

THE COALITION
FOR HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD



LA COALITION
POUR UNE SAINÉ ALIMENTATION SCOLAIRE

**Written Submission to the House of Commons
Standing Committee Study on
Children's Health**

June 17, 2022



About the Coalition for Healthy School Food

The [Coalition for Healthy School Food](#) is the largest school food network in Canada. We bring together more than 200 [not-for-profit member organizations](#) from all provinces and territories including community-based school food program implementation partners, Indigenous leaders, researchers, as well as many of Canada's most recognized national health, education and philanthropic organizations. The Coalition's over 90 endorsers include school districts, municipalities and health boards.

We are pleased to submit our comments on the importance of well designed school food programs for children's health and would be pleased to be invited to present to your Committee.



Current Situation

*Our kids are not ok. In 2007, the HoC Standing Committee on Health [expressed](#) a real concern that our children will live *shorter and sicker lives than their parents* because of an increase in the rate of illnesses such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, cancer and other preventable diseases, most of which are closely linked to diet. That was 15 years ago.*

Today, only one-third of children aged four to 13 eat five or more servings of fruit and vegetables, and a Canadian survey found that only 10% of youth in grades 6-12 met fruit and vegetable recommendations. [Media](#) and researchers are reporting that Covid-19 has led children and their families to eat more pre-packaged and processed food, exacerbating poor diets.

Families struggle to feed their children whole, healthy foods for a variety of reasons including limited family budget and working long hours. Covid-19 has also brought significant unemployment and rising food insecurity, and an increasing number of families have had to turn to emergency food aid. Statistics Canada shared at the start of the pandemic that 19.2% of Canadians living in a household with children reported experiencing food insecurity. We also know that Black households experience [significantly more food insecurity](#) than white households and this has almost certainly been exacerbated by Covid-19.

Unfortunately, when children attend school hungry or undernourished their energy levels, memory, problem-solving skills, creativity, concentration, and other cognitive functions are all negatively impacted. We are also learning that children and adolescents with unhealthy dietary patterns experience poorer mental health including greater symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Despite these statistics there is a lot of encouraging evidence that interventions in schools can provide children and youth access to healthy food, shift their eating habits and support their mental health. Since students spend a minimum of 50% of their waking hours on most days in schools, these settings present a huge opportunity to support children's health and wellbeing.



The Opportunity

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 children's consumption of vegetables, fruits, and other healthy foods and reduce their consumption of saturated and trans fat, sodium and added sugars.
- Positively impact children's mental health, including reducing behavioural and emotional problems, bullying, aggression, anxiety, and depression as well as visits to the school nurse.
- Increase academic skills such as independent academic work, initiative, conflict resolution, class participation and problem-solving at school.

A School Food Program for Canada would provide an excellent opportunity for schools to put into practice [Canada's Food Guide](#), enabling students to develop the taste receptivity for nutritious foods, food literacy, and habits needed for a lifetime of healthy eating. A well-designed program that provides healthy and culturally appropriate food, provides universal access to all students in a school where a program is running, and that enables student connection with caring adults would advance many of the Sustainable Development Goals that relate to health including: Goal 2 - End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; GOAL 3 - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages; and GOAL 10 - Reduce inequality within and among countries. (See Appendix A below that shares how well-designed school food programs can advance the SDGs).

Such a program would also take pressure off of the family budget and be a support for the millions of children and youth who are unable to access healthy food. Investing in a national school nutritious meal program that is universal and without means-testing can help level the playing field and ensure that all students are able to access a healthy meal or snack each day. It would, however, not be a replacement for needed income supports for the unacceptable number of Canadians living in poverty.

In addition to the benefits seen from providing healthy food, our members are seeing that meals and snacks can greatly complement and be complemented by gardening, cooking, food system learning, and overall school food culture transformation to the benefit of children and youth. Through learning food skills, students can also build character strengths such as motivation, responsibility, confidence, initiative, leadership and creativity.



A National School Nutritious Meal Program for Canada

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.

