

Blessings in a backpack



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After the first month of school, students should be settled into their classes by now. The nervous butterflies and jitters in their stomachs should be gone.

However, there are many students across the city that can't help but feel unsettled every morning. Hunger has starved their appetite to learn.

Fortunately, there's Blessings in a Backpack (blessingsinabackpack.ca), a program designed to feed elementary school children who may not have any or enough food on the weekends. Students are given backpacks every Friday filled with foods that require little to no preparation, they return with their backpacks on Monday and are ready to learn.

The program is currently most active in neighbourhoods with higher needs schools, such as Downsview, Scarborough, Parkdale, Humber and the Grange. \$100 can feed a child on weekends throughout the entire school year.

Karen Green, Executive Director of Blessings in a Backpack, has seen firsthand how hungry children have transformed into top students — thanks to a little more encouragement and a lot more nourishment.

"We have teachers that tell us all the time that

they see a higher attendance once the program has started. Students are more alert, focused and participate more in class after they've started the program," says Green.

"Attendance is one of the factors used to determine whether a student is on track for graduation, and research from Feeding our Future has linked feeding programs in schools with higher grades." Green recalls

how one Grade 6 student was so proud that he was able to bring food home for his family, that he prepared dinner on the Friday night and surprised his parents.

The kids themselves are well-aware of the correlation between being full and doing well in school.

"I used to live in a homeless shelter, the backpack program is also a motivation to come to school," says Mike, age 14.

"My family and I are

thankful for the program because me and my family don't have enough money to get food every day," says Nordia, age 10.

Monetary donations are always welcome, but the program is also looking for actual backpacks. Some students at San Lorenzo Ruiz Catholic Elementary School (SLR) in Mississauga, even organized a backpack drive to collect 118 slightly-used backpacks.

One student, Thea M, managed to donate 34 new backpacks to the drive. When asked about her motivation for donating all of those backpacks, Thea said that when she heard her school was collecting backpacks, she decided to help because she had a pile of extra backpacks from World Youth Day.

The organization is also on the lookout for talented fundraisers and helpers to prepare the backpacks.

It seems like a worthwhile volunteer opportunity to piggyback on.

Program feeds students in need on weekends