



National School Food Policy



Employment and
Social Development Canada

Emploi et
Développement social Canada

Canada 

National School Food Policy

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Minister of Families, Children and Social Development message

Every child in Canada deserves to have a fair chance at a good, healthy life, yet one in four children do not get enough food. That has a real impact on their opportunities to learn and grow. We need to build a Canada where every generation of children and youth have access to the resources and support they need to reach their full potential.

Having access to nutritious foods in schools not only improves the health of students but also lays the foundation for them to be successful. School food programs can boost our children's physical and mental wellbeing and be a launchpad for them to soar to their greatest heights. That's the spirit behind the National School Food Policy, the federal vision for school food programs in Canada.

To create this policy, we set out to hear what Canadians across the country had to say about school food programs. We engaged with provincial and territorial governments as well as First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners. We also heard from health and agricultural organizations, food producers, charities, academics, experts, and school communities. Most importantly, we heard from some of our youngest Canadians to ensure the Policy truly reflects their needs and aspirations. I want to thank everyone who helped inform the Policy, especially the youth and children who provided their insights.

What we heard repeatedly throughout our consultations is that no child should learn on an empty stomach. Those consulted also shared that any school food programs created should offer healthy foods, highlighting the need for these options to help students stay focused, energized and be at their best. We also heard that school food programs should be delivered in stigma-free environments so that students can benefit without feeling excluded or ashamed if they take part. There are a variety of reasons why children might be hungry when in school, and that's why it's important that school food programs be available to as many children and youth as possible, because "everyone matters" as one child shared with us.

The Policy builds on the hard work and contributions of volunteers, educators, and parents by creating a roadmap that can guide the delivery of school food programs. The responsibility for ensuring that no child spends the whole day on an empty stomach should not be on individual educators or volunteers. Our Policy aims to strengthen connections between local food systems, culture and the environment. Simply put, our Policy is about nourishing Canada's future.



Our government believes in investing in people. That means giving kids the best possible start in life, and giving parents a hand when they need it most. This National School Food Policy builds on our commitment of \$1 billion in Budget 2024 to create a new National School Food Program to help ensure that children have the food they need to succeed. The National School Food Program is expected to provide meals for up to 400,000 kids each year. And for families who manage to put enough food on the table but struggle to pay for it, this program is expected to save the average participating family with two children as much as \$800 per year in grocery costs, with lower-income families benefitting the most.

Our government recognizes that partnerships between provinces, territories, Indigenous partners and stakeholders are essential to implementing school food programs that ensure children have the proper nourishment they need to thrive. By releasing this Policy, we are taking the next important step towards ensuring children have access to healthy food at school so they can focus on what truly matters: learning, growing and dreaming big.

The Honourable Jenna Sudds

Minister of Families, Children and Social Development



National School Food Policy

Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food message

Canada is truly fortunate to have the very best farmers who work tirelessly to grow and deliver high-quality, nutritious food. Sadly, far too many children in Canada still go to school on an empty stomach.

The National School Food Program will help connect schools with local food organizations, which play a vitally important role in supporting the health of communities right across the country. This initiative will provide kids with healthy meals, so they can learn, grow, and reach their full potential, while also creating new opportunities for local farmers, food processors and harvesters.

Strengthening food security in Canada has been a top priority of our Government. When I first served as Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, I was proud to have played a role in getting the first-ever Food Policy for Canada off the ground. Since then, investments through the Local Food Infrastructure Fund, a flagship program under the Food Policy, continue to support a variety of projects including, urban gardens, food banks, community kitchens, and greenhouses across Canada, as well as impactful projects led by Indigenous and Northern communities.

From the farm to the classroom, I want to thank all of the advocates, community partners, farm organizations, and everyone else who helped inform the Policy—especially the bright children who shared their ideas. The benefits of school food programs go far beyond the cafeteria, having long-term positive impacts on kids, their families, and local communities. Canada's new National School Food Policy will help ensure a brighter future for school children across Canada, and help us build a stronger economy for all Canadians.

The Honourable Lawrence MacAulay

Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food



National School Food Policy

Introduction

Every child in Canada deserves to have the best start in life. But higher grocery prices are making it more difficult for parents to afford the food their kids need.

One in four children live in food insecure households, and that has a real impact on their opportunities to learn and grow. According to the Toronto District School Board, students who regularly ate breakfast were 17 percentage points more likely to be on track to graduate compared to students who did not have breakfast every day.

