

Understanding the Landscape of School Food Programming in Ontario

Findings from a 2026 Baseline Survey of English-Language Public Schools



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Centre for Healthy Communities

Ontario Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food September

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Centre for Healthy
Communities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background: In 2024, the Government of Canada announced the National School Food Program and Policy and committed \$1 billion over five years to expand school food programming. The program was then made permanent in 2026. In Ontario, this investment builds on an extensive but decentralized system of Student Nutrition Programs, school-based initiatives, and community partnerships. Despite this established foundation, limited provincial-level information is available about how programs are delivered, and how program capacity and access vary across communities throughout the province.

This report shares the results of a study that was undertaken by the Ontario Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, with the support and collaboration of Loyalist College's Centre for Healthy Communities, the Ontario Principals' Council, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, and the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health.

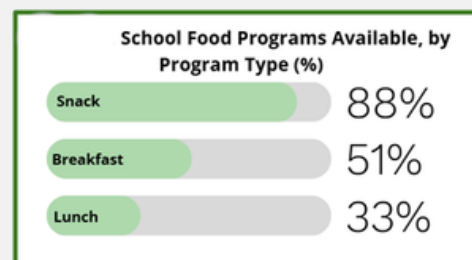
Survey Goal: To establish a provincial-level baseline understanding of school food programming across Ontario's English-language public schools.

Survey Process: A 38-question online survey examined school food program availability, models, financial accessibility, cultural relevance, perceived impacts, staffing, infrastructure and equipment, operational challenges, food-based learning, and future needs.

Distribution and Response: The survey was distributed to 3,033 English-language public schools across Ontario. A total of 314 consenting responses were included in the analysis, representing a response rate of approximately 10.5%.

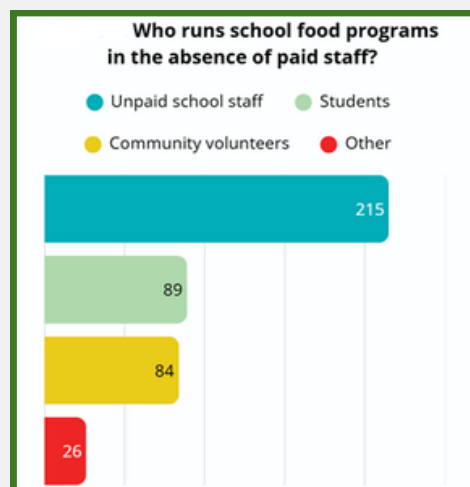
Findings:

- While Ontario has a strong existing foundation for school food programming, there is considerable variation regarding how different programs operate, and the capacity available to deliver them.
- Prevalence:** Nearly 95% of participating schools reported offering some form of school food program. Snack programs were most common (88%), followed by breakfast (51%), both program types were found to be available largely free of charge, while lunches are less frequently offered (33%), and generally paid by families.



Findings:

- **Prevalence (cont):** 210 respondents (71%) also indicated that their school organized occasional lunch vendor programs through the school or school council (e.g., pizza, tacos) that were purchased by parents or guardians.
- **Human Resources:** 215 out of 314 schools (68%) noted their programs are run by school staff who volunteer their time. 54% of responding schools said they experience gaps in personnel to support programs.
- **Equity:** While school food programs are nearly universal among participating schools, the system is characterized by considerable variation in program models, staffing, funding, and operational capacity.

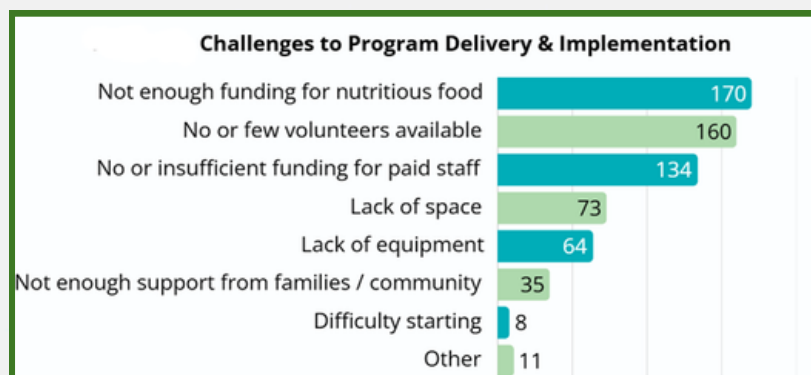


Lunch programs are less widely available and more likely to require payment, and culturally relevant food options are limited across many participating schools. Nearly half of respondents reported that no Indigenous or culturally specific foods are offered, and more than one-third indicated that these foods are offered only occasionally. Respondents identified funding, procurement restrictions, and limited food availability as barriers to providing greater cultural variety.

- **Benefits:** Schools perceive substantial benefits from their food programs. These include improved student mood and mental health (76% of responses), concentration and learning (68%), willingness to try new foods (68%), attendance (38%) and students' learning of respectful eating behaviours and social skills (38%).

Programs support families, strengthen school-community relationships, and provide opportunities for student leadership, volunteering, and food-related skill development.

- **Challenges:** Operational capacity emerged as the most consistent challenge experienced by schools. Specifically, insufficient funding for nutritious food was the most frequently reported barrier (54%), followed by limited volunteer availability and insufficient funding for paid staff. Schools also reported space and equipment challenges.



Findings:

- **Challenges (cont):** Respondents described challenges relating to rising food costs, growing student demand, reliance on fundraising and charitable or community contributions, and concern about the sustainability of programs as they depend on temporary funding and unpaid labour.

These findings suggest that maintaining and strengthening existing programs will require attention to staffing, coordination, infrastructure, equipment, and other operational supports in addition to addressing the cost of food.

- **Opportunities to strengthen food literacy education:** Responses indicated that food-related learning is incorporated to varying degrees across participating schools. Some schools reported having gardens (25%), hydroponic systems (16%), classroom growing (6%), culinary programs, and other forms of experiential learning.

However, food-based learning is often limited by curriculum demands, instructional time, facilities, staffing and other capacity constraints. More intentional integration of food programming and learning may create food literacy opportunities while contributing to program delivery, particularly when appropriate resources and infrastructure are in place.

Conclusions: Taken together, the findings shine a light on how schools and communities have developed a diverse range of programs through decades of local innovation, partnership, and problem-solving. Additional federal and provincial investment will be important to strengthen this existing foundation while addressing the fragility and inequities within it.

Recommendations: Future policy and investment should:

- Develop sustainable staffing and operational capacity
- Strengthen infrastructure and equipment where needed
- Enable continued community and cross-sector partnerships
- Improve consistent supports for affordable, culturally relevant, high-quality school food programs to ensure equitable access across all of Ontario
- Preserve Ontario's diverse delivery models that reflect local contexts

This baseline study provides a foundation for continued provincial monitoring as implementation of the National School Food Program progresses. Ongoing data collection will be important for understanding how programs evolve, where gaps persist, and how future investments are strengthening student health, learning, equity, and the long-term sustainability of Ontario's school food system.

For more information: For the full set of study details, see the ON Survey Report.

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FoodShare Toronto, ON

BACKGROUND



Schools are a critical setting for promoting child and youth health, well-being, and learning. Students spend a large portion of their day in school and often consume a substantial proportion of their daily food intake during school hours. At the same time, many Canadian children and youth do not meet recommendations for healthy eating, particularly for fruit and vegetable consumption, while approximately one in three children in Ontario live in households

experiencing food insecurity (Polsky & Garriguet, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2023; Dabravolskaj et al., 2026). As a result, school food programs have become an increasingly important strategy for supporting student nutrition, alleviating children's hunger during the school day, improving dietary quality, and enhancing academic achievement, health, and well-being (Cohen et al., 2021; Colley et al., 2020). While comprehensive income security measures remain essential to addressing household food insecurity, school food programs can reduce financial pressures on families while generating longer-term health, social, and economic benefits for children, families, and communities (Ruetz et al., 2023; Quibrantar et al., 2023). These findings are consistent with international evidence demonstrating that investments in school food programs generate substantial economic returns through improved health outcomes, workforce participation, and local food system development (World Food Programme, 2025).

