

## CEREAL KILLER: Too many mouths to feed

Funds can't match breakfast plan demands

By [SHARON LEM](#), SUN MEDIA



Food is being prepared for the school breakfast program at Highfield Junior Public School. (Ernest Doroszuk/Sun Media)

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For the past decade, Francoise Naraine has sent her children to school early for breakfast.

After separating from her husband, putting food on the breakfast table got a lot tougher for the 47-year-old single mom.

The Nutritious Students breakfast program at Highfield Jr. Public School has been a "godsend," Naraine said.

"If it wasn't for the program, I don't know what I would do," she told the Sunday Sun. "It means a lot (to my family) and my kids love it."

Naraine has worked as a volunteer since 2000 with FoodShare, a grass-roots non-profit dedicated to helping individuals and communities feed themselves.

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### 'SEE THE SMILES'

"Kids feel better after they have something to eat," she said. "You can see the smiles on their faces and when they're happy, I'm happy."

Hunger has become a chronic problem in this city, exacerbated this past year by the recession. As reported in an exclusive Toronto Sun story last week,

food bank use has soared -- up 20% to more than a million visits to Greater Toronto Area food banks.

Toronto's breakfast programs have also been hit by growing demand and funding constraints.

In response, city council this past week voted to increase spending on school breakfast programs by \$400,000.

However, while 45 schools will benefit from that funding, thousands of children and 146 city school breakfast programs will go without any municipal help.

"These programs are very important," Dr. David Mc-Keown, Toronto's chief medical officer of health, told the Sun.

Last January, McKeown said the city needed to boost breakfast program funding by at least \$1.4 million to keep them viable.

"We know families living on low incomes and social assistance don't have enough money to buy nutritional food for a basic nutritious diet and every year these costs are out of reach," he said.

"The children are at risk of poor nutrition. We know low income is related to health problems like obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease."

And low-income and marginalized communities earning minimum wages or

living on social assistance incomes simply don't earn enough to cover the cost of healthy eating in Toronto, he said.

Breakfast programs also improve student performance in class.

More than 100,000 students in 378 schools participate in Toronto's Nutritious Students program that provides breakfast, lunch or snacks to a third of all elementary students and one in 10 high school students.

Queen's Park covers 15% of the cost, but without a 12% municipal share, 146 city schools will need to fund 85% of the cost of their programs next year.

"It's very hard to feed someone on 15 cents," said Catharine Parsonage, senior manager of Nutritional Services at the Toronto District School Board and the executive director of Toronto Foundation for Student Success.

"And these less affluent communities won't be able to survive," Parsonage said. "It's a real struggle for parents and to raise the money through local fundraisers."

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## HALF A SLICE OF BREAD

"If you have a program it's not good to serve half a slice of bread. We don't want to water down the funding by giving pennies to these programs -- they are desperately in need of government support and donations from the private sector," Parsonage said, adding it costs \$1.29 for each child's breakfast and \$2 for each teenager's breakfast the program provides.

"It's too late when we have children dropping out of school and we can't afford to wait for that to happen," she said. "It's critical to deal with it now because if we don't, we fail our children."

"In the year 2009, it's shameful because it's a basic human right. Children have the right to be nourished, to be warm and

educated and have housing," Parsonage said.

There's little question that school funding programs are beneficial -- particularly for at-risk youth.

The question is who should pay for them.

Toronto council will spend \$3.2 million this year on the school breakfast program and the extra \$400,000 has been targeted to help "priority areas" -- 20 elementary and 25 secondary schools in the neediest communities.

Meanwhile, Queen's Park spending for 2009 has more than doubled since 2007 to \$3.8 million to feed 136,000 kids.

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## THREATENED

Though some city officials think the province needs to do more.

Toronto Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti said if the province doesn't kick in more money, the 146 breakfast school programs will clearly be threatened.

"I'm a guy who does fundraisers for breakfast clubs to feed 250 children every morning, and if you're going to rely on people like me to continue fundraising, it's the wrong way to deal with this because this program will not work just relying on fundraisers," Mammoliti said, adding the city is tapped out and fundraising can only raise so much.