This Policy articulates the federal government's long-term vision for a national school food program in Canada. It presents a set of **principles** – the core values that will guide work towards this vision – and **key objectives**, which outline how these principles can be put into action.

This Policy delivers on several commitments prior to Budget 2024, made by the Government of Canada. For example, the December 2021 mandate letters committed the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development and Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food to “work ... with provinces, territories, municipalities, Indigenous partners and stakeholders to develop a National School Food Policy and to work toward a national school nutritious meal program.” This Policy also builds on and aligns with Canada's international commitments through its membership in the Global School Meals Coalition and enactment of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*.

This Policy is the result of national engagement with diverse stakeholders and Canadians, the results of which are summarized in a What We Heard Report, and is also informed by a review of domestic and international best practices.

Collaboration with other orders of government will be essential to achieving the vision set out in this Policy. The federal government will work with provincial, territorial, and Indigenous partners to deliver a National School Food Program, with support beginning as early as the 2024-25 school year.



Background

Every child in Canada deserves to have the best start in life. School food programs provide children and youth with the meals they need to succeed at school. These are often given at no-to-low cost. Providing nutritious meals to children and youth provides many benefits, including:

- ◆ reducing hunger
- ◆ improving nutrition and health outcomes
- ◆ supporting local economies
- ◆ improving learning outcomes
- ◆ promoting sustainability
- ◆ helping families manage the higher cost of groceries

The recently announced program is part of the federal government's generational investments to make life cost less for families and ensure every child gets the best start in life. These investments include the Canada Child Benefit, which in 2024, provides families with up to \$7,437 per child, per year, to provide the essentials their kids need; Early Learning and Child Care, which has already reduced child care fees for regulated child care by 50 per cent on average across the country; and the Canadian Dental Care Plan, which will cover up to 9 million uninsured Canadians by 2025. These programs ensure fairness for every generation by reducing financial burdens and improving access to essentials, now including nutritious food.

School Food in Canada

There is an urgent need for a National School Food Policy in Canada

When children are hungry, they cannot learn. School food programs can help ensure that no child has to go hungry at school. Domestic and international evidence shows that school food programs contribute to the wellbeing of children, their families, and communities in multiple ways:

School food programs can increase consumption of nutritious foods, promote health equity, and help establish lifelong healthy eating behaviours

The foods we eat can greatly affect both physical and mental health and well-being, including among children and youth. Research shows that there is room for improvement in children and youths' patterns of eating in Canada. For example, according to the 2021 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), only 22.1% of youth ages 12 to 17 report consuming at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day.



Research has shown that school food programs are particularly beneficial for young people who face additional barriers to accessing nutritious food and who face higher rates of food insecurity. In Canada, food insecurity is especially high among children who are Indigenous, Black, or from other racialized groups, and among those in immigrant, lone-parent, and low-income households.

School food programs can improve student behaviour and increase school attendance, completion, and scholastic achievement

When children attend school hungry, their energy levels, memory, problem-solving skills, and other cognitive functions are all negatively impacted. For example, a study of kindergarteners in New York City, found that access to a free school meal increased average attendance by 1.8 days and reduced chronic absenteeism by 5.4% [Trajkovski, Schwartz, & Rothbart, 2023].

School food programs can be designed to strengthen sustainable food systems and create opportunities for local farmers and economies

For example, programs can incorporate procuring and serving local, seasonal and sustainable foods. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization has recognized that public food procurement, especially in the context of school food programs, is a “game changer” for promoting sustainable food systems and healthy diets [FAO, 2021].

Additionally, research from Sweden suggests that by making even modest, environmentally-conscious changes to school food program menus, it is possible to reduce program-related greenhouse gas emissions by up to 40%, while also increasing nutritional adequacy and affordability, lowering program costs, and ensuring a well-balanced diet consisting of all food groups [Eustachio Colombo et al., 2019].

School food programs can be designed to build food literacy, and to promote environmentally sustainable practices

School food programs can create opportunities for learning about the environment and food systems, and incorporate elements such as school gardens, “farm-to-school” approaches, and composting systems. These elements support sustainable food systems and reduce waste, while also equipping children with the confidence and knowledge to adopt sustainable practices and develop a positive relationship with food.

