

# Feeding Hungry Minds



The Breakfast for Learning program is more than a worthy charity; it can be a child's meal ticket to a great future.

BY KATHRYN DORRELL

**K**'alemi Dene School stands in the centre of Ndilo, a tiny community of about 200 aboriginal people on the outskirts of Yellowknife. It's more than merely a symbolic location. The school, which teaches 86 children from kindergarten to Grade 10, is the heart of the community: a place where residents gather and celebrate and where kids are cared for and shown they have a future. It's also a place where a school food program has made a profound difference.

The school has a morning snack and lunch program and offers breakfast to kids who are hungry when they arrive in the morning. "They know they don't have to ever feel embarrassed," says principal Angela James, a Métis raised in Manitoba who has lived in this community for 30 years. Each day at 10:30 a.m., children eagerly await the arrival of a big plate filled with bannock (an aboriginal bread), fresh fruit and dry caribou meat. "There are some fruits that are their favourites, like watermelon and pineapple. They'll gobble up," ▶

says Angela, adding that many families can't afford to buy fruit for their kids to eat at home.

An elder comes to the school in the afternoons to make fresh bannock for the next day and then teaches language lessons. For lunch, every class has bread, peanut butter (no allergy concerns here), jam and Cheez Whiz in their classroom fridge. "We encourage kids to bring a lunch, but sometimes they forget and sometimes they just don't have food (at home), and that is a real concern for them," says Angela. "Other times they prefer to eat what is at school. We don't ask any questions."

Full tummies aren't the only benefit of school food programs such as this one. The spirit of community that is fostered when students eat together creates a bond that puts everyone on a level playing field. "When all the children are all fed, they all feel equal," explains Angela. "We take away completely all the barriers to learning."

The school's food programs are funded by Breakfast for Learning (BFL). Launched by the editors of *Canadian Living* Magazine in 1992, the nonprofit organization helps communities set up breakfast, lunch and snack programs in schools across Canada (see "National Treasure, National Disgrace," page 245).

Given that extensive research shows children learn and concentrate better and are more engaged in school when they eat well, health and education advocates say nutrition programs should be a staple – not an extra – in our school system, regardless of where children live and their parents' income.

**A**t Vermilion Elementary School, two hours west of Edmonton, the kitchen buzzes with the sounds of children chatting and utensils clanging against serving dishes as volunteers from this small community help students fill their lunch plates with hot roast beef, Caesar salad and fresh fruit. "My friends who don't live in this area are always amazed at how well my kids get to eat here at school," says Carolyn White, a working mom, who volunteers with the lunch program one day a week. "On the days



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I'm here, the fruit is the first to go. It's great to see."

Gerri Cameron, the administrative assistant at Vermilion Elementary School for 23 years, started the hot-lunch program eight years ago. "I noticed many students coming to school with inadequate lunches or no lunch at all," she says. "They would say, 'When I open the fridge at home, there is nothing there.'" Once the program was up and running, everyone who worked in the school noticed almost an immediate impact on the students, who come from diverse economic backgrounds. They were more content, behaviour problems decreased and attention span in the classroom improved.

Part of the money the school received from BFL to start its lunch program was used to install a commercial kitchen in the building. Goodwill in the town has spread over the years, and contributions from the business community and parents

(donations of cash, vegetables and meat, such as whole cows; this is a rural community, after all) now fully sustain the lunch program. Carolyn and other parents who can afford to buy their kids' lunches pay \$3 per day. About 10 per cent of students are subsidized through the donations the school receives.

**M**any school food programs started out with the goal of enriching the minds of students from poor- or low-income families by filling their grumbling stomachs. This need still exists: more than 41 per cent of food bank users are children, according to a survey by the Canadian Association of Food Banks. But the demand has expanded well beyond the boundaries of poverty. A report on child nutrition by BFL says that one-quarter of all Canadian children in Grade 4 do not eat breakfast every day. By the time our kids reach Grade 8, this

**Gerri Cameron launched a school lunch program that parents, teachers and students rave about.**



PHOTOGRAPHY, CURTIS COMEAU (BOTTOM)

number rises to almost half of all girls and a third of boys.

As any parent who's ever rushed around trying to get herself ready for work, get the kids to eat their cereal and get lunches packed can tell you, children may go to school hungry for a variety of reasons – many have nothing to do with the family's income or parental neglect. Some kids have long bus rides to school and might eat at home but are hungry by the time they arrive; others attend early-morning school activities. Add to this that 80 per cent of families with children aged six to 12 have two working parents, and moms and dads work longer hours than ever before, and you can see why morning routines are harried and kids are left to get their own meals.

Martha O'Connor, executive director of BFL, explains how the philosophy of feeding children in school has evolved to meet the changing needs of Canadian families. "Fifteen years ago we started out to address a problem around poverty and hunger, and we thought that when the issue was addressed there would be no more need. But what we have [created] is something that's good and right for all Canadian families and builds caring communities." She adds, "Feeding children is a parental responsibility, but families really need support. We have to broaden the definition of family to include the community."

School food programs do much more than lend a hand to time-starved parents and those who can't afford to give their kids breakfast or lunch. A study in Nova Scotia entitled "Children's Lifestyle and School Performance Study" looked at children in three groups: those in schools with no nutrition programs; those with a general nutrition program; and students who had a fully-integrated nutrition program involving parents, teachers and the community. Researchers found that children in the third group had the lowest rates of childhood obesity.

Getting kids to eat healthily is no easy feat for parents these days. Moms and dads know their children size up their lunch with what other kids bring to school – and it isn't ham sandwiches or carrot sticks kids are eyeing. Twenty-three per cent of all ads intended for ►

## NATIONAL TREASURE, NATIONAL DISGRACE

We'll admit we're biased: we think Breakfast for Learning (BFL) is something of a national treasure. That's because it speaks to the community spirit that is so much a part of *Canadian Living Magazine*.