"I would hate to see what would happen to the children who can't afford breakfast ... the kids just won't get fed," he said.

Fellow Councillor John Filion, chairman of the City of Toronto's board of health, also said the city only has so much money to allocate to school breakfast programs.

"The city had budget problems and we did provide extra money (\$400,000 in

March), but it was not proportionate to the province's (funding)," Filion said.

"We're serving more meals to more children than last year, and unfortunately it's never enough but we're doing the best we can."

About 36% of children in Toronto live in poverty -- meaning a lot of children from across the city likely go to school with too little to eat.

Jann Houston, acting director of Toronto Public Health's chronic disease prevention program, said hunger is a real concern for many families.

"In this economy, parents are working two jobs to keep a roof over their heads," Houston said.

"For parents who are working at jobs paying \$10 an hour, it's a real struggle to support their families and pay rent and utilities."

Numerous research and medical studies have concluded that breakfast programs help children learn better in school, improve attendance, improve classroom behaviour, increase in-class

participation, decrease classroom disturbances and school violence, improve discipline and decrease the times children are absent due to minor colds or illness.

"Hungry kids have less attention, they can't focus -- period -- and there are a lot more disciplinary problems happening and more trips to the principal's office," said Lori Nikkel, of Toronto's partners for Student Nutrition, an agency that helps to co-ordinate 17,600 parent volunteers in Toronto who buy, prepare and serve the food.

"It's not just the kids that won't get to eat," Nikkel said. "Their behaviour changes and violence goes up."

Sara Camilleri, executive director of the Angel Foundation for Learning, which is in charge of the Toronto Catholic District School Board's student nutrition program, said school breakfast programs have made a huge difference at their schools.

"These programs build communities and get volunteers out of their houses, talking to neighbours, building confidence and learning skills they need to get a job," Camilleri said.

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## BIG IMPROVEMENT

"In many schools we've noticed tremendous academic improvement," Camilleri said. "We haven't quantified it because it's been empirical evidence from principals telling us attendance is up, participation has increased and in social areas kids are getting better at recess time when they're not in the classroom.

"When children are not properly fed, the chance of losing your temper and making mountains out of molehills increases, they may come to school late, kids are easily provoked and they're not using good judgment when their tummies are empty," Camilleri said.

Rick Gosling founded the Children's Breakfast Club in Toronto in 1984 in the Jane/Falstaff community.

Today, there are more than 20 Children's Breakfast Clubs in Toronto, Markham, Mississauga, Brampton and Hamilton

that prepare more than 4,000 hot, nutritious and culturally sensitive breakfasts each school day.

These breakfast clubs rely on corporations and individual donations.

"You get children across the board going to school hungry," Gosling said. "Giving a kid breakfast can make all the difference -- it helps to prevent behavioural problems, reduces anger and violence, truancy, tardiness and rates of aggression and allows kids to feel loved and cared for and gives kids the respect they need."

Despite the efforts of such volunteers, more needs to be done including more by government, suggests the city's chief medical officer of health.

"Government funding for student nutrition is really important to ensure

programs are viable and sustainable," McKeown said.

"Some communities have greater success in raising money and others have more difficulty.

"I think we should be doing more to provide access to healthy food and security for children in low-income families and the provincial government should expand the student nutrition program for families on social assistance to receive a \$100 healthy food

supplement -- these are steps which will improve the health of children," he said.

"What we need to be doing is support student nutrition programs with more government support," McKeown said.

"It's not just about those 146 schools. It's a higher level of support for student nutrition programs.

"There is value in promoting and ensuring better nutrition for all children."

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## MEAL THAT MATTERS

- Kids who eat breakfast are less likely to be overweight.
- Girls, low-income children and some ethnic children are more likely to skip breakfast.
- Even short-term or periodically skipped or missed meals diminishes brain function.
- Numerous studies have shown a clear link between good nutrition and school performance.
- Concentration is diminished by poor nutrition and poor diets increase behavioural problems in adolescents including irritability, aggressive behaviour and violence.

Source: Government of Ontario