Federal report shows overwhelming support for national school food program

CAROLINE ALPHONSO  EDUCATION REPORTER  PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

A new federal government report shows an overwhelming majority of survey participants support a national school food program that advocates say is desperately needed to meet a growing demand among children.

The report released on Tuesday summarized feedback on a national school food policy. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made an election commitment in 2021 of investing $1-billion over five years, and tasked his agriculture minister and minister of families, children and social development to create a policy.

Among G7 countries, Canada is the only one without a national school food program.

The report found that 96 per cent of respondents believe that the programs benefit children by teaching them about healthy habits or helping them stay focused and learn.

The government received more than 5,000 responses to its online questionnaire late last year from individual Canadians and organizations. Participants in the survey supported a universal program, which means that every child would have access to school food, providing opportunities for students to be involved and integrating food literacy into the school day.
“No child should go to school on an empty stomach, and if they do, our schools need to be able to provide them with a nutritious meal,” said Jenna Sudds, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development.

However, advocates are increasingly frustrated at the pace the government has moved in developing a policy. Many local programs have struggled to feed children because of soaring food prices and the growing demand from families who are having difficulty making ends meet with the rising cost of living.

What currently exists across the country is a patchwork of community-driven food programs that serve a snack, breakfast or lunch to roughly one million school-age children, 21 per cent of the country’s student population. The programs are financed by local and provincial governments, but also rely heavily on non-governmental organizations for support, as well as community donations.

Debbie Field, co-ordinator of the Montreal-based advocacy group Coalition for Healthy School Food, said every province and territory has stepped up to contribute, and the federal government should fulfill its promise.

“We’re very frustrated, we’re very disappointed. And we really think the government needs to do something now, quickly,” Ms. Field said.

A growing body of evidence suggests that a nutritious school food program promotes better student attendance, participation in classroom lessons, and physical benefits. One study published in 2021 looked at the long-term effects of Sweden’s free school lunch program, which was rolled out between 1959 and 1969. The study found that those exposed to the program through their entire elementary school years had 3-per-cent greater lifetime earnings, with those from poorer households benefiting the most.
“Justin Trudeau and [Finance] Minister [Chrystia] Freeland need to see the economic need to invest right now, in terms of keeping us in a competitive economy, making sure that in the long term that our citizens are healthy,” Ms. Field added.

The call for the federal government to step in has grown louder. Last Friday, Vancouver teacher Brent Mansfield ran 200 laps – or about 92 kilometres – around his school to draw attention to the need for a national school food program. About 200 students at Lord Roberts Elementary, in the city’s west end, receive lunch twice a week through the school’s pay-what-you-can meal program. Older students help prepare the meals.

A few years ago, around 40 students received a meal subsidy. That number has increased to 60. Several others are requesting a subsidy, Mr. Mansfield said.

Last year, his province included a $214-million investment over three years in its budget to expand existing school food programs – the largest single investment in school food in Canadian history. Mr. Mansfield believes it’s time the federal government plays a role in helping feed school children.

“These programs need to benefit all students. This really needs to be something that we’re taking seriously in education,” he said. “If we’re not thinking about how kids are, what they’re eating and what they’re learning about food at school, I think we’re missing out in education.”

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