For example, a review of 15 studies on behavioral outcomes associated with farm-to-school programs, published in the *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, found that these programs contributed to increased knowledge about growing cycles and sustainable agriculture among students, along with gardening skills and an increased ability to identify local foods [Joshi et al, 2008].



These interconnected benefits result in a high return on investment

The World Food Programme has estimated that every \$1 to school food programming internationally yields between \$3 to \$10 in economic return, while studies in the US and UK suggest that every dollar invested in school food programs provides \$2 to \$6 in health, social and economic benefits.

In Canada and elsewhere, school food programs can help advance Sustainable Development Goals, by mitigating hunger, promoting good health and well-being and improving educational outcomes.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2022 more than 2.1 million children under the age of 18 in Canada reported that they experienced some level of food insecurity over the past 12 months.

UNICEF's 2017 Report Card ranked Canada 37 out of 41 wealthy nations for children's access to nutritious food.

In addition to provincial and territorial funding, most school food programs in Canada rely heavily or exclusively on volunteers, community groups, parents, and donations from the charitable and the private sectors. Service delivery organizations and other stakeholders have flagged that a lack of resources, an overreliance on volunteers, and rising costs are compromising the sustainability of existing school food programs. Programs also vary greatly in scope, coverage, and quality. Some offer snacks while others provide full meals and there is uneven access across jurisdictions. For example, while most schools in the territories and Atlantic Canada have school food programs in place, fewer than half of schools in the Prairie provinces offer these programs.

There are many success stories and best practices across Canada, and some provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments and organizations have made significant advancements in recent years. Current examples include:

- ◆ Prince Edward Island has a provincial lunch program available to all students K-12, serving healthy lunches every day through a “pay-what-you-can” model
- ◆ British Columbia's 2023 provincial budget announced a \$214 million investment over three years so school districts can create or expand local food programs in schools throughout B.C.
- ◆ le Collectif québécois pour une saine alimentation scolaire is a group of member organizations from various regions and sectors across Quebec which share school food information and resources and to collaborate on advocacy, research and pilot projects
- ◆ Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami has identified school food as a key priority under their Inuit Nunangat Food Security Strategy and undertaken widespread engagement to inform program design and implementation for Inuit communities
- ◆ the Council of Yukon First Nations has rural and urban nutrition programs in place to provide equitable and healthy food to all Indigenous children aged zero to 18 residing in Yukon



The federal government recognizes the critical work of all orders of government, organizations, school communities, volunteers, and Indigenous partners to feed children every day, and seeks to build on and strengthen these efforts.

School food around the world

According to the United Nations World Food Programme's report entitled "*State of School Feeding Worldwide 2022*", more than 87 percent of all countries have a school food policy in place, and approximately 61 percent of primary school children in high-income countries, and 41 percent worldwide, have access to a free or subsidized daily school meal.

There are a wide range of approaches to school food programming worldwide. Many countries provide school meals that are universal and free and have policies that strive to achieve health and environmental benefits through nutrition standards, food education, quotas for locally produced foods, and other tools. Some examples include:

- ◆ **Finland:** School meals are universally available and free in both primary and high school. Meal services are part of the curricula and are designed to help children build food-related knowledge and skills
- ◆ **Japan:** School meals are mandatory for all students and are not free but highly subsidized. Food and nutrition education are core objectives of Japan's approach to school food, and there are also targets for nutrition and locally-produced foods
- ◆ **Brazil:** School food programs are universally available and free. They are required to procure at least 30 percent of their food from local farmers and must follow menus prepared by nutritionists that reflect local crops and food habits



Figure 1

Universal healthy school food programs designed with the Sustainable Development Goals



Source: Employment and Social Development Canada and the Coalition for Healthy School Food/Food Secure Canada.



What We Heard - Engagement on a National School Food Policy

Since January 2022, the federal government has sought to hear from a broad range of stakeholders, experts and partners about their experiences with school food programs and their views on a National School Food Policy. You can read about the outcomes of this engagement in the [National School Food Policy Engagements – What We Heard Report](#).

