

SCHOOL FOOD and NUTRITION: THE BRIEF

Eating a healthy diet is critically important, especially for children; it leads to short- and long-term health benefits, increases academic performance, and sets up healthy habits for a lifetime. To ensure all Canadian children are receiving these benefits, a universal and comprehensive National School Food Program is a critical step in providing children with healthy, safe food, reducing child and household food insecurity, teaching food skills, and supporting local food systems.

Why do we need a school food program?

Canada is the only G7 country without a national school food program—ranking 37th out of the world's 41 wealthiest nations for access to healthy food.

Children spend a large amount of time in school – approximately one-third of children's food intake happens during school hours – but many children go through the day undernourished. For various reasons, it is common for children come to school without having eaten breakfast or packed a lunch, and for those that have a lunch, research shows that lunches provided by schools tend to be healthier than home-packed lunches.

Overall, Canadian children have poor diets: they consume too few vegetables, fruit and milk or milk products, consume too much high-fat and high-sugar food and fast food, and frequently skip meals. The pervasiveness of diet-related diseases among children in Canada may make today's youth the first generation to have sicker, shorter lives than their parents.

Schools teach about food as part of the curriculum, sell food, and some schools offer programs like community kitchens, school gardens, and food skills courses. This makes our schools a critical place where children can access healthy, nutritious food, learn food skills, and establish healthy habits for a lifetime and why it is time to develop a universal and comprehensive National School Food Program in Canada.

What are the benefits of a Universal and Comprehensive National School Food Program?

A universal school food program has many benefits supported by research, including:

Health. School food programs and policies provide healthy food - increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, averting diet-related chronic disease, and supporting children's physical and mental health and development.

Academic Success. Providing universal school meals has been proven to improve learning outcomes, increased attendance, and decrease tardiness and dropout rates.

Food Insecurity. Providing all children with healthy food at school can reduce food insecurity and social stigma.

Family Support. Providing all children with daily access to food at school would have a positive impact on all families and particularly women who invest a significant amount of time preparing food for school.

Food Skills. Children can learn about healthy eating in classes, develop preferences for healthy foods, and gain relevant skills such as food preparation, gardening, and appreciating food traditions and cultural foods.

Food Sustainability. When designed with sustainability goals in mind, school food programs can provide a strong opportunity for students to learn, in a hands-on way, to choose local and sustainable food, minimize food waste, and compost.

Local Food Systems and Economic Development. School food programs have the potential to support Canadian farmers and food businesses and contribute to Canada's agri-food sector.

What is the current system of school food in Canada?

School food programs vary significantly, but most are in elementary schools, are funded by community groups, charities, and private sector, and rely on volunteer support. Though national dietary guidelines exist, there remains wide variation in provincial and local-level school nutrition policies and guidelines, and funding and capacity for school meal programs are often limited. The current practices in schools across Canada create an inconsistent patchwork of food-related activities and understanding. While each program addresses some important food and nutrition needs of school-aged children and youth, the patchwork approach to funding leads to inconsistency in programming that fails to reach many Canadian children.

What does a successful school food program look like?

To be successful, a national school food program must employ a comprehensive approach, including the combined use of curriculum, education, policy, family and community involvement, and healthy food provision. It must:

- be universally, available to all K-12 students;
- be non-stigmatizing;
- promote healthy lifestyle choices and offer nutritious food and drinks;
- respectfully include local stakeholders, ensuring the program is culturally appropriate and locally adapted;
- tap into the local food system to support the local economy and yield environmental benefits;
- incorporate hands-on food skills experiences and nutrition education, including traditional indigenous foods; and
- include regular monitoring and evaluation.

Where can governments play a role?

Funding. Federal-provincial-territorial-municipal collaboration must include political commitments to ensure funding for food, curriculum development including hands-on food skills, training, infrastructure, human resources that support new and existing school food programs.

Intergovernmental collaboration. Effectively implementing a comprehensive program requires commitment from a cross-section of ministries and agencies at the federal, provincial-territorial, and municipal levels, including but not limited to: Health, Social Services, Children and Youth, Education, Agriculture, Industry, Finance, and Indigenous Services. As a first step, provincial and territorial governments should convene a cross-Ministry working group to provide comprehensive support to school food programs. This could include, but is not limited to, the development of a standardized approach to food safety requirements in the school food context, food procurement policies including local food procurement targets.

Infrastructure and Human Resources. Trained nutrition experts and certified food preparation staff need to be hired to deliver programs. Additionally, school food infrastructure assessments will need to be conducted along with future capital planning to ensure the necessary updates are made to kitchens, cafeterias, teaching spaces and eating areas.

Curricular Enhancements. With recent updates to Canada's Food Guide, which is taught in Canadian schools, there is an opportunity to update and strengthen the inclusion of food education in our curriculum, specifically through the incorporation of hands-on foods literacy activities on how to choose healthy, local and sustainable foods, minimize food waste and compost.

Nationally Harmonized Standards. The commitment of federal funds to supporting existing and new programs through harmonized nutrition standards – including appropriate safeguards to ensure the independent oversight of food procurement – that are fully implemented, monitored and regularly evaluated.

To read the full spotlight report on School Food and Nutrition in Canada, and other important agri-food topics, visit arrellfoodinstitute.ca/spotlight

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