

# Feeding a connection to Maple Ridge schools

- by [Michael Hall - Maple Ridge News](#)
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Jon Wheatley has worked in the Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows school district for 25 years, and currently as principal at Golden Ears elementary.

In that time, he has seen a drastic change, and not just technological advancements in education.

Increasingly, he has seen students going hungry as their families struggle to cope with higher costs of living. He and other school staff see it in the lunches children bring to school, the lack of healthy food, and whether or not they have snacks at recess.

Golden Ears has lunch and snack programs, just as other schools have ones for breakfast.

But those can only provide for students when they are at school.

Wheatley knows that when some go home on weekends, the cupboards and fridges aren't filled with what they need.

"Those can be a long two days," he said.

A new program, sponsored by the [Meadow Ridge](#) and [Haney](#) Rotary clubs and which started Friday, Sept. 30, aims to fill that void.

The Starfish Pack program, which originated in Abbotsford, provides food for children in need on the weekends.

Starfish Packs started with six students in a single Abbotsford school in the spring of 2013.

"Today we have 15 B.C. communities delivering Starfish Packs this school year," said Bruce Beck of Abbotsford Rotary. "Our goal is to be feeding 1,000 B.C. students by the end of this school year."

Students, identified by their schools, are given a backpack filled with food to take home on Friday afternoons.

Each backpack contains food for two breakfasts, two lunches, two dinners and snacks.

“Sometimes that food feeds an entire family,” said Lisa Prophet, publisher of the *Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows News*, a program sponsor.

In Maple Ridge, all the food is provided by Save-On Foods at Valley Fair Mall, purchased at cost through an agreement with the [Friends in Need Food Bank](#).

The Rotary clubs provide the backpacks, which are filled with food by volunteers at [Burnett Fellowship Church](#) in downtown Maple Ridge, then delivered to participating schools.

“We are committed as a church to help pack the back packs, take them to the school at the end of the week and picking up the empty packs on Monday to fill them again on Friday for them to go out again,” said Paul Olson, with Burnett Fellowship.

“We got involved in this due to our commitment to be an active partner in our community with the strong desire to help make a significant difference.”

So far there are two schools involved – Golden Ears elementary and another.

About 10 backpacks will be issued at each.

Wheatley anticipates that number will grow, but for now the program is starting small, to ensure its success.

For the program to grow, more sponsors are needed.

The cost to sponsor a backpack for one child for a year is \$525, which is tax deductible.

The Rotary clubs are covering expenses not related to the direct cost of the food, including the backpacks – \$35 each.



Rotary is also responsible for bringing all the stakeholders together, to make sure the food is ordered, packed and delivered, “bringing the issue of hungry kids in our own backyard to the forefront of the local community,” said Ineke Boekhorst, executive director of the [Downtown Maple Ridge Business Improvement Association](#) and president of the Meadow Ridge Rotary Club.

Meadow Ridge Rotary has two local companies and two local individuals as sponsors so far, and is committed to providing a minimum of 20 backpacks per week for the first year – “maybe more, depending on community donations,” Boekhorst said.

Mary Robson, executive director of the Friends in Need Food Bank, is excited about the Starfish Pack program as it is a continuation of the school meals and snack programs.

“Ensuring our children receive proper nutrition is the first step in ensuring they have the necessary tools to learn,” she said.

Wheatley concurs – students who aren’t hungry are more able to settle down, focus and learn. He likes that the Starfish Pack program is able to help one child at a time, and that it gives them a connection to the school that may have been missing.

“They feel like they belong,” he said.

“Parents are doing the best they can. This just makes things a little bit easier.”