Unlike other G7 countries, Canada historically lacked a coordinated national approach to school food programming, with initiatives largely developed and implemented at provincial, regional, or community levels (Zhong, et al., 2023). Consequently, programs have been established with, and continue to rely on, a combination of charitable funding, community partnerships, and volunteer labour, leading to considerable variation in program availability, reach, and sustainability across regions (Hernandez et al., 2018; Ruetz & McKenna, 2021).

In 2024, the Government of Canada announced a National School Food Program and Policy, committing one billion dollars over five years to support provinces, territories, and Indigenous communities in expanding access to school food programs (Government of Canada, 2024). The [National Policy](#) sets out a long-term vision for school food in Canada, recognizing that school food programs contribute not only to student nutrition and academic achievement, but also to food literacy, local economic development, environmental sustainability, and broader health and social

outcomes for children and youth. By March 2025, the Government of Canada had reached agreements with all provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners to advance the vision, principles, and objectives of the National Policy through jurisdiction-specific approaches that build on existing school food systems and governance structures.

In Ontario, federal funding will continue to strengthen and expand Ontario's Student Nutrition Program (SNP), the First Nations Student Nutrition Program (FNSNP), and the Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program, while also supporting procurement of fresh Ontario-grown produce for students across the province (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2026).

These investments build on Ontario's existing school food system, in which provincial and federal funding is administered through the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and allocated to Student Nutrition Programs (SNPs) and the First Nations Student Nutrition Program (FNSNP). Additional financial and in-kind support is provided by community organizations, private and philanthropic partners, and, in some areas, municipal governments. Beyond these provincially and federally funded programs, many schools also operate food literacy programs, parent council-led meal programs, hospitality and food studies programs, and after-school or summer food initiatives that receive little or no government funding. Together, these diverse delivery models contribute to a complex school food landscape across Ontario.

Despite significant recent investment, there is currently no comprehensive provincial picture of the diversity, organization, and delivery of school food programming across Ontario's school system, including how access, resources, and program capacity may vary across schools and communities.

Survey Rationale

Establishing a provincial baseline is particularly timely as Ontario expands school food programming through new federal and provincial investments. Key aspects such as program availability, participation, funding models, staffing, infrastructure, and operational challenges are inconsistently documented. A better understanding of these dimensions, and how they vary across schools and communities, can help identify gaps and inequities, guide future investments, and support more equitable program development across the province.

The purpose of this study is to examine the current state of school food programming in Ontario schools, including the types of programs offered, operational characteristics, staffing and infrastructure needs, and perceived impacts and challenges associated with program delivery. This study aims to establish a provincial baseline through an environmental scan and survey of English-language public schools, capturing both existing program models and areas of need.

The findings are intended to support planning, collaboration, and investment in school food programs by identifying current strengths, gaps, and opportunities across the system. This work also provides a foundation for future provincial-level monitoring and evaluation, particularly in the context of Ontario's commitment to advancing the National School Food Policy and efforts to expand and strengthen programming across Ontario.

METHODOLOGY

This section describes the design, development, administration, and analysis of the provincial school food survey. It also describes the study's limitations.

Study Design

This study used a cross-sectional, descriptive mixed-methods survey administered online to examine the availability, structure, and perceived impacts of school food programs across Ontario's English-language public schools. The survey predominantly collected quantitative information about existing school food programs. Open-ended questions were used to supplement this information with qualitative context.

Survey Development

The survey instrument was adapted from a school food program survey previously developed for use in Saskatchewan (Michnik, 2025), with modifications to reflect Ontario's policy context and school food delivery models. The adaptation was led by the Ontario Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, which is hosted by Sustain Ontario, with input from school and public health leaders representing the Ontario Principals' Council, the Ontario School Boards' Association, the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health, and Loyalist College's Centre for Healthy Communities.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was comprised of 38 questions, including multiple-choice, select-all-that-apply, ordinal scale, and open-ended items. Questions included information about school characteristics (e.g., school board, school type, and enrolment), the presence and structure of breakfast, snack, and lunch programs, participation levels, payment models, cultural relevance of foods offered, program impacts on students and school communities, staffing and volunteer involvement, infrastructure and equipment needs, and barriers to implementing or expanding

school food programs. Respondents also reported key school characteristics, including school board affiliation and approximate student enrolment.

The complete survey instrument can be found in **Appendix A**.

Recruitment and Data Collection

The survey was hosted by Loyalist College's Centre for Healthy Communities using Microsoft Forms. The Ontario Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food coordinated survey distribution through the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC), with support from the Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA). The survey was distributed electronically to approximately 3,000 English-language elementary and secondary public-school principals across Ontario. Principals or school administrators were invited to complete the survey. Where appropriate, respondents may have consulted with staff more directly involved in school food programming (e.g., teachers or program coordinators) to ensure responses accurately reflected the programs operating within their schools.

Participation was voluntary, and respondents reviewed a Letter of Information and provided informed consent before beginning the survey. The study received approval from Loyalist College's Institutional Research Ethics Board (LC-REB 2026-94SK) in February 2026.

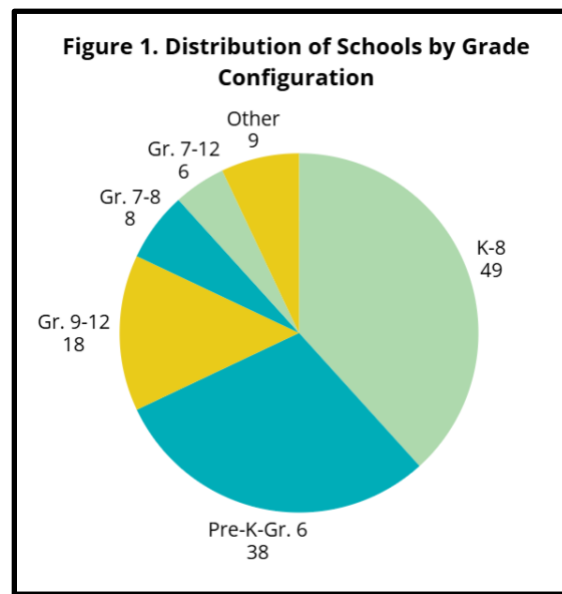
Sample

A total of 317 survey responses were received. Of these, 314 respondents provided consent to participate in the study and were included in the analysis. In relation to the survey distribution size of 3,033 schools, the corresponding response rate was approximately 10.5%. Based on this achieved sample size, the estimated margin of error is approximately ±5.2–5.5% at the 95% confidence level.

As represented in **Table 1**, respondents represented a range of school boards – with some school boards participating more than others.

Table 1. Responding School Boards	
School Board(s)	# of Responses
Ottawa-Carleton DSB	37
Peel DSB	35
Toronto DSB	27
York Region DSB	25
DSB of Niagara	10
Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB	9
Waterloo Region DSB	9
Upper Grand DSB	8
Thames Valley DSB	8
Avon Maitland DSB	8
Durham DSB	7
Renfrew County DSB	7
Other	29

As represented in **Figure 1**, survey respondents represented schools with a range of grade configurations, including primary-junior elementary schools (pre-kindergarten to grade 6), intermediate schools (grades 7–8), combined elementary-intermediate schools (kindergarten to grade 8), intermediate-secondary schools (grades 7–12), and secondary schools (grades 9–12). The highest number of responses (almost half) were from elementary schools.



Data Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Closed-ended survey questions were summarized using descriptive statistics, including counts and percentages, to describe response patterns across participating schools. Quantitative analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel.