Canada's Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister of Families, Children and Social Development have been mandated to develop a national school nutritious meal program and National School Food Policy together with provinces, territories, municipalities, Indigenous partners and stakeholders.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food is asking the federal government to build on existing programs 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.

We recommend that you allocate \$1 billion over five years in budget 2023 towards a national school nutritious meal program and collaborate with provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners to provide them with an initial \$200 million as soon as possible to fund their existing school food programs. This initial funding would be provided directly to First Nation, Inuit and Métis partners to fund programs in their communities, and to provinces and territories to continue to deliver programs that serve food based on Canada's 2019 Food Guide, provide universal access to students, do not market to kids, and gather standardized program data.

We also encourage you to invest an additional \$200 million from pre-allocated infrastructure funding in a separate School Food Fund grants program that would provide infrastructure and capacity building funding to schools or community organizations that provide programs in schools. This funding would be provided either directly to schools and organizations or to provinces and territories to fund demonstration projects as well as the improvement of kitchen, food service, garden and other facility infrastructure to enhance the ability of programs to offer healthy food.

A critical component of this program will be to enter into discussions with Indigenous Nations and leaders to negotiate separate funding agreements for Indigenous school food programs.

These actions would be the initial steps towards more comprehensive medium-term actions including the establishment of a National School Food Policy, negotiated funding agreements with provinces and territories and negotiated funding agreements with Indigenous Nations and leaders.

In the longer term, (2+ years) we recommend that your government continue and expand funding to provinces and territories for a truly national, universal school food program for Canada as a new and important component of the Canadian social safety net.

In order to fully support the physical and mental health of children in Canada we recommend that a national school nutritious meal program:

- **Serve food based on Canada's 2019 Food Guide.** This will ensure that the program meets Canada's strong dietary guidance and help children and youth develop the habits and preferences to live out the Guide in practice.
- **Provide universal access to students.** This means that, where a program is in place, all students in the school would have access to the meal or snack that is offered. Meal skipping and short-term hunger impact children across all socio-economics classes and children come to school hungry for many reasons. School food programs should be widely accessible so that every child and youth is ready to learn. Through research and experience, we also know that school meal and snack programs are more successful at meeting the needs of students when everyone at the school is welcome to participate.
- **Reflect the cultures and traditions of students.** Food is an important part of a person's cultural identity and the foods served, grown, and learned about at school should be culturally appropriate and help students feel that they belong.
- **Does not market to kids.** A primary goal of the program should be to improve the health and wellbeing of our children and this is at odds with the goals of product marketing, which is to sell products that are often deficient in nutrients.

- **Enables connections between students and members of the broader community and creates opportunities for students to eat together and to connect with caring adults.** Food is a powerful connector and there is a huge opportunity for school food programs to support relationship building and connections, which have been badly undermined throughout Covid.
- **Includes opportunities for students to plan, purchase, grow, harvest and prepare food.** Experiential (hands-on) food literacy leads children to be excited to try new foods and helps them gain the skills and knowledge they need to access healthy food and to make healthy dietary choices for life. Developing this competence can also build students' confidence and improve their self esteem and can help students acquire academic and personal skills that contribute to long-term success. These skills include critical thinking, innovation, collaboration, problem-solving, numeracy, literacy, communications, social connection, resilience and thinking about complex issues including our health, the environment, the economy, and our place in broader food systems.
- **Is informed by the needs and perspectives of children and their families.**



Final Reflections

The advancement of a national school nutritious meal program for Canada, with Canada's Food Guide as its foundation for nutritional guidance, would provide a solid opportunity for children and youth to access healthy food and to support their broader health and wellbeing.

The mandate letters of the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Marie-Claude Bibeau and Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Karina Gould include a commitment "to develop a National School Food Policy and work towards a national school nutritious meal program". We urge you to support this important initiative and ensure that it is designed in a way that can best support the health and wellbeing of all children in Canada.

Appendix A:

How well-designed school food programs can help meet the Sustainable Development Goals (see our [blog post](#) for more info)



Universal healthy school food programs designed with the SDGs in mind have great potential to:

