



A national school food program for all

Towards a social policy legacy for Canada

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In the 1930s and 1940s, the United States, the UK, and many other countries developed a National School Lunch Program in response to the Great Depression — the biggest economic crisis of the last century — however, Canada did not choose this path.^{1,2} In the spirit of building back better in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have the opportunity to create a social policy legacy for Canada: a world-class, universal, healthy school meal program for all children and youth. We should not let this moment pass us by.

What does school food look like in Canada?

When it comes to national school lunch programs, Canada is an outlier. Internationally, school meals are the norm: 83% of all countries provide free or subsidized school meals, according to the World Food Programme.³

While over 35% of Canadian elementary and secondary schools offer one or more school food programs (breakfast, lunch and/or snacks), most are only partially funded by provincial or territorial governments.⁴ The lack

of coordinated and adequate funding inhibits universal access for all junior kindergarten to grade 12 students.⁵ School food programs in Canada are abysmally under-resourced by a patchwork of funders, including governments, and non-profit and for-profit organizations. In 2018/19, most provincial and territorial contributions only accounted for a small portion of resources required to provide meals to children and youth — an average of \$0.48 per student per school day.⁶ As a result, programs rely heavily on the goodwill of volunteers, who are often already busy teachers and parents from the school community juggling many responsibilities.

The (neoliberal) shifting of responsibilities for food provision and health promotion from governments to communities or individuals/households also means that programs have to apply for funding every year and compete with other schools to support these programs. Program coordinators are not only tasked with preparing and buying food in the most cost-efficient ways possible but are also continuously seeking out charitable sources of funding to

sustain their programs.⁷ The reliance on volunteerism has depoliticized the problem of school food and nutrition, leaving the responsibility of such programs to the private realm and reinforcing short-term charitable responses.⁸

Systemic solutions for providing access to food and nutrition for all children and youth are required. In 2017, UNICEF raised the alarm about the state of child nutrition in Canada, ranking us 37 out of the 41 wealthiest nations for children's access to nutritious food; below the United States and just above Bulgaria.⁹ We can and we must do better.

School food: A public good with holistic impacts

Along with other important income-based solutions for increasing food security, school food solutions can strengthen our social safety net while also supporting health and well-being in the long term.

Why is it that the school libraries and computers are seen as an essential public good to support students' learning, but food is not?

Food plays an integral role in enhancing people's ability to work productively, which is beneficial for society more broadly.¹⁰ While what individuals choose to eat might be viewed as a private matter, food is an integral part of how we relate to each other in society in our social, cultural, economic, and ecological systems. As such, we argue that since education is predominantly seen as a public good and being well nourished is a prerequisite for positive socio-educational outcomes, school meals should also be considered a public good.

School food advocacy organizations and other advocacy groups agree with this position. According to the Coalition for Healthy School Food, Canada's largest school food network, "the COVID-19 crisis has revealed that school

food is an essential public good, just like K-12 education and healthcare".¹¹ The School Meals Coalition – a global coalition advocating for school meals – also highlights the importance of school food for nutrition, health, and educational outcomes. They also go beyond this to say that school meals do more than simply provide food, as they can support local agriculture and can help in improving global food systems.¹²

The impacts of school food are far-reaching.¹³ Much like education, school meals nurture our future

generations to become engaged citizens that can drive positive change in our national food system as healthy, food literate leaders.¹⁴ But even beyond our schools, school food programs are integral to our local economies. Through the implementation of a national school food program, the federal government can create jobs¹⁵ that support small food producers and schools through sufficient funding and local procurement policy.¹⁶ Public investment in school food would ensure that essential food sector jobs are integrated into the school's workforce and that this is maintained beyond the pandemic. In addition, schools are food hubs where regional food producers and community stakeholders work together to provide local foods to our children. For example, in Brazil's School Food Program 30% of the food provided comes from small family farms.

Given the multiple positive outcomes of such programs, a holistic, expansive, and food systems approach to school food programming¹⁷ should be considered by the Government of Canada when designing our National School Food Policy and Program.

What could it look like? How could it work?

Here are some examples of what school food programming looks like in other countries. In France, students eat a four-course meal around a group table with their peers and a supervisor who teaches them about nutrition, healthy eating, and table manners.¹⁸ Similarly, in Finland, where school meals are free, approximately 95% of JK-12 students participate. In Scotland, access to universal free school meals was expanded to more students, aligning with their proposed legislation to incorporate the right to food into Scottish law.¹⁹ Scottish schools' adoption of the Food For Life program, furthermore celebrates programs' continuous improvement to implement sustainable food practices, including sourcing from local businesses, among other holistic aspirations.

Within Canada, there are some recent trends in how school food programs are operating that policymakers could consider. One option is a sliding scale or 'pay-what-you-can' school food program model where all students receive the same meal, but parents contribute the amount that best suits their budget. This model has been operating in Canada since the late 1980s in St. John's, Newfoundland, and has been recently adopted by Prince Edward Island during the rollout of their provincial school lunch program. Proponents of pay-what-you-can

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programs claim that it increases students' access to food by reducing student stigma and financial barriers to participating; however, limited research has been conducted to confirm if this is the case.

Another rapidly-growing trend is the 'free for all' model. California and Maine have legislated permanent free school meals for all students regardless of income through additional state investments that top-up national funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. At least seven more states — Massachusetts, Colorado, Minnesota, Vermont, New York, Wisconsin, and Maryland — are now considering similar legislation

that would make free school meals universally accessible to all students, moving away from the 3-tier stigmatizing system that has ingrained student school meal debt among other challenges. In response to the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Agriculture granted a series of waivers²⁰ to increase program flexibility including allowing school food authorities to serve meals to all students at no cost. These waivers helped eliminate the stigma around participation in school meals and meant that school nutrition services could focus on meal quality, knowing that every meal was fully reimbursed.

With the development and implementation of a National School Food Policy and Program on the horizon for Canada, this is an opportune moment for the Government of Canada to carefully consider school food as a public good for all children and youth. Building on the recent federal commitment to child care and early childhood education, this is the opportunity to create another Canadian social policy legacy supporting children and youth for generations to come. ☀

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