Responses to open-ended questions were imported into NVivo (QSR International) and reviewed using an inductive thematic approach. Recurring ideas, patterns, and themes related to program implementation, perceived impacts, and operational challenges were identified and used to support interpretation of the quantitative findings and inform the discussion and recommendations.

Study Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study was limited to English-language public schools. As a result, the findings do not capture the experiences of Catholic, French-language, private, or Indigenous school systems, where program models and supports may differ.

Second, participation across the province was uneven with higher representation from some school boards than others, likely representing differences in how the survey was distributed. Representation from schools in Northern Ontario was comparatively lower, which may limit how well the findings reflect the unique challenges faced in rural and remote communities, including access to food, transportation, and infrastructure.

Third, the response rate of 10.5% achieved a sample size that is sufficient to provide useful insights at a provincial level. However, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of broader trends rather than fully representative of all schools.

Fourth, responses reflect the perspectives of principals or school administrators. Although respondents may have consulted with staff involved in school food programming, their knowledge of operational details—such as infrastructure and equipment needs, staffing requirements, or long-term program planning—may have varied depending on how programs were organized within their schools. Consequently, findings related to these operational aspects may not fully capture the perspectives of those responsible for the day-to-day operation of school food programs.

Fifth, the survey did not capture detailed information on several aspects of school food program delivery that may be valuable for future monitoring and research. For example, future surveys could examine how schools secure and supplement program funding, including the use of fundraising, grants, donations, school-generated funds, and community partnerships. While the current survey also explored the cultural relevance of foods offered, future data collection could more explicitly examine how programs accommodate food allergies, dietary restrictions, and other dietary needs. Collecting this additional information would provide a more complete understanding of how schools finance their programs and respond to the diverse food needs of students.

Finally, several survey questions yielded data that were not suitable for analysis. Some questions asked respondents to estimate program participation rather than report administrative records. These estimates may be subject to recall or reporting error and should therefore be interpreted as approximate rather than precise measures of program use. For this reason, estimated participation data are not presented in this report. Additionally, some questions did not include definitions, creating ambiguity in how respondents interpreted key terms. For example, responses related to breakfast and snack programs may overlap if schools considered a shared morning snack bin to be a breakfast program. Similarly, some respondents may have interpreted parent-paid lunch vendor programs (e.g., pizza days) as school lunch programs, potentially contributing to variation in how lunch programs were reported. The term *culturally relevant* was also not defined, which may have resulted in inconsistent interpretation across respondents. These limitations should be considered when interpreting findings related to program type and cultural inclusivity.

RESULTS

This section presents the survey findings, including the availability and types of school food programs in Ontario, their perceived impacts, and information about program operations, logistics, challenges, and opportunities. It also summarizes responses related to food literacy and

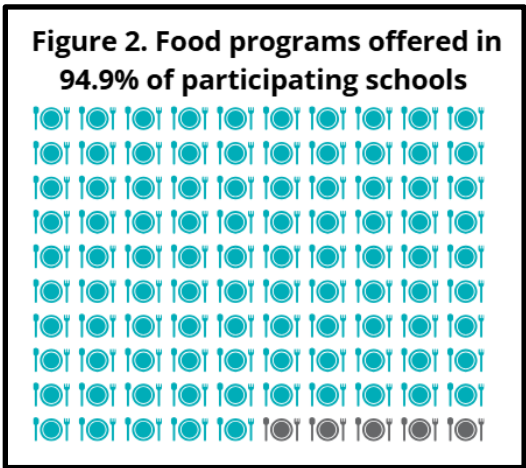
food-based learning, school food production (e.g., gardens and growing initiatives), and additional comments shared by participants.

An Overview of School Food in Ontario

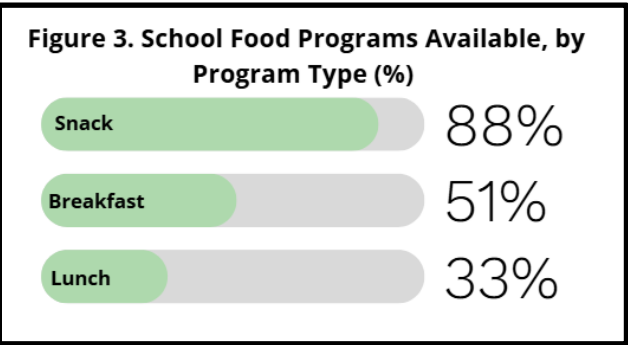
This section describes the availability, financial accessibility, and cultural inclusivity of school food programs in Ontario.

Availability & Types of School Food Programs

School food programs were widely available across participating schools, with 94.9% of survey respondents reporting that their school offered some form of food program (**Figure 2**). These programs take a variety of forms.



Under Ontario's Student Nutrition Program, programs are generally classified as *snack* or *meal* programs based on the number of food groups offered. Snack programs must include up to two food groups to choose from, while meal programs include three food groups and can include more than one choice within those groups.



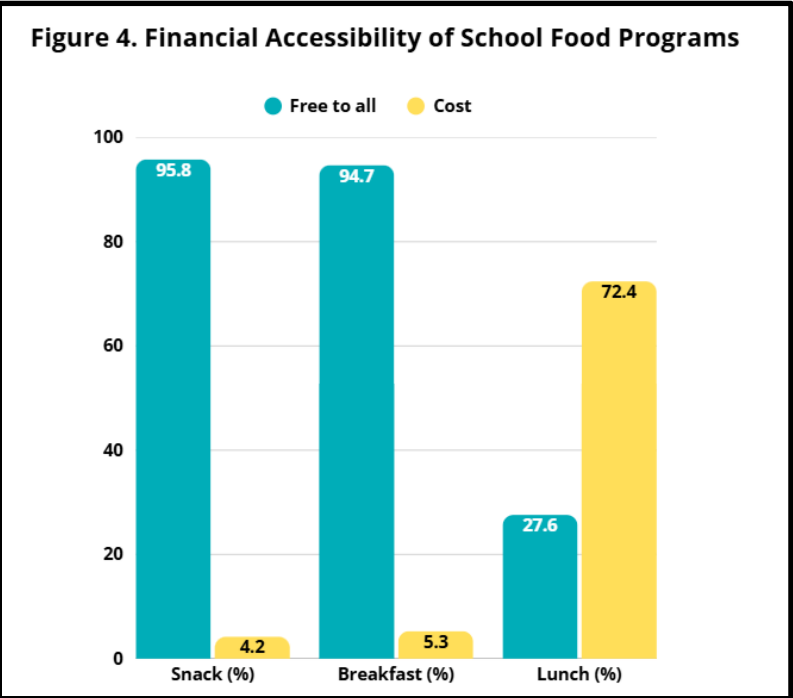
As shown in **Figure 3**, snack programs were the most common type of program, reported by 88.2% of participating schools. These programs most commonly consist of grab-and-go bins or classroom-based snacks that students could access throughout the school day. Breakfast programs were reported by 50.7% of schools, while 32.5% reported offering lunch programs.

Because the survey did not provide standardized definitions for snack, breakfast, or lunch programs, some respondents may have classified similar programs differently. For example, some schools reporting breakfast programs may have been referring to snack-based offerings available during the morning.

In addition to school food programs, many schools reported organizing paid lunch vendor programs through the school or school council. Overall, 210 respondents (70.7%) indicated that their school offered pre-prepared lunches (e.g., pizza, tacos) that were purchased by parents or guardians. Because this question referred to paid lunch vendor programs rather than school food

programs, these responses were analyzed separately. However, some respondents may have considered these offerings when reporting the availability of lunch programs, potentially contributing to variation in how lunch programs were classified.

