



**Presentation to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health**

**Re: Canada Food Guide Study**

**June 6, 2018**

Honourable members of the Standing Committee on Health, thank you for inviting the Coalition to speak to you about your study on Canada's Food Guide.

My name is Carolyn Webb. I coordinate the Coalition for Healthy School Food. The Coalition is made up of more than 40 member organizations from coast to coast to coast in Canada that have come together to advocate for funding for a national school food program because we believe that schools are ideal places for children and youth to access good, healthy food, as well as to develop healthy eating habits and skills that will last a lifetime. We held the Great Big Crunch on Parliament Hill in March to raise the profile of this issue and were pleased to see many of you and your parliamentary colleagues there. The Coalition is coordinated by Food Secure Canada.

**I'd like to first express our appreciation for the Government of Canada's process to revise Canada's Food Guide.** The level of transparency has been excellent. We have appreciated the extensive consultation that has allowed many diverse Canadian voices to be heard. We applaud that building trust has been a major priority in this process, and that Health Canada is showing a strong commitment to using evidence to inform its decision making so that the guidance prioritizes health first and foremost and is not unduly influenced by food industry stakeholders, which has been a major criticism of previous Food Guides.

We also appreciate the thought that has gone into how to communicate the new edition of the Food Guide to a wide range of different audiences. We'd love to see a high level of discussion about how the Food Guide can be communicated and put into practice as well as financial resources allocated to supporting implementation of its guidance in cooperation with the Provinces and Territories. I'll be speaking today to the opportunity in schools.

**I'll offer some concerning statistics relating to children and youth.** Only about one-third of children between the ages of 4 and 13 years of age eat 5 or more servings of vegetables and

fruit each day.<sup>1</sup> About one-quarter of children's calorie intakes are from food products not recommended in the 2007 edition of Canada's Food Guide.<sup>2</sup> A 2017 UNICEF report ranked Canada in 29th place out of 30 high-income countries for unhealthy weight among children between the ages of 11 to 15.<sup>3</sup> That same study ranked Canada 37 out of 41 countries for food security and nutrition among children under the age of 15. Nationally, 1 in 6 children are exposed to some level of household food insecurity but that rate is even higher in the Maritimes and the North.

**However, there is a lot of encouraging evidence that interventions in schools can shift the eating habits of our children and youth as well as those of their families. Since students spend a minimum of 50% of their waking hours on most days in schools, these settings present a huge opportunity to bring Canada's Food Guide to life for young Canadians.**

Across the country a growing number of schools and community partners are initiating school food programs. When they have strong nutritional guidelines in place, meal and snack programs have been shown to increase consumption of vegetables, fruits, and other healthy foods among children<sup>4 5</sup> and their families<sup>6</sup>. It has been demonstrated that children who have access to a school breakfast program consume a better overall diet and consume less saturated and trans fat, sodium and added sugars.<sup>7</sup> School food programs have also been linked with positive impacts on children's mental health, including reductions in behavioural and emotional problems, bullying, aggression, anxiety, and depression<sup>8 9</sup> as well as fewer visits to the school nurse.<sup>10</sup>

These programs help students to get into the habit of enjoying healthy foods in the company of others, enabling them to live out many of the proposed principles of Canada's Food Guide in practice including the 3rd principle relating to knowledge and skills. We have seen that school food programs can also impact family eating patterns as students go home to their families asking for new foods, offering to help cook the family meal, or sharing how they ate their morning snack according to the food guide ideals. **This offers an unrivalled opportunity to support positive shifts in population health.**

The school food programs that currently exist in Canada rely on a limited patchwork of funding from governments and external donors. They do fantastic work but are only able to reach a small percentage of our country's over 5 million students. We have a great opportunity to do better for our children.

