



OPINION COLUMN

The importance of school breakfast programs



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If accepting free food identified you as poor, especially in front of your classmates, would you take it? Not likely. This is why school nutrition programs are universal and offered to all students, regardless of their family's income level.

All school children, yes, probably yours too, enjoy a variety of healthy food from the four food groups in Canada's Food Guide in a safe space at school, free from stigma and judgment. In Peterborough city and county, 47 of 51 schools offer a school nutrition program to their students.

Students arrive at school hungry for many reasons: long bus rides, rushed mornings that don't leave enough time for a proper breakfast, lack of parental supervision over their food choices before heading out the door, and sometimes, not enough food at home. The reality is that we are all busy, so even if parents manage to set out and pack perfectly balanced meals and snacks, we can't always

be sure the child will eat it. Eating is a social activity, and children can eat smarter, and better, when consuming food together as part of a family at home, or with peers at school.

Research shows that eating breakfast is linked to healthy body weight, improved academic performance and memory functioning, and increased school attendance. It's no surprise that students who have access to a school breakfast program have reduced risk for disease, are more likely to come to school and participate in class, have better test scores, and are more likely to graduate. Scientific evidence aside, teachers are the first to tell us the difference they see when students start their day with a healthy breakfast. Students are more alert, are better able to pay attention and process information, and show improved memory and problem solving skills. Schools with programs report better attendance and less disciplinary interventions, in the classroom or in the school yard.

Depending on your local school's program, students have access to a variety of foods, including fresh produce, hot and cold cereals, milk, cheese, muffins, and yogurt multiple times a week. Foods grown and produced locally, like produce, cheese and milk, are also featured in breakfast programs. School nutrition programs can help contribute towards community food security by providing a secure and predictable market for local farmers. Those farmers can also help strengthen kids' connection with the land, with agriculture and food production, by improving food and farm literacy. British Columbia has done this by funding and promoting a Farm to School initiative that uses school nutrition programs to link schools with local farmers. Over 20,000 students are now benefitting from this connection.

Peterborough has reason to be proud of our breakfast programs. Long before school nutrition was supported and partially funded by government, a small grassroots group began serving hot breakfasts in a handful of schools in Peterborough. Since those initial efforts in 1992, Peterborough County and City residents have embraced the initiative in an astounding way. Last year alone 17,434 students were served almost 2.2 million meals. The hard work and incredible dedication of 1037 volunteers, each dedicating, on average, an hour a week, made it happen.

Ultimately, breakfast programs are an asset for all our students, and contribute to their health, and academic and personal success. Last week, the province released its new poverty reduction plan, which has rightly focused on housing and income as priorities. But it was heartening to see a commitment to invest another \$32 million over the next three years to expand the student nutrition programs in another 340 schools across the province, including on-reserve schools in First Nations communities. This month marks an important milestone in our province: all four year olds now have access to full day Junior Kindergarten. At the same time, only 83% of our children are completing high school. Hungry minds also have hungry bodies and working together to reach a goal of universal nutrition programs in all of our local schools is key to ensuring that Peterborough's children will meet their full potential.

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