School Food Programs and Cost to Students



Most snack and breakfast programs were reported as free of charge to all students. In contrast, lunch programs operated quite differently. As shown in **Figure 4**, only 27.6% of lunch programs were available free to all students, while the majority (72.4%) relied on a combination of family-paid, subsidized, or hybrid payment models.

Overall, these findings suggest that schools are largely able to provide low-barrier access to breakfast and snack programs, whereas lunch programs that are more resource-

intensive require cost-sharing or additional funding within the current Ontario context.

Cultural Relevance and Inclusivity of Food Offerings

Findings suggest that culturally relevant food options are limited across many school food programs. As shown in **Figure 5**, nearly half of respondents (46.6%) reported that no Indigenous or culturally specific foods are offered, while an additional 36.5% indicated that such options are only available occasionally. Only a small proportion of schools reported regularly (7.8%) or consistently (0.3%) offering culturally relevant foods. A further 8.8% of respondents were unsure. (Responses of unsure may be attributed to the fact that the term *culturally relevant food* was not defined in the survey.)

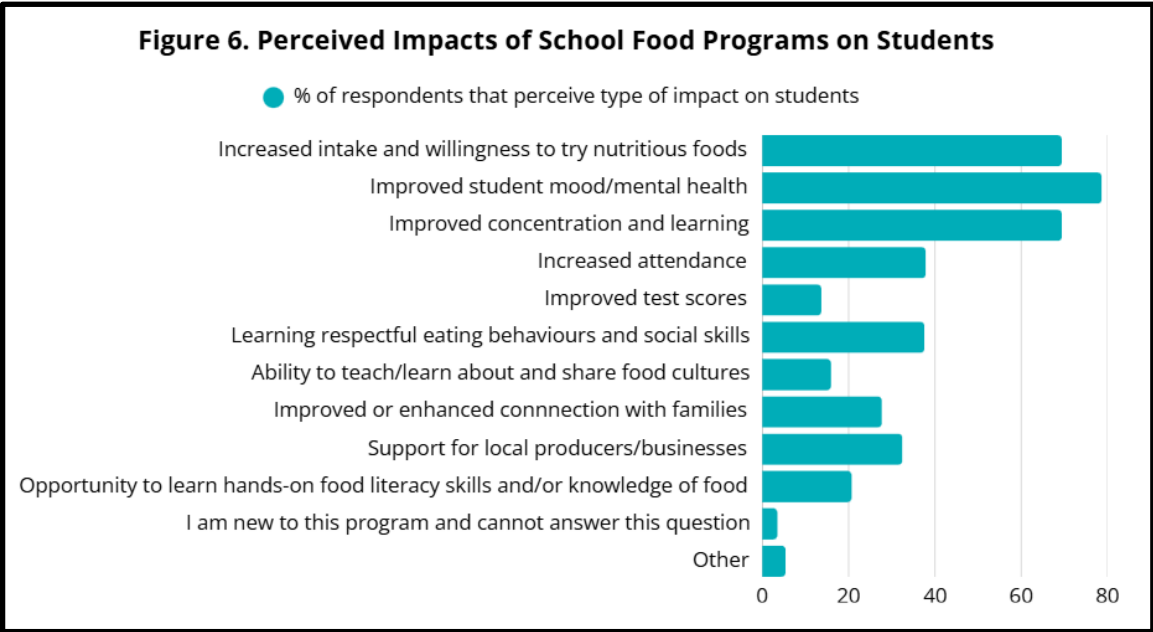
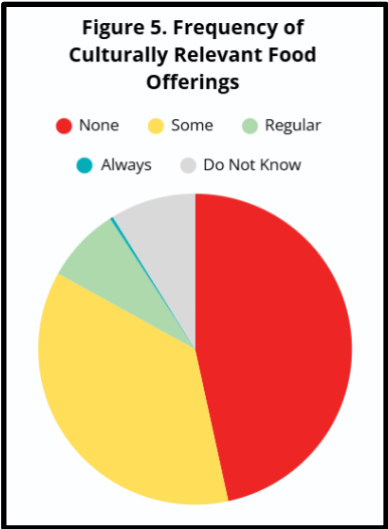
In the open-ended responses, some respondents expressed interest in providing greater cultural variety, including Indigenous and Halal food options, but described limitations related to approved

suppliers, purchasing requirements, available funding, and food selection. These responses suggest that cultural relevance may be influenced not only by school-level interest, but also by the procurement systems and resources available to programs.

Perceived Impacts of School Food Programs

School food programs were widely perceived to have positive impacts on students across a range of outcomes. See **Figure 6**. The highest frequency of responses were in regard to improvements in student mood and mental health (76%; n=234), followed by increased food intake and willingness to try nutritious foods (68%; n=205) and improved concentration and learning (68%; n=208). Fewer respondents reported improvements in attendance (38%; n=114) or test scores (14%; n=42).

Beyond academic and health outcomes, respondents also identified broader social and community benefits. Approximately two in five respondents reported that school food programs supported respectful eating behaviours and social skills (38%; n=113), while one-third identified support for local producers and businesses (33%; n=102). Around one-third also reported enhanced connections with families (29%; n=88), opportunities for hands-on food literacy learning (21%; n=65), and increased ability to teach about and share diverse food cultures (16%; n=49).



Open-ended responses provided further insight into how these impacts were experienced within schools. Respondents frequently emphasized the role of school food programs in reducing hunger and supporting students experiencing food insecurity, including newcomer families and students living in communities affected by persistent poverty. Several described improvements in students' emotional regulation and behaviour when hunger was addressed, alongside perceived benefits for concentration, readiness to learn, and overall well-being. One respondent noted,

"Our school's snack program continues to have a meaningful impact on student well-being, engagement, and readiness to learn. We have seen that consistent access to nutritious snacks helps reduce barriers for many of our students and contributes to a more equitable learning environment".

Universally accessible approaches, such as classroom food bins and grab-and-go programs, were viewed as particularly valuable because students could access food without being singled out or stigmatized. Respondents also described an increased sense of security among students who knew food would be available at school.

Beyond meeting immediate food needs, respondents described school food programs as contributing to belonging, relationships, and a positive school culture. Breakfast spaces and shared meals provided opportunities for students to connect with staff and peers, while some respondents described food programs as welcoming spaces that helped students feel cared for and connected to their school. These responses suggest that the perceived impacts of school food extend beyond nutrition and academic readiness to include social inclusion, emotional well-being, and a sense of belonging.

Respondents also identified benefits for families. Programs provided practical support when lunches were unavailable, insufficient, or inadvertently forgotten and offered students access to nutritious foods that might not otherwise be available at home. In some schools, food programming also supported busy families or provided access to dietary options that enabled greater participation and inclusion. These responses illustrate that school food programs can respond to a range of family circumstances and needs beyond food insecurity alone.

Student participation in program delivery was also described as a source of benefit. Through culinary classes, specialized education programs, student volunteer teams, and other opportunities to prepare, organize, and distribute food, students developed skills related to food preparation, organization, service, teamwork, and contributing to their school community. Community volunteers and service organizations similarly contributed to program delivery while strengthening connections between schools and the broader community.

While these responses provide important insight into how school food programs are experienced, the impacts reported in this survey reflect respondents' perceptions rather than independently measured outcomes. Some respondents explicitly noted that, although they believed programs contributed to outcomes such as learning, attendance, behaviour, and school connectedness, these impacts had not been formally evaluated within their schools.

