

Hartman's food program aims to 'disrupt perception of what community needs'



Aurora has long been thought of as an affluent community, but not every experience is the same, regardless of age or circumstance? and this is a perception that leaders at Hartman Public School is aiming to challenge.

Hartman Public School believes that access to proper nutrition is 'essential for a child's growth, development and academic success,' and with the help of several local businesses, including The Real Canadian Superstore at Bayview and St. John's Sideroad, they have been able to take their school's Universal Snack Program to the next level.

The Hartman Public School Universal Snack Program aims to provide healthy and nourishing snacks to all students regardless of their financial circumstances. The overall goal is to 'create an inclusive environment where every child can thrive and concentrate on their studies without hunger as a barrier.'

It's a cause particularly close to the hearts of Principal Saira Salman and parent volunteer Miriam Dos Anjos.

Together, the women have been working to not only amass support amongst the business community, but challenge the school's catchment area on how a school community should be defined.

'When we first started, there was a little bit of, 'Oh, but our community doesn't need it,' but I thought every community needs it, regardless,' says Salman, who joined the Hartman community last September. 'School can be a place where we can address a lot of the issues we're not willing to socially address. You can do it quietly and effectively and that is the goal here.'

Dos Anjos, however, has been a bit less quiet. Described by Salman as a 'huge advocate for students,' Dos Anjos approached her children's principal with an idea to kick programs that were already in place up a notch or two. Their efforts build upon the groundwork of school administrator Gigi who secured some funding from a partner program in Peterborough to offer select healthy snacks in the main office to anyone who needed them.

The women saw an opportunity to build community buy-in and, with the support of businesses, they're now feeding 550 kids with granola bars, apples, bananas, Cheese Strings, juice boxes, and more.

'I had an extra driving force because if I was dropping something off [in the office] I would see some students come in and ask for a snack because they didn't have lunch,' Dos Anjos explains.

Now, the Universal Snack Program brings these healthy goodies right into the classrooms where students might need them, allowing them to access the food without having to ask, helping to reduce the 'stigma' that sometimes comes with need.

'Having a bin in their class has helped students so much because they don't have to come down to the office and feel uncomfortable,' says Dos Anjos. 'We don't know what their family economic status or situation is, but I think just having access to something and it being in a safe place, not it being an uncomfortable thing, not being teased because you don't have something, is part of the whole picture.'

'I think every child deserves a chance and, to me, a tummy that is full is a tummy and a mind that is able to expand and learn. I have seen it with students and I have seen it in the community where some kids don't have access to things or are uncomfortable asking. It made me think we could do something 'bigger picture.' Everybody deserves a chance regardless of your social or economic status. It's not always that kids don't have lunches here or don't have food, but it is access in a safe, positive environment and that is the best.'

That hasn't always been the case.

Salman says that since she joined the Hartman community, she has had kids come to the office to quietly see if there were any leftovers from pizza lunches. Although it's less than ideal for a student to have to even ask the question, she prides herself that she has fostered an environment where students can do just that.

'I am privileged and honoured that they trust me with that but, at the same time, I want to make sure our kids are fed. Full tummies means that they're ready for learning and for our older kids, sometimes their parents leave early and they think they are independent to pack their own lunches, or they forget their lunches, and a school should be a hub where kids feel like it's home,' says Salman. 'That's where we're working from.'

Salman grew up in Montreal and has vivid memories of taking part in her school's milk program. She 'hated milk with a passion at home' but things tasted just a little bit sweeter at school where she received a little blue carton of her own each day, making it a life-long habit.

'We have changed schooling so much that we have forgotten we're in partnership raising somebody else's child. How do we build that partnership?' she says. 'I am the parent while Miriam is working and my job is to make sure they are healthy, safe, nourished and educated. I can't do the education part without them feeling the rest.'

There are additional benefits as well. Since they started work to augment the program, they have seen students take ownership of it as well.

'Our Student Council has been very helpful,' says Salman. 'We have one in our school for the first time this year and they have taken it on to help out, to make and deliver the bins, so they are part of this journey. It is leadership from them. It means they're receptive to it.'

Adds Dos Anjos: 'I pick up my kids after school and it makes it worth it for me to see the happy faces and the excitement. My kids help me go pick up our deliveries [in the morning] and it's a battle of who gets to bring in the wagon of cases of bananas and apples. It's a pride thing for my kids to be able to help and seeing the other kids and hearing that the Student Council is really involved in distribution and part of it just takes away the embarrassment, the uncertainty, or being uncomfortable.'

Salman and Dos Anjos encourage local businesses and like-minded organizations to partner with their local schools to make these programs take root in their schools or to bolster programs that already exist 'and to re-think what it means to be part of a school community now and in the future.'

'Demographics change every 10 years or so,' says Salman. 'Our notion of who we serve sometimes gets frozen in time. We're at a

point in our school where demographics have now started to change and it is through that lens that I am starting to see needs arise.

?I would really like people to challenge their own understanding of school. School isn't just a place where we come to do the ABCs and 123s; it's a place where we can come to have someone who is safe for us, somebody we can tell what happened the night before or at the breakfast table. School is more than just classrooms with desks in a row. With that vision, I hope to really think more deeply about who our students are and who they are no longer.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter