopes of improving their appetite for knowledge.