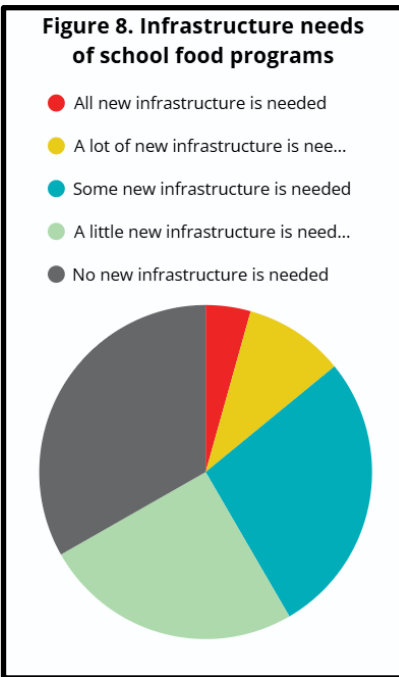
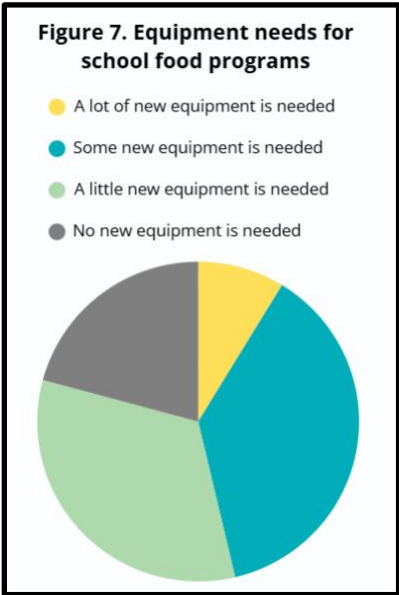
Program Operations and Capacity

This section describes all responses related to food program operations and capacity, including infrastructure and equipment, staffing and coordination, and challenges with implementation and delivery.

Infrastructure and Equipment

Most schools identified a need for additional equipment and infrastructure to support their school food programs, although the level of need varied. For equipment, the largest proportion of respondents indicated that some new equipment was needed (37.5%; n=112), while approximately one-third reported that a little new equipment was required (32.9%; n=98). About one in five schools indicated that no new equipment was needed (20.8%; n=62), and relatively few reported that a great deal of new equipment was required (8.7%; n=26). See **Figure 7**. A similar pattern was observed for infrastructure. Many respondents reported needing some (27.5%; n=82) or a little (25%; n=75) additional infrastructure, while over one-third indicated no infrastructure needs (33.2%; n=99). Only a small proportion of schools reported requiring a great deal or entirely new infrastructure. These responses are interpreted to reflect school's reported needs within their current operating contexts and program models; infrastructure requirements may differ depending on the type and scale of food programming being delivered. See **Figure 8**.

Open-ended responses further illustrated how infrastructure and equipment affect program delivery: *"Infrastructure and storage space*



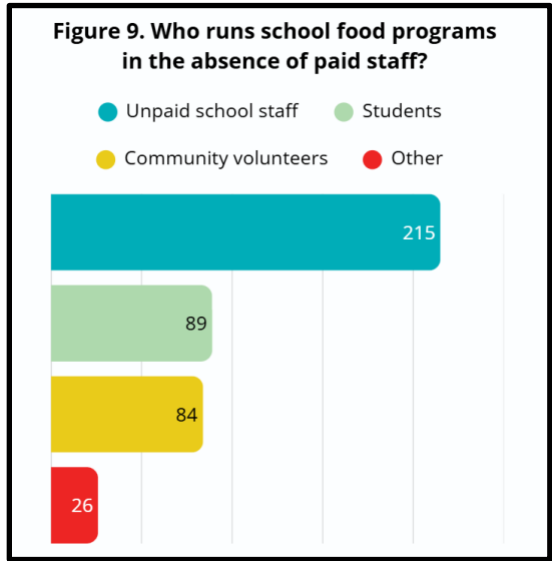
are ongoing considerations, particularly when managing perishable items and bulk orders. Access to additional storage (e.g. cabinets), would enhance our ability to expand fresh food offerings”.

Respondents described limited kitchen and food preparation space, inadequate refrigeration and storage, and a need for equipment such as ovens, stoves, dishwashers, and food preparation tools. In some older schools, installing new equipment could also require costly electrical or building upgrades. These limitations influenced not only the scale of programming, but also the types of food schools could provide. Some respondents described relying more heavily on pre-packaged or shelf-stable foods when facilities were insufficient to safely store or prepare fresh and hot food. Conversely, schools with well-equipped kitchens or culinary facilities described these resources as important assets that enabled more comprehensive programming.

Staffing and Coordination

Most school food programs are coordinated without dedicated paid staff. Only 65 respondents (22%) reported having school-level staff whose primary role was coordinating the school food program, while the remaining 232 respondents (78%) indicated that no such paid position existed.

Unpaid school staff—including teachers, administrators, and educational assistants—were identified most frequently (n=215), followed by students (n=89) and community volunteers,



including parents and guardians (n=84) (Figure 9).

A small number of respondents selected "Other" (n=26), most commonly referring to office staff, breakfast monitors, educational assistants, parent volunteers, or other school staff who supported program delivery.

54% of responding schools experience shortages in personnel to support school food programs

This reliance on existing staff and volunteers appears to contribute to ongoing capacity challenges. More than half of respondents (54%; n=159) reported experiencing staffing gaps that affected the delivery of their school

food program.

Open-ended responses reinforced the significance of these staffing pressures. Respondents frequently described food programs as relying on teachers, administrators, office staff, educational assistants, parents, and community volunteers who coordinated programming

alongside their existing responsibilities. One respondent exclaimed, “adding more jobs to do to staff that are already overworked with all the added tasks that we do each day is tough despite it being such a great idea!”

Several noted that food-related work occurred during breaks, lunches, or outside regular working hours, and many expressed a need for dedicated paid coordination. Programs that depended heavily on one staff member or volunteer were also described as particularly vulnerable to staff turnover or changes in volunteer availability. Together, these responses suggest that staffing capacity is not only an immediate operational challenge, but also an important consideration for program continuity and long-term sustainability.

Among those reporting staffing gaps, additional staff time was most frequently needed for food preparation (67%; n=107), food ordering and purchasing (61%; n=97), grocery shopping (57%; n=91), cleaning up after meals (46.5%; n=74), serving food to classrooms (39.6%; n=63), seeking funding (35%; n=56), and menu planning (30.2%; n=48). See **Figure 10**.

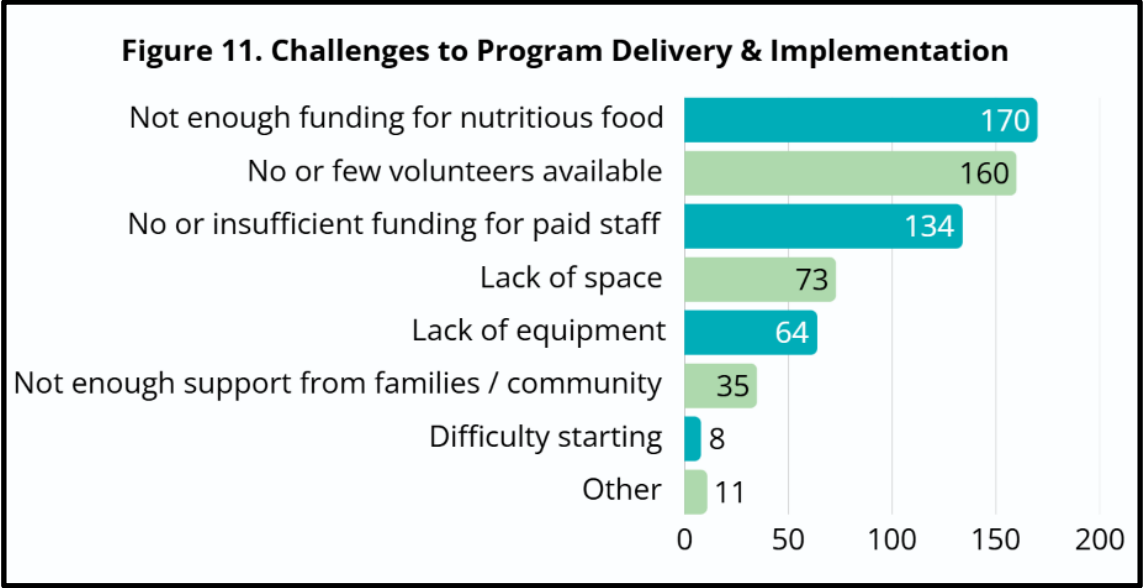


Challenges to Program Implementation and Delivery

Respondents identified resource constraints as the primary challenges to implementing and sustaining school food programs. As shown in **Figure 11** (on next page), the most frequently reported barriers were insufficient funding for nutritious food (n=170; 54%), limited volunteer availability (n=160), and insufficient funding for paid staff (n=134; 42.5%). Together, these findings highlight the central role of both financial and human resources in supporting program delivery. One respondent noted that, “the one area which all schools are battling is that funding isn’t always enough and with the number of mouths to feed, we are unable to provide a solid program that can meet everyone’s daily needs”.

