

Niagara being asked to Make Change for Children

Education foundation working to help feed and dress students

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Kids showing up for school with empty bellies and no boots. Kids unable to afford field trips. Kids unable to join school teams because they can't pay for a uniform.

Those are scenarios teachers and principals in Niagara confront every day. They do what they can -- often reaching into their own pockets to help out students living in poverty -- but can't be everything for everyone.

Julie Densham is hoping a new poverty and emergency relief fund launched by the Education Foundation of Niagara -- an arm's length fundraising agency of the District School Board of Niagara that provided about \$85,000 to public schools last year for such things as gym mats, music equipment, audio visual equipment and breakfast programs -- will mean there are fewer kids going without at schools.

Densham, executive director of the foundation, realized the need for an emergency fund when Niagara's regional government released a report last fall showing about one in six Niagara kids live in poverty and more than 40 per cent of food bank users are children.

At the launch of the fund at the Quality Hotel Parkway in St. Catharines Feb. 21, school board chairman Kevin Maves said the proliferation of breakfast programs at schools points to how prevalent poverty is among children.

"We take for granted that our kids will come to school well-nourished and ready to learn," he said. "Unfortunately, it's not true."

Brian Hutchings, commissioner of community services for Niagara Region, said over a five-year period, one out of every three Niagara kids will at some point be living in poverty.

The foundation's goal is to raise \$100 this year for each student in need. Principals will be able to apply for kids for such things as clothing, school supplies, uniforms, field trip costs and cafeteria vouchers so they can have a hot lunch, and the service will be confidential.

Over the next year, the foundation will monitor how many requests for assistance come in to better understand the need.

"There will never be enough" money to fight poverty, Densham said. "If there was, we'd be living in a utopia.

"But every little bit helps."



Julie Densham, executive director of the Education Foundation of Niagara, with future students Willem Sendzik (right) and Erin Gracey, hold toonies at the District School Board of Niagara headquarters. The foundation has launched a new poverty and emergency relief fund for kids; the first fundraising event will be Make Change for Children on May 6, when toonie donation boxes will be set up in workplaces.

The first event to raise cash for the new emergency fund will be 'Make Change for Children' on Tuesday, May 6, when workplaces will put out boxes to collect two-dollar coins. Employers will be encouraged to match the toonies donated by employees.

For more information, call 905-641-2929 ext. 4104.

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