

Beyond nutrition: Elementary school students learn more than just meal preparation skills at Brown Bag Lunch Program

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By Lisa MacSween



Kirsten Willigar is the active living coordinator with the Municipality of Cumberland and program lead of the Brown Bag Lunch Program (Contributed).

When Kirsten Willigar started the Brown Bag Lunch Program at Parrsboro Regional Elementary School, she didn't realize that the impact of the program would go beyond nutrition.

Willigar is the active living coordinator for the Municipality of Cumberland, which has been offering the Brown Bag Lunch Program for free to registered participants from Grades Primary through Grade 6 since 2014 and is part of Nova Scotia Health Authority's (NSHA) Wellness Fund program

Every Tuesday and Thursday, the after-school students registered for the program walk as a group to the Parrsboro Lions Club.

With the guidance of Willigar and two other volunteers, the children learn how to prepare their lunch for the next day. These meals are easy to prepare so they can be replicated at home.

The children gain a lot from the program, including learning about healthy food choices, trying new food, feeling empowered to create their own meals, and making new friends.

In the 2018-19 school year, 14 children were registered for the program with representation from all grade levels and a blend of social economic situations.

"Most of these children had never hung out before attending the program," Willigar said.

The lunch menu varies, giving children the opportunity to try different food.

“At the start of the program, we had an agreement that the children would try everything they made,” explained Willigar.

The week they made tacos, many of the children tried peppers for the first time, she recalled. After everyone tried the peppers, several of the children opted to include them on their tacos.

After preparing the meals, the students receive a plastic container for the lunches they make, so they cannot be identified as being part of the program unless they choose to share.

Willigar scans grocery store flyers and plan meals in advance around the sales and food availability in order to stay on budget for the Brown Bag Lunch Program, which was developed in partnership with Municipality of Cumberland County, Parrsboro Lions Club and Parrsboro Regional Elementary School, which is part of the Chignecto-Central Regional Centre for Education.

In 2018, this program received full funding through the Southampton, Parrsboro, Advocate and Region (SPAR) Community Health Board (CHB) Wellness Fund.

Each year, NSHA designates funds for each CHB in the province to distribute as [Wellness Funds \(WF\)](#).

This Wellness Fund is for non-profit groups working to improve health in their communities and must address the health priorities identified by CHBs in their current community health plans.