Physical capacity was also identified as a challenge, although less frequently. Seventy-three respondents reported a lack of space (23%), while 64 identified inadequate equipment as barriers to delivering school food programs (20.3%). In contrast, relatively few respondents identified a

lack of support from families or the broader community (n=35; 11.1%) or difficulty starting a program (n=8; 2.5%) as key challenges. Overall, the findings suggest that schools are more likely to face barriers related to sustaining and resourcing programs than to generating interest or community support.



Open-ended responses described rising food costs, increasing student demand, and reliance on combinations of grants, charitable contributions, school-generated funds, fundraising, and community donations. While these sources enabled substantial programming, some respondents expressed concern about their ability to maintain current service levels when funding was temporary, insufficient, or needed to be secured again each year. Predictable and sustained funding was therefore frequently identified as important to longer-term program planning and continuity.

Although 11 respondents selected “other” as a response, additional respondents used the accompanying open-text field to elaborate on challenges selected elsewhere in the question, offering further insight into the demands placed on school staff. Respondents frequently described the time required to plan menus, purchase and order food, coordinate volunteers, prepare and distribute meals, clean equipment, manage finances, and complete reimbursement processes. In some schools, these responsibilities were assumed by principals, educators, educational assistants, or other support staff in addition to their regular duties. One administrator estimated that food programming occupied as much as one-third of their working day, while others expressed concern about programs depending heavily on a single staff member or volunteer. These responses indicate that staffing challenges involve not only the availability of personnel, but also the absence of dedicated and adequately compensated coordination time.

Schools also encountered practical challenges related to food procurement, storage, preparation, and distribution. Respondents described limited access to approved vendors, minimum order requirements, higher food prices in rural and remote communities, and difficulty sourcing affordable, good-quality fruits and vegetables. Limited refrigeration, cooking equipment, storage space, and suitable kitchen facilities further constrained what schools could provide. These challenges varied by school context: smaller schools could struggle to use large vendor orders without generating waste, while larger schools faced difficulties preparing and distributing sufficient food for their student populations. Scheduling volunteers around school meal periods and serving students who arrived by bus created additional logistical complications.

Several responses also highlighted tensions related to equitable access and program fit. Although universal access was valued for reducing stigma, some respondents were uncertain about how to prioritize students experiencing food insecurity without identifying or singling them out. Others reported difficulty ensuring that food remained available throughout the day for students with the greatest need. Food waste, limited student interest, and restrictions on food choice were additional concerns, particularly when available items did not reflect student preferences, dietary requirements, or cultural backgrounds.

Finally, experiences varied considerably across schools. Some respondents reported having stable staffing, strong partnerships, sufficient funding, and well-established programs with few current barriers. Conversely, several respondents—particularly those in more affluent school communities—questioned the relevance of introducing or expanding a standardized program where little food insecurity had been observed. In these settings, respondents described resistance from some families or staff and concerns about fundraising expectations, food waste, and replacing food brought from home with less preferred options. These findings suggest that

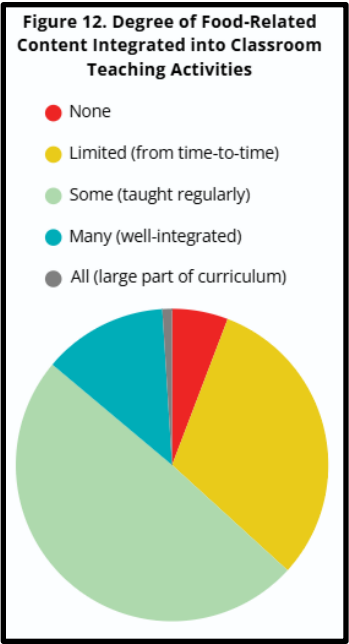
implementation requirements may need to remain flexible enough to reflect differences in school size, geography, infrastructure, student need, and existing program capacity.

Food Literacy and Food-Based Learning

Food-related content was incorporated into classroom teaching in most participating schools, although the degree of integration varied. See **Figure 12**. Nearly half of respondents indicated that food-related learning was taught regularly in at least some classrooms (49%, n=153), while approximately one-third reported that it was incorporated only occasionally (31%, n=96). A smaller proportion described food-related learning as well integrated across many classrooms (13%, n=40), and very few indicated that it formed a large part of the curriculum (1%, n=3). Only a small number of respondents (6%, n=18) reported that food-related content was not incorporated into classroom teaching at all.

Open-ended responses provided additional insight into why food-related learning remained limited in some schools. The most common barrier related to curriculum alignment and competing instructional priorities. Respondents frequently indicated that food-related learning was primarily addressed where it was explicitly connected to curriculum expectations, particularly through Health and Healthy Living, Foods or Hospitality courses, and, in some cases, Kindergarten and Primary classrooms. Several noted that teachers face substantial curriculum demands and may have limited time to incorporate food-related learning beyond required content.

Capacity and infrastructure also influenced opportunities for more experiential approaches. Respondents identified limited staff time, planning and supervision requirements, lack of funding and supplies, and inadequate access to kitchens, food preparation areas, storage, and equipment. Food allergies, dietary restrictions, food safety requirements, and liability concerns created additional barriers to activities involving food preparation or consumption (i.e. if teachers had their Food Handlers' Certificate).



Responses also suggest that the presence of a school food program does not necessarily translate into integration with classroom learning. In some schools, snack or meal programs operated primarily as food provision, with limited involvement from classroom teachers or intentional connections to curriculum. Where integration did occur, it was sometimes dependent on individual teacher interest, available facilities, or specialized programs and courses. Together, these findings suggest opportunities to strengthen connections between school food programming and food literacy, while recognizing that doing so may require appropriate curriculum connections, educator resources, infrastructure, and dedicated capacity.

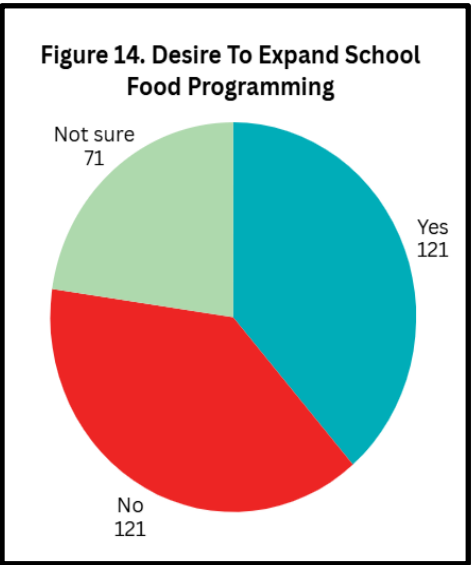
Schools Growing Food

Many participating schools reported growing food on-site as part of their educational programming. See **Figure 13**. Schools utilized a variety of growing methods, including 25% reporting in ground (n=25) or raised bed gardens (n=54), 16% reporting hydroponic systems (n=50), and 6% reporting classroom growing (n=19). A few schools reported growing food in greenhouses (n=7) and classroom-based growing more specific to culinary arts (n=5). Additional schools stated other forms of growing food, beyond the previously stated forms (n=20).