BFL was started in 1992 by the editors of *Canadian Living Magazine*, who were disturbed by a national disgrace: one in six Canadian kids was living in poverty, and almost half of the people who relied on food banks were children.

Where do we stand today?

- Child poverty is 11.7 per cent, unchanged from 1989 when the House of Commons voted unanimously to eradicate it by 2000.
- Canada ranks 22 among 26 wealthy nations in terms of the number of children living in poverty.
- A report by Statistics Canada released in May reveals that the average family income among the 10 per cent of families with the lowest incomes fell by 11 per cent from 1989 to 2004.

The progress report for BFL is much brighter. Since its inception, with the help of 30,000 volunteers, it has served more than 1.5 million school-age children in 5,000 communities across Canada. Programs are developed and managed locally by parents, teachers, public-health officials, educators and, in some regions, local governments.



Most of BFL's funding comes from corporate donations. But executive director Martha O'Connor says that for each dollar it gives to a program, an additional \$9 comes from the community, including businesses, local governments and groups, such as the Rotary Club. At present, the federal government does not contribute any money.

### GET STARTED

If you want to start a breakfast, lunch or snack program in your community, begin with BFL's website ([www.breakfastforlearning.ca](http://www.breakfastforlearning.ca)) and talk to other individuals running programs in your area for advice. While you're at it, write to your MP and tell him or her that you support the Children's Health and Nutrition Initiative. Your voice will make sure all Canadian school kids eat healthily.

youth promote fast foods, such as soda, chips and frozen pizza. Debbie Field, a Toronto mom who launched one of the city's first healthy hot-lunch programs at her children's school, Fern Avenue Junior and Senior Public School, and went on to become the executive director of FoodShare Toronto, says this is another reason why school food programs are so important today. "They help parents manage these negative influences by giving students healthy options and having them eat the same things," she says. "These are lessons that they take home with them."

**I**f a food program in every Canadian school sounds like a pricey pipe dream, advocates urge the naysayers to look at what other countries are doing. In the United States, for example, more than 30 million kids participate in the National School Lunch Program; almost 10 million are also part of the School Breakfast Program. And get this: total government funding for these two U.S. programs was \$8.8 billion US in 2005.

England is beefing up its school nutrition budget, spending an extra \$520 million Cdn just on healthy ingredients and increasing the subsidies for these programs. (Three cheers for dishy chef Jamie Oliver, who championed nutritious school meals on the other side of the pond.) England also plans to ban ads for foods and beverages high in fat, salt and sugar in TV programs geared to kids under age 16.

In comparison, many of our elementary school children eat lunch in crowded classrooms, cramped hallways and gyms packed to the gills – places in which most adults couldn't digest a sandwich. There is often no time built in for snacks, or any means of properly monitoring whether kids eat the food their parents pack. "We still build new schools in this country with no facilities whatsoever for kids to eat in," says Field, who is incredulous that the 1950s mom-will-pick-up-the-kids-for-lunch mentality still exists.

What's more, Canada is one of the few developed countries in the world without a national food program for

**➤ A recent survey commissioned by BFL shows that families support a national nutrition program for school-age children. Among parents with kids aged six to 18 who saw a need for a school food program in their community, 86 per cent said the federal government should play a role in providing the service.**

students or a set of standards for feeding kids in school. That's something nutrition, education and children's advocates are out to change.

**E**arlier this year, BFL, FoodShare and the Centre for Science in the Public Interest, along with Olivia Chow, an NDP member of Parliament, came together to create the Children's Health and Nutrition Initiative (CHNI). The group is determined to transform Canada's patchwork of school food programs, which have no stable source of monetary support, into a nationally funded effort that would see healthy food available in schools to all children under age 18. "This is too important an issue to be left to nonprofit groups," says Field. "Only with Ottawa can we have national standards that will benefit all kids in Canada."

For starters, CHNI is asking for \$75 million from the federal government to start the project, which amounts to less than \$1 per child a day. As a second step, it wants Ottawa to prohibit junk food advertising aimed at kids.

Dr. Kellie Leitch, who is the adviser on healthy children and youth for Tony Clement, federal health minister, recently spent several months talking to parents, kids, organizations and government officials across Canada about kids' health. She says the issues of childhood obesity and nutrition "came up all the time." Leitch, who is also an assistant professor in pediatric orthopedics and chair of pediatric surgery at the University of Western

Ontario in London, says the federal government realizes that the state of kids' health in Canada is an area that needs tackling. "We are now seeing adult diseases, such as type 2 diabetes and obesity in kids," she says. "The government wants to know how to empower parents and to help children." The folks at CHNI are hoping that this translates into cash for their initiative in the near future.

Under a national school feeding program, parents would contribute to the best of their ability. Families who can afford it would pay the full cost of meals, which are often cheaper than buying groceries to prepare a breakfast or lunch at home. Parents would be encouraged to volunteer. Most importantly, each community group would iron out the details of the program itself, sticking to the wisdom that communities know what's best. "Every community has different strengths," says O'Connor of the BFL approach that a national program would adopt. "We build on those strengths, help fill in the gaps and don't presume that we know better about what a community needs than its people."

Back in Vermilion, Gerri speaks of the swell of community pride that has come out of the hot-lunch program in her school. "We have 90 volunteers and they own our program." This sense of caring is as nurturing to students as food. Indeed, when kids evaluate BFL programs, volunteer interaction is what they say they appreciate most. "On the receiving end, I see what it does for the kids," says Gerri, "and the kids are our future." ●