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Juhl: Olympian's perspective on food insecurity sharpened when he became a dad

Charles Hamelin surprised staff and students at Montreal's Mountainview High School with the launch of a breakfast program for kids.

Hayley Juhl • Montreal Gazette

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When the Breakfast Club of Canada and Amazon Canada reached out to him for help launching a breakfast program at Côte-St-Luc's Mountainview High School, speedskater Charles Hamelin said it was a no-brainer. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

Olympian Charles Hamelin's breakfast looks a lot like that of a two-year-old. His two-year-old, that is.

"Now that I'm retired, breakfast is whatever my daughter, Violette, is eating," the 38-year-old gold medallist said. "It could be toast or fruit, maybe cereal or yogurt or granola."

Violette and speedskater Hamelin know that breakfast plays a big part in children's development. "To be the best athlete, you have to eat well," Hamelin said. "All athletes — all of us — started with going to school to learn and play sports. We had to have the energy to absorb all that information."

That's one of the reasons Hamelin said he was shocked to learn that one in three Canadian children go to school hungry.

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“For me, it was mind-blowing. My reality changed when I became a dad and I became more conscious of the problem. It’s not normal to send a child to school with an empty stomach.”

Hamelin surprised students and staff at Mountainview on Friday by delivering packages to help launch the in-school program that provides healthy breakfasts before classes start every day. The Boucherville-based Breakfast Club helps more than 500,000 children in around 3,000 programs across the country, including 67,000 children in 486 breakfast clubs in Quebec.

“Mountainview is one of our social-affairs schools that operates very successfully under the radar,” said Michael Cohen, the English Montreal School Board’s marketing and communications manager. “Ensuring that these students get a quality breakfast each school day will have a tremendously positive impact on their ability to focus in class each day. The staff are just ecstatic.”



Charles Hamelin and daughter Violette start their days strong with a good breakfast. Hamelin believes all children should have that morning boost. PHOTO BY GRAHAM HUGHES /The Canadian Press

The Breakfast Club of Canada said it has seen a significant increase in the need for more programs since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Statistics Canada reported that a national survey conducted in May 2020 estimated that nearly 15 per cent of Canadians reported some level of food insecurity in their household over the previous month.

“Higher rates were documented among Canadians living in households with children and among those absent from work because of COVID-19 during the previous week,” StatsCan said. “Both before and during the pandemic, those reporting higher levels of household food insecurity were younger, with less than a high-school education, living in lone-parent-led households, living in households reliant on social assistance or employment insurance as their primary source of income, those who rented rather than owned their dwelling and who identify as Indigenous or Black.”

Six to nine months into the pandemic, there was some improvement in household food security as pandemic-related financial aid like the CERB was rolled out, StatsCan said. However, it noted a “persistent challenge” among working-age people outside the workforce, who were ineligible for relief benefits.

“People might not realize that children whose families are struggling financially could run out of food and need relief,” Hamelin said. “With this program, they will be assured their child is fed and maybe they can put that money somewhere else.

“When you’re hungry, you’re not thinking clearly, you’re not as aware. This gives an equal chance to all kids to learn at the same pace.”

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