Future Directions and Remaining Needs

Respondents were divided in their interest in expanding school food programming. Of the 313 respondents, 121 (39%) indicated that they were interested in starting a new program, adding an additional program, or enhancing an existing school food program, while an equal number (39%; n=121) reported no interest. A further 71 respondents (23%) indicated that they were unsure. See **Figure 14**.



Among schools interested in expansion, the most desired program types were breakfast programs (n=61), followed by snack and lunch programs (n=55 each). Weekend food assistance was also identified by 43 respondents, while fewer schools expressed interest in food education (n=30), summer programming (n=20), or after-school programs (n=17).

Schools identified several reasons for wanting to expand school food programming. The most frequently reported motivations were ensuring students have adequate nutrition to support their health (n=115), supporting families with the cost of living and grocery bills (n=101), creating opportunities for student success (n=98), and supporting the whole school community (n=92). Fewer respondents identified supporting educators through classroom management and teaching (n=48) as a primary motivation.

Similarly, respondents also share why expanding (and even continuing programs) would pose to be challenging, emphasizing their financial precarity. For example, one respondent stated that, *"We would love to start a breakfast program but due to the cost of food, our grant money does not allow us to provide extra food beyond our daily snacks"*. Another concerned respondent stated, *"This is an important initiative that, again, the school system is being asked to shoehorn into our existing structures rather than provide a meaningful contribution from the government to enhance and support families"*.

Open-ended responses described rising food costs, increasing student demand, and reliance on combinations of grants, charitable contributions, school-generated funds, fundraising, and community donations. While these sources enabled substantial programming, some respondents expressed concern about their ability to maintain current service levels when funding was temporary, insufficient, or needed to be secured again each year. Predictable and sustained funding was frequently identified as important to longer-term program planning and continuity. Additionally, many schools recognized that needs were rising:

"With the increase in food prices and financial demands on families, we find that more children are needing to access the food and asking to bring food home. In addition, our regular funding does not cover the cost of the program. I am in a place where I need to raise funds which is an additional task on the principal to write letters of support and connect with community partners". – Survey Respondent

DISCUSSION

While school food programs are nearly universal among participating schools, the findings demonstrate that the system is characterized by considerable variation in program models, staffing, funding, and operational capacity. As Ontario begins implementing the National School Food Program, these findings suggest that future investments should focus not only on expanding access, but also on strengthening the capacity, sustainability, and equity of existing programs.

Ontario Has a Strong Foundation for School Food Programming

This study demonstrates that Ontario has already established a broad foundation for school food programming. Nearly all participating schools reported offering some form of food program, reflecting decades of investment and collaboration among schools, Student Nutrition Programs, public health, community organizations, volunteers, and local partners. Rather than creating school food programming from the ground up, the implementation of Canada's National School Food Program is occurring within an existing system that has already achieved substantial reach.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate considerable diversity in how school food programs are organized and delivered. Program models, funding approaches, staffing structures, and operational capacity varied across participating schools. This diversity reflects decades of locally developed approaches that have evolved in response to community needs, available resources, and regional partnerships. The next phase is not to replace that diversity, but to support it through coordinated policy, sustainable investment, and an equity-focused approach that enables all schools to provide meaningful food programming.

School Food Extends Beyond Nutrition

Although improving access to nutritious food remains a central objective of school food programs, the findings suggest that their perceived benefits extend well beyond nutrition. Respondents most frequently identified improvements in student mood, mental health, concentration, learning, and willingness to try nutritious foods. Schools also reported benefits related to social skills, family engagement, food literacy, and support for local food systems, reinforcing evidence that school food contributes to multiple dimensions of child health and well-being.

Collectively, these findings reinforce the view that school food programs should be understood as investments in both education and health, rather than nutrition interventions alone. This aligns with broader approaches to health promotion that recognize schools as important settings for supporting physical, mental, social, and educational outcomes. As Ontario continues to expand school food programming, these broader benefits may be important considerations when evaluating program success and determining future investment priorities.

School Food as a Platform for Learning and Community Partnerships

The findings also highlight opportunities to strengthen the connection between school food programs and learning. Many participating schools reported incorporating food-related learning into classroom activities, while others described school gardens, hydroponic systems, and

classroom growing activities. Together, these findings suggest that school food can provide an important platform for experiential learning alongside its nutritional role.

At the same time, open-ended responses suggest that this potential is not consistently realized. Food-related learning was often limited to areas where it aligned directly with curriculum expectations, such as Health and Healthy Living, Foods or Hospitality courses, or particular grade levels. Respondents also identified limited instructional time, staff capacity, infrastructure, equipment, funding, food safety requirements, and allergies or dietary restrictions as barriers to more experiential approaches. In some schools, food programs operated largely independently from classroom learning. Strengthening connections between school food and education may therefore require appropriate resources, curriculum connections, facilities, and capacity to meaningfully incorporate food-based learning. Where these conditions are in place, activities such as gardening, food preparation, menu planning, composting, and food service may offer opportunities to simultaneously support student learning and contribute to program delivery and capacity.

Community partnerships may provide additional opportunities to strengthen both school food programming and food-based learning. Respondents described programs that already benefit from relationships with community organizations, volunteers, and other local partners, while operational challenges related to volunteer recruitment, food procurement, and program coordination suggest areas where broader collaboration could be valuable. Partnerships with community organizations, local food producers and food hubs, public health, post-secondary institutions, and other community partners may help schools access expertise, resources, and experiential learning opportunities that would be difficult to develop independently.

Capacity Remains the Primary Challenge

Across the findings, operational capacity emerged as one of the most consistent challenges facing school food programs. Respondents identified staffing, volunteer availability, funding for food, infrastructure, and equipment as key barriers to sustaining and expanding programs. The widespread reliance on unpaid school staff and volunteers further raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of existing delivery models.

These findings should also be interpreted within the context of schools' existing program models and operating environments. Schools operating smaller snack programs may report fewer infrastructure or equipment needs than schools seeking to deliver more comprehensive meal programs. Similarly, responses regarding future expansion may reflect current staffing, funding, volunteer capacity, and scheduling constraints rather than the potential need or value of more comprehensive school food programming.

While it is clear that school food programs are highly valued, they are often being sustained through a fragile combination of goodwill, unpaid labour, charitable funding and local problem-solving.

Balancing Flexibility and Consistency

One of the defining characteristics of Ontario's school food system is its diversity. Participating schools described a wide range of delivery models, including snack, breakfast, and lunch programs, food literacy initiatives, gardens, hydroponics, and parent-supported meal programs. This flexibility has allowed communities to develop approaches that reflect local needs, resources, and priorities.

At the same time, this diversity contributes to considerable variation in program availability, staffing, infrastructure, and student access across schools. As Ontario moves into the next phase of school food policy, the opportunity will be to support local innovation while ensuring more equitable access to the staffing, infrastructure, funding, and partnerships needed to deliver high-quality school food programming.

Universal access does not necessarily require identical program models, levels of investment, or approaches to delivery across schools.

Advancing Equity Through School Food Programming

While school food programs were widely available among participating schools, the findings suggest that equitable access to high-quality programming remains an important consideration. Lunch programs were less common than snack or breakfast programs and were more likely to rely on parent payment or mixed funding models. Similarly, many respondents reported limited availability of culturally relevant or Indigenous foods within their programs.

