

Thank you for your support and inviting our Rotary funded agency to provide some awareness about what it is that we do. I'm Jessica Stephenson, from Niagara Nutrition Partners. Together with supporters like you, we have made feeding school-aged children in our community a priority. Niagara Nutrition Partners feeds approximately 24,000 children a nutritious breakfast, lunch and/or snack daily - in 211 schools across the Niagara Region. 45 of which are located right here in Niagara Falls.

1,000 plus volunteers (comprised of education staff, students, parents, and community partners alike) work the front lines to order, prep, cook, serve, clean up and prepare budget reports. I know many of you belong to this team of "hunger heroes"! It is important to mention that all four school boards participate making it a true community effort.

To create some sort of sustainability, our small staff contingent of 6 stomp the pavement daily to provide schools with volunteer training, safe food handling resources, nutrition guidelines, menu help and suggestions for fundraising opportunities to support programs at the school level.

Many of our programs are student run. Providing life skills and a sense of purpose and belonging within the school community. Often built into everyday curriculum, they coupon clip, shop and do the program budgeting.

It's truly heartwarming to watch the students wheel the food through the hallways, receiving high fives and "thank you" messages from peers they may not normally have an opportunity to interact with!

These programs are beyond filling stomachs, school meal programs foster feelings of self worth, belonging, and mentorship opportunities. They mobilize the community at large in a practical and meaningful way.

Everyone has either a time, talent or treasure to contribute. We're grateful for all of it. These programs wouldn't run without the work of caring folks on the front line's day in and day out.

At the core everyone's motivation is making life better for children and families.

Breakfast programs may focus on children specifically, but their impact ripples over to families, schools, and entire communities. In other words, something as seemingly small as a healthy breakfast can have a BIG impact.

That impact is multifaceted and includes things like...

an inclusive school community, fostering a sense of worth and belonging, improved learning capacities, attendance and punctuality, reduced occurrence of behavioral incidents and of course the most obvious would-be, alleviating hunger related stress, providing access to healthy food and a greater nutritional awareness.

Most non-profits are magicians of sorts. They're able to turn one donated dollar into five dollars worth of food (maybe more!). It costs approximately, \$2.50 per child, per day, to run a Student Nutrition program and that's stretching dollars as far as we can using approaches like bulk purchasing and sourcing discounts from local vendors.

For a little perspective - Our Lady of Mount Caramel, is serving 325 children an early morning meal, 5 days a week, Stamford Collegiate is serving an average of 85 students a full breakfast, lunch and snack daily and Simcoe Street - 80 students at breakfast and another 170 for a mid-day snack.

Although we are recipients of funding from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, their funding only covers a portion of the cost for each program. The remainder is a funding gap, in which Niagara Nutrition Partners works tirelessly to fill - either from the support of individuals, corporate and/or service clubs - like the rotary!

Unfortunately, Student Nutrition Programs in Niagara and across Ontario are experiencing a perfect storm of financial obstacles that have had a large impact on how we run non-stigmatizing programs. Without a Provincial funding increase in more than a decade, our expenses for food, equipment and delivery are increasing at alarming rates and each program is becoming more expensive to maintain as a result.

Our rightful mandate as a Ministry funded agency, is to provide fresh, preferably local, high-quality foods at all times. 2-3 food groups are always offered to each student - so, a fruit/veg, grain and dairy product. This is what the kids deserve - but a significant cost comes with that.

As families continue to build from economic and pandemic related losses, they too face the same obstacles and have become more reliant on our programs than they were in previous years. And a continuing increase in overall student population makes it difficult to keep up. For example - a school on the Thorold/Niagara Falls border called last summer stating that they were welcoming 140 new students - many of which requested food, language and social supports during initial registration. And there are many more stories just like that.

In March of 2023, it was with a heavy heart, that schools were asked to stop purchasing and ordering food if they were at risk of a negative balance and serious occurrence reports were submitted indicating a pause in service for approx. 13 of our schools. After sounding alarm bells for months, there just simply weren't enough funds to keep things going through the obstacles we were faced with. Our staff worked with the remaining schools to reduce capacity if needed. Meaning that, instead of students having a hot meal for breakfast they were getting something like a granola bar.

In response, we were fortunate enough to receive significant one-time investments from local philanthropists and community members, and many service clubs - including Rotary - essentially stepped in and financially saved these programs with whatever balances were remaining.

**Provincial funding** currently invests \$37.6M across all of Ontario into school food programs, providing 10¢ per student per day, while the national median PT contribution is nearly four times higher at 39¢/student/day. We have been reminded by the province that their contribution is simply “seed

funding” and that to ensure a truly universal program we will need to rely on our community members and municipalities. NOTE: we do not receive any funding from the region or any municipality other than Welland. And believe me, that’s not for a lack of trying.