**This is why the Coalition for Healthy School Food is asking the federal government to build on what exists by investing in a cost-shared universal healthy school food program to enable all students in Canada to have access to healthy food at school every day.**

Our members are also seeing that meals and snacks can greatly complement and be complemented by gardening, cooking, food system learning, and overall school food culture transformation. These approaches are ways that the proposed Food Guide's emphasis on a comprehensive approach can be put into practice.

- There is evidence that learning to grow food increases vegetable consumption in children and that gardening can foster student awareness and appreciation of nutritional foods, in part because it increases children's interest in and willingness to try new foods.<sup>11 12</sup>
- A higher frequency of cooking and food preparation for children has also been linked with a greater preference for fruits and vegetables and success at healthy eating.<sup>13</sup> Many dietitians argue that teaching our kids to cook would make a huge difference in their eating habits for life.

I'll share with you now a story about the potential comprehensive impact that school food programs can have. This past spring the Student Nutrition Program in Ontario's Southwest Region initiated a Fruit and Vegetable Delivery Program that provided over 40,000 students with more than 1 million servings of fresh vegetables and fruit. Many students were involved in the preparation and serving of the snacks and over 20% of the produce was sourced from local Ontario farms. Here's a quote from one student : "I had never tried a red pepper before... and now I have and I really like them!"

Evidence shows that if we can shift the food environment, healthy choices and skills that support healthy eating will follow.

**The Coalition for Healthy School Food believes that there is a huge opportunity for schools to be a setting for the Food Guide to be modeled in practice and brought to life, as well as for the new Food Guide to be a driver in profoundly shifting school food cultures for generations to come.**

We offer these considerations for your Study:

- Canada's Food Guide has historically been the #1 teaching tool regarding nutrition in schools and the de facto guidance for municipal, provincial, and settings-based nutritional policies. We applaud the Government's current efforts to expand the Food Guide to include food skills and knowledge and hope that Health Canada will continue

to develop Canada's Food Guide based on the best available evidence so that it can offer the strongest guidance possible for how Canadians can adopt and model a healthy eating culture.

- We envision that a version of the revised Food Guide, or supplementary materials, could help to inform school curriculum and programs. These materials could include guidance on how the Food Guide can be modeled in schools including through a variety of comprehensive programs. Members of the Coalition would be pleased to work with a team to help develop these supplementary materials and strategies. The considerations that have been proposed for the Food Guide (determinants of health, cultural diversity, and the environment) will also go a long way to supporting and guiding comprehensive school food programs and food literacy.
- We would also like to emphasize that the full Canada Food Guide and supplementary materials should be very clear in their advice around young and older school-aged children because school communities will be looking for that foundational advice.
- It also needs to be mentioned that a Food Guide alone cannot change people's food choices without other supports to promote healthy food environments and improve food security, including affordable access to foods in rural and remote locations, employment, income security, affordable housing and access to health care.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food believes that a federal investment in a universal healthy school food program, with Canada's Food Guide as its foundation for nutritional guidance, would provide a solid opportunity for children and youth to learn to live out the Food Guide in practice.

With support, we believe that our schools can become places that enable our children and youth to learn healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime.

Thank you.

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The **Coalition for Healthy School Food** is seeking an investment by the federal government in a cost-shared Universal Healthy School Food Program that will enable all students in Canada to have access to healthy meals at school every day. Building on existing programs across the country, all schools will eventually serve a healthy meal or snack at little or no cost to students. These programs will include food education and serve culturally appropriate, local, sustainable food to the fullest extent possible.

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La **Coalition pour une saine alimentation scolaire** entend établir un programme alimentaire scolaire à frais partagés qui permettrait de servir à tous les élèves canadiens des repas sains quotidiens. En s'inspirant sur les programmes déjà en place à travers le pays, toutes les écoles pourront éventuellement servir aux élèves, gratuitement ou à un prix modique, des collations ou des repas sains. Ces programmes comprendront un volet d'éducation alimentaire, en plus de servir, autant que faire se peut, des aliments produits localement de manière durable et culturellement appropriés.

## References

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