These findings suggest that future efforts may benefit from considering not only whether school food programs are available, but also the quality, inclusivity, and accessibility of those programs. As Ontario expands school food programming, continued attention to cultural relevance, affordability, and equitable access may help ensure that all students are able to benefit from school food initiatives.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Strengthening Existing Systems

The findings suggest that Ontario's existing school food system provides a strong foundation for continued growth. Rather than replacing current delivery models, future investments may be most effective when they strengthen the partnerships, infrastructure, and operational systems that schools and communities have already established. Maintaining local flexibility while improving consistency in available supports may help encourage innovation while reducing variability across schools.

Supporting Sustainable Capacity

Operational capacity emerged as a consistent theme throughout the findings. Future policy and practice discussions may benefit from considering staffing, infrastructure, equipment, and operational coordination alongside food funding, recognizing that each plays an important role in the long-term sustainability of school food programs. Supporting these foundational elements may improve schools' ability to maintain existing programs and expand programming where appropriate.

Integrating School Food Across Sectors

Alongside supporting student nutrition, respondents described contributions to learning, food literacy, mental health, local food systems, and community well-being. These outcomes suggest opportunities for continued collaboration among various policy sectors, including ministries responsible for education, children and community services, agriculture, and health, as well as with public health, Student Nutrition Programs, schools, and community organizations.

Continuing Collaboration and Learning

Many of the operational challenges identified in this study may also present opportunities for strengthened collaboration across communities. Partnerships with local food producers, grocery retailers, food hubs, community organizations, service clubs, and post-secondary institutions may help strengthen procurement, volunteer recruitment, food literacy, and experiential learning while building on the collaborative approaches already evident across Ontario.

Many of the recommendations summarized above are also reflected in the [Ontario School Food Policy Recommendations](#) arising from the cross-sectoral 2025 Ontario School Food Visioning Process.

Future Monitoring and Research

Using the results of this study as a baseline, continued monitoring would provide valuable insight into how programs evolve as implementation of the National School Food Program progresses. Future research will benefit from expanding participation across Catholic, and French-language schools. Additionally, increasing engagement with Indigenous school systems and Northern Ontario schools, refining and standardizing survey measures, and incorporating qualitative interviews to better understand the operational contexts influencing school food delivery could be strong elements of future research.

Future iterations of the survey could also refine and expand several areas of data collection. More detailed information on program financing would help clarify how schools secure and supplement funding through grants, fundraising, donations, school-generated funds, community partnerships, and other sources. Additional questions could examine how programs accommodate food allergies, dietary restrictions, and other dietary needs, alongside more detailed measures of cultural relevance and inclusivity. Further exploration of food literacy could examine how food-related content is being integrated across subjects and grade levels, rather than only whether it is present within classroom teaching. Similarly, future research on school food growing initiatives could examine whether food grown in school gardens, greenhouses, or other growing systems is incorporated into student meals or snacks, and how this occurs in practice.

Future survey questions related to program expansion may also benefit from explicitly accounting for resource constraints. For example, asking schools whether they would be interested in starting, expanding, or enhancing programming *if additional funding and resources were available* may provide a clearer indication of underlying interest and need, separate from schools' current operational capacity. Together, these refinements would support a more detailed understanding of how school food programs are financed, delivered, integrated into learning, and positioned for future growth across Ontario.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Ontario has already developed a broad and diverse school food system through local innovation, community partnerships, and flexible delivery models. At the same time, considerable variation remains in program models, operational capacity, staffing, infrastructure, and equitable access to high-quality programming.

As Ontario implements Canada's National School Food Program, the next phase is not to replace the diversity that has emerged across communities, but to strengthen it through coordinated policy, sustainable investment, and continued collaboration. Supporting the systems that already exist while improving operational capacity and equitable access offers an opportunity to build a more resilient and inclusive school food system for students across the province.

This report establishes an important provincial baseline that can inform future research, policy development, planning, and practice. Continued monitoring will be essential to understanding how school food programming evolves over time and how future investments contribute to student health, learning, equity, and community well-being.

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Appendix A: Survey Tool

School Food Programs Survey

Consent

1. I have read and understand the letter of information for this study. I agree to participate in this study.

School Information

2. Please provide the following information about your school:
 - a) Name of school board
 - b) Name of school
 - c) Number of students enrolled in the last school year (2024–25)
3. What is your school type? (Select all that apply.)

School Food Program Availability

4. Does your school provide or sell food to students to eat at school? (Including meals or snacks that are free or paid; excluding programs where food is sent home for special occasions, fundraising, or irregularly, e.g., care packages or holiday hampers.)
5. Does your school or school council organize food vendors to sell weekly pre-prepared school lunches (e.g., pizza, tacos, etc.), which are paid for by parents or guardians of students?

Breakfast Programs

6. Does your school offer a breakfast program?
7. What is the payment process for the breakfast program?
8. Please explain what you meant by “other” regarding the payment process for the breakfast program.
9. What is the approximate percentage of the student body using the breakfast program on an average day (if known)?

Snack Programs

10. Does your school offer a snack program?
11. What is the payment process for the snack program?
12. Please explain what you meant by “other” regarding the payment process for the snack program.

13. What is the approximate percentage of the student body using the snack program on an average day (if known)?

Lunch Programs

14. Does your school offer a lunch program?
15. What is the payment process for the lunch program?
16. Please explain what you meant by “other” regarding the payment process for the lunch program.
17. What is the approximate percentage of the student body using the lunch program on an average day (if known)?

Cultural Relevance

18. To what extent are the foods provided in your school food program relevant to the diverse food cultures of your students (e.g., serving traditional or Indigenous foods, providing foods from different cultures)?

Impacts of School Food Programs

19. In your experience, what impacts have you seen or witnessed that school food programs in your school have on students and/or the school community? (Select all that apply.)
20. If you selected “other” or would like to provide additional details regarding program impacts, please describe them here. (Optional)

Infrastructure and Equipment

21. Which of the following best describes the equipment needs at your school (e.g., refrigerators, stoves, sinks, dishwashers, food preparation tools)?
22. Which of the following best describes the school food-related infrastructure needs at your school (e.g., storage, kitchens/food preparation areas, cafeteria space, school gardens or growing spaces)?

Staffing and Program Coordination

23. Do you have paid school-level staff who coordinate your school food program (e.g., a school nutrition coordinator)?
24. If you do not have paid staff, who runs your school food programs? (Select all that apply.)
25. If you selected “other” or would like to provide additional details regarding staffing, please describe them here. (Optional)
26. Are there gaps in staffing (paid or unpaid) for your program (e.g., insufficient time to coordinate the program, shop or prepare food, seek funding, or involve students)?

27. If yes, what are the main areas where additional staffing hours are required? (Select all that apply.)

Program Expansion

28. Is your school interested in starting a new, adding an additional, or enhancing an existing school food program?
29. If yes, what type of program or enhancement would you like to offer if funding were available? (Select up to three.)
30. Why are you interested in this new, additional, or enhanced school food program? (Select all that apply.)
31. If you selected "other" or would like to provide additional details regarding your interest in new or expanded programs, please describe them here. (Optional)

Program Challenges

32. What are the biggest challenges to starting or maintaining school food programs? (Select all that apply.)
33. If you selected "other" or would like to provide additional details regarding challenges, please describe them here. (Optional)

Food Education and Learning

34. Does your school integrate food-related activities into the classroom or teaching activities? (Examples may include food preparation, cooking, gardening, composting, or lessons related to food, nutrition, culture, or environmental topics.)
35. If you answered "none" or "limited" in the previous question, please explain why not, including any barriers to doing so.

Growing Food at School

36. Does your school grow food at school in any of the following ways? (Select all that apply.)

Program Operations and Satisfaction

37. How satisfied are you with the following operational aspects of your school food program?

Additional Comments

38. Is there anything else you would like to share about your school's food program(s) (e.g., financing, staffing, infrastructure, procurement, or impacts)?