

The Breakfast Club: students at Amalgamated Academy get early Christmas present

By DANIEL MacEachern

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On the last day of school before Christmas break, students at Amalgamated Academy received an early Christmas present: a hot meal.

The Bay Roberts school on Dec. 22 became the 200th school in Newfoundland and Labrador to launch a Kids Eat Smart Club program.

The St. John's-based Kids Eat Smart Foundation is a charity that works to help schools across the province set up nutrition programs - usually in the form of breakfast clubs. As of Dec. 22, the close to 700 students at Amalgamated can have breakfast if they, for whatever reason, didn't eat breakfast at home.

Students cheered as school principal Violet Parsons-Pack kicked off the program in the school cafeteria, just before officials and teachers from the school and district and local volunteers and Kids Eat Smart Foundation representatives donned plastic aprons served pancakes to students seated at long tables.

"It's pretty cool," said Alexander Caravan, seated with a group of his Grade 4 schoolmates. Jessica Pike, also in Grade 4, said she plans to visit the cafeteria with her friends in the morning even when she eats at home first. "I'll eat my breakfast in here, too!" she said.

Grade 8 student Matthew Mercer says he eats breakfast every morning but thinks the club will be great for students who don't.

"I think it's a pretty good program, good for the school," he said.

Principal Parsons-Pack said it was a couple of teachers at her school who suggested they start a program for students missing their morning nutrition.

"We did a survey, and the results of the survey indicated that students felt there was a need, parents felt there was a need," she said. "There's many reasons why some children don't eat breakfast, and one is that it's too early in the morning for them, they have to travel on the bus. I'm sure there are a few, maybe a very small group, that don't have breakfast (at all) at home."

Parsons-Pack said the program is designed not just so students who never eat breakfast get an opportunity to have one, but to ensure that all students have the chance to do so, as an empty stomach can interfere with their learning. She said the program provides a "happy medium" for students who might not be hungry when they first wake up but are famished after a long bus ride to school.

"By the time they get to school, they're hungry. And it interferes with their learning, because they're more concentrated on the fact that they're hungry and looking forward to eating," she said.

The drop-in program is free of charge, she said, and is being supported by community donations and volunteers, she said, adding the club expects to supply breakfast to one-third of the school's 697 students any given day.

"So we're looking at possibly 230 students being able to, on a fairly regular basis, have a meal. Now that won't be the same 230 every day. That will vary, but that's generally what you'll get."

A side benefit of the fundraising, said Parsons-Pack, is an improvement in the school's recycling. The principal said each five-cent can they recycle is matched by the Multi Materials Stewardship Board, a provincial Crown agency run by the department of environment and conservation. Then, that 10 cents is

matched by the Kids Eat Smart foundation, making each pop can worth 20 cents towards the breakfast club.

"So we've started a recycling program at the school, trying to make our students more community-minded," she said. The recycling revenue is being added to the \$5,000 startup grant from the Kids Eat Smart Foundation and corporate donations to keep the club going, she said.

Melanie Stokes, the program development co-ordinator for Kids Eat Smart, said the organization is based on a community model.

"It's volunteer-run. That can be teachers, community members, community groups... we have students that volunteer, a lot of high school students participate. They serve the breakfasts. We provide the funding, the majority of the funding, and it comes from the provincial government and also corporate sponsors and other private sponsors."

The schools involved also do fundraising themselves, said Stokes, adding that Kids Eat Smart matches all the funding they raise.

The typical breakfast program serves three or four breakfast foods every morning, said Stokes. "A typical breakfast would be whole-wheat toast, fresh fruit and a glass of milk. Or another day might be whole-grain cereal, yogurt and juice."

Daphne LeDrew, the executive director of Kids Eat Smart Foundation, said it's important for the breakfast program to be there for students who might have slept in and missed a breakfast or for those students who might not normally have breakfast in the mornings.

"It's important for them to have access to nutritious foods for their overall development and learning," she said. LeDrew said she didn't know how many students might typically miss breakfast, but said there are always students at every school who come to class without a morning meal in their stomachs. Often, she says, a long bus trip for a student might mean he or she didn't have time to have breakfast before catching the bus.

"A lot of kids can't eat before they ride on the bus, so a lot of times they're the ones that would want breakfast," she said. "There are all kinds of reasons. Getting up teenagers, you know?"

LeDrew said the Kids Eat Smart programs are available to 52,000 students across the province, and typically 18,000 students get some form of breakfast through the programs each morning.

Stokes said Kids Eat Smart doesn't plan to stop with its 200th club. She said there are plans for many more programs. Often, she said, schools will get involved when they hear about a Kids Eat Smart Club at another school.

"A lot of schools will approach us if they hear about it from other schools, or principals might hear about it in principals' meetings and they approach us and we sent out a startup kit to help them start the process," she said.

The Kids Eat Smart Foundation works with the schools on all aspects of the club, from organizing to menu preparation, said LeDrew. "There's a whole series of things that happen before we get to this stage."

LeDrew praised the volunteers responsible for keeping Kids Eat Smart clubs going. "It's volunteer-run, so it depends on the support of volunteers in the community. That's really important and a really valuable contribution you can make to your community," she said, adding the foundation is willing to work with any school or community to start a club.

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