

'Food and Friends' can help children succeed in school

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It's 8 a.m. and you're walking out the door to go to work.

Maybe you work in an office; perhaps you're working on a road crew. Maybe you're a teacher; perhaps you're a dentist. Assume for a moment that your lunch kit was accidentally left on the counter, and you're not able to purchase lunch.

As noon approaches, and your stomach starts to growl, you can't help but snap at colleagues. Concentrating on work becomes harder as the afternoon progresses, and by 3 p.m., your knees are starting to feel wobbly. All you can think about is food and how much you want it. You'd eat anything right about now, just so you can satisfy your now audible stomach growls.

Sadly, this is what everyday life is like for thousands of kids across Guelph, Wellington and Dufferin counties.

One in 10 parents in our community will not be able to fill their children's backpack with a lunchbox because there is no food in the house. And if you are one of the parents who can, it's worth noting that your child will have at least one friend or classmate whose parents are unable to provide a healthy breakfast before their kids leave the house. This is reality for too many families, even in a community as blessed as Guelph.

The lack of a nutritious breakfast isn't just about access to food, it's about student success. A recent study conducted by the Toronto Foundation for Student Success came to some startling conclusions about the role that a healthy breakfast plays in the academic standings of middle school students. After a two-year period, this study showed that 78 per cent of students who ate breakfast every morning were on track to graduate, while only 61 per cent of students who rarely or never ate breakfast were on track to graduate.

The same study showed that student behaviour improves. Think back to the irritability that came along with being hungry the day you forgot your lunch. It probably wouldn't surprise you, then, to learn that access to breakfast or snacks cut student suspensions in half and significantly improved teacher-student relationships in the classroom.

Locally, the Children's Foundation of Guelph and Wellington works with corporate partners, teachers, and generous donors to administer the Food and Friends student nutrition programs. Last year, more than 13,000 students received a healthy meal because of the breakfast, snack, and lunch programs that are in place in many schools across this community.

"I'm so thankful for the hard work of our volunteers, and for the generous support of this community," community program director Anita Macfarlane said. "It really makes a huge difference — seeing the smile on the face of a little girl as she bites into an apple is pretty rewarding."

This fall as you are sending your kids back to school, take a moment and think about what you can do to help ensure all students have equal opportunities to learn.

Connect with your school's administration and find out if they have a Food and Friends program so you can volunteer. If you're a business owner, gather your employees together and Adopt-A-Program this fall. If you can't volunteer but want to help, buy food or make a financial contribution.

Every dollar, every volunteer hour, every smile, every orange makes the future of our children just a little brighter.

For more information about Food and Friends and how you can help, visit <http://childrensfoundation.org> .

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