As I stated earlier, It’s important to understand that the **true cost for each meal/student is approx.. \$2.50.**

**Federal funding** for Year 1 of a 3-year commitment (yes, there is no guarantee this money will continue to flow past that) is \$18.5M across the entire country and will be provincially distributed/split between the Ontario Student Nutrition Program and First Nation Student Nutrition Program. So, bearing in mind that we’re still waiting to hear about the precise use of this funding, and with the understanding that I did some very basic calculations with the intention that the National School Food Program funding will be primarily for food, the estimated amount of funding that NNP should receive would be approximately \$465,000. We have not received any of this funding to date and are hopeful that it will be received before the end of this school year as program budgets are dwindling.

With this new money in mind, we’ve done some calculations based on a standard \$2.50 per meal (3 food groups, properly costed, proper servings), and based on 2023-24 school year data, NNP has a projected funding gap of almost \$5,400,000. This does not even include schools on waiting lists or the onboarding of additional students ensuring this program become completely and truly universal.

We’ve had many organizations and community members reach out wondering if we were “fully funded” after the National Food Program announcement was made. Unfortunately, this announcement has done Student Nutrition Programs a great disservice regarding our fundraising efforts. The way it was presented in the media suggests that it is no longer a cost sharing effort between the Province, Feds, and communities at large. This is not the case. (although how wonderful would it be if it was?)

With current Niagara Falls rotary funds, NNP has been able to provide stabilizing funds to schools experiencing unprecedented participation increases over last year. Meaning, students in these locations will have access to 3 full food groups, 5 days per week - with a focus on local whole fruits and vegetables and hearty hot meals, rather than prepackaged product - which was often split in half to cut cost.

Student Nutrition programs are an essential service. Of course, we know that child hunger is NOT isolated only to low-income families. There are a variety of reasons children access these programs, including:

- Bussing
- Early morning sport routines which limit their time to eat at home
- Latchkey students who get ready on their own in the morning and choose not to make their own meal.
- Students whose parents are working shift work and do not have anyone to make them a meal.
- Students that prefer to eat breakfast with their peers.
- Parents might prefer their child to eat at the breakfast program because there is a better selection of nourishing foods than in the home.

**IT'S IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT POVERTY DOESN'T HAVE A NEIGHBOURHOOD!**

A child can appear to live in a nice, well kept - upper class home, but.. The reality is, we don't know the situation behind those doors. Loss of jobs, illness, and separation - an array of reasons a child may not have access to healthy and filling foods.

It's unfortunate that stigmas are frequently associated with people using supportive resources. For children to deal with stigmas for something as

essential as access to healthy food, it's even more disconcerting. Ontario's leadership in implementing the concept of universality has been transformative in removing the stigma often associated with school "breakfast clubs". All Student Nutrition Programs funded in part by the Ministry of Community and Social Services follow this model - meaning, if you come to school hungry, no questions are asked and you have access to healthy, filling foods. In Niagara, we believe in this method and even though we are not properly funded to fulfill this expectation - we strive to get there everyday.

We encourage ALL students to utilize the program. Programs are enhanced when they promote a "shared experience" around food, meaning that they provide enough time for students to eat their food, are located somewhere that is comfortable and conducive to eating, and where they allow students to connect with one another and other members of the school community including teachers and program volunteers. It helps to see kids from all walks of life taking part and benefiting.

Many schools have reported, less absenteeism, higher graduation rates, problems solving, conflict resolution and class participation all up.

It's actually a pretty simple concept - Eat a bagel, pass Math... Or something like that.

Students who participate in student nutrition programs are in fact improving their quality of life twofold. Not only are they optimizing their academic and behavioral performance during the school day, but they are also securing long-term health by learning healthy eating habits that will benefit them for a lifetime.

In 2022, the Ontario Science Curriculum added Food Literacy. Our programs complement this requirement in a tangible and practical way. As I mentioned, many of our programs are student run. Providing life skills and a sense of purpose and belonging within the school community. Westlane Secondary School in Niagara Falls runs a successful Breakfast program which is executed by the special education students. As part of their curriculum, they coupon clip, shop and do the program budgeting.

In many of our elementary schools, the breakfast room provides an alternative for those struggling with social conflicts and bullying on the playground. The volunteers meet the students in their world and provide a safe space... A space for unity, a space where they can see that someone truly cares.

I encourage you to remember what it was like to be a kid. Things like spelling tests and playgrounds and friendships can be a really big deal. Remember and appreciate that kids have worries too. Our goal, is to make sure not eating, isn't one of them.

As mentioned earlier, Rotary's support and funding helps stabilize and enhance our programming. Student Nutrition Programs are an overall excellent economic investment that provides relief for families who are struggling due to the affordability crisis, which includes many working parents.

A recent report by Ruetz and colleagues showed that for every dollar spent on school food, the return on investment is 2.5 to 7x that in terms of the increased human health and economic equity it leads to. School food can lead to healthier lifelong eating habits, which in turn can help reduce spending on diet-related diseases which is estimated to cost \$5.6B annually in Ontario. Our local Agri food sectors also stand to benefit through increased business and employment - which aligns with the Grow Ontario Provincial agri-food strategy.

Your investment is changing lives. Feeding kids is truly a nonpartisan issue. School food programs offer a huge opportunity to support the health and learning of the next generation and their families. We're grateful for the local businesses, agencies and service clubs who understand that feeding our kids feeds the future.