Key takeaways from the online public questionnaire

- ◆ Strong agreement that school food programs are beneficial for children
- ◆ A majority indicating that meals should be both filling and nutritious
- ◆ Emphasis around the importance of providing healthy, safe, locally-sourced, and culturally appropriate foods
- ◆ A majority identified ensuring that participants do not experience stigma as the most important component of programming
- ◆ A large majority indicated child health and well-being and reducing child hunger as the most important objectives

Key feedback from stakeholders

- ◆ There is no “stereotypical” hungry child, and there are numerous reasons why children go to school hungry
- ◆ School meal programs extend beyond simply feeding children, and should strive to incorporate educational objectives, opportunities for community building, and linkages with local food systems
- ◆ A one-size-fits-all approach will not work, and instead local flexibility needs to be baked into the approach
- ◆ Participants noted that they saw an opportunity to stimulate regional food production and local economic development
- ◆ Stakeholders also widely reported experiencing significant increases in demand for programming, at a time where they are also facing significant decreases in capacity due to many factors, including the higher cost of food. Organizations shared that they have experienced additional challenges including infrastructure, the need for paid staff, and lack of data and governance



A National School Food Policy

Every child in Canada deserves to have the best start in life. Getting the food they need to succeed at school is essential to a fair start in life, regardless of their family's circumstance. This is a key part of our plan for fairness for every generation.

Vision

That all children and youth in Canada have access to nutritious food at school, in an inclusive, non-stigmatizing environment that fosters healthy practices, while strengthening connections with local food systems, the environment and culture.

Principles

The following guiding principles will support progress towards the Policy's vision.

Accessible

Children and youth can participate in school food programs without stigma or barriers.

Health promoting

Food served is consistent with healthy eating recommendations in Canada's Food Guide, and children and youth are supported in developing healthful food-related behaviours and attitudes, as well as food and nutrition knowledge and skills.

Inclusive

Children and youth have access to culturally appropriate, relevant and inclusive school food programs that engage students and the broader community.

Flexible

Food is locally sourced where possible and reflective of local and regional circumstances.

Sustainable

Programs are designed to be environmentally sustainable, and adequately resourced.



Accountable

Consistent and transparent monitoring and evaluation to ensure that programs are achieving policy objectives.

Scope

The Policy lays the foundation for collaborative and complementary action by all levels of government and all sectors to advance work on school food in Canada. The Policy was derived from and builds on what was heard during engagement with diverse stakeholders and the public as well as a review of research, data and best practices.

This Policy seeks to:

- ◆ describe the federal government's long-term vision for school food programs in Canada
- ◆ spotlight promising practices related to school food programs
- ◆ affirm and maximize the wide-ranging benefits of school food programs

Objectives

Guided by the Policy's principles, the following objectives help support the long-term vision of every child having access to nutritious food in school.

Work progressively towards the long-term goal of universal access

- ◆ Building constructively on the work of existing funders and school food programs
- ◆ Expanding school food programs to communities that are underserved and/or where programming does not currently exist
- ◆ Prioritizing communities and populations that face barriers to accessing nutritious food and which are most affected by food insecurity, including those that are Indigenous, Black, or from other racialized groups; living in rural, remote or isolated areas; and in immigrant, single-parent, or low-income households
- ◆ Ensuring that the physical, financial and other barriers to participation are reduced or mitigated, especially for marginalized populations
- ◆ Striving to serve meals that are free at the point of participation, such that any contribution on the part of students or families takes place privately and separately from meal or snack service, and ensuring that meals are offered in an environment designed to minimize or eliminate stigma



Expand investment in school food so that programs can operate sustainably

- ◆ Enhancing and expanding, and without displacing, existing sources of funding for school food programs with the goal of expanding their reach and capacity
- ◆ Exploring how different funding models could be implemented to further expand access to school food programs
- ◆ Supporting investments in infrastructure and staffing to procure, grow, deliver, store, prepare, and serve safe and healthy food at schools in a supportive environment
- ◆ Taking action to encourage sustainable practices, including efforts to reduce food loss and waste through prevention and diversion strategies and behaviours

Help children meet their nutritional and health needs, develop healthful food-related behaviours and attitudes, as well as food and nutrition knowledge and skills

- ◆ Fostering a healthy school food environment, aligning meals, snacks, experiences, and education with Canada's Food Guide and provincial or territorial nutrition guidelines
- ◆ Valuing the importance of age-appropriate and hands-on learning opportunities related to food, nutrition and/or food systems
- ◆ Promoting positive food-related behaviours and attitudes, such as enjoying meals and snacks with others, being open to trying new foods and taking time to eat
- ◆ Safeguarding against marketing food and beverage brands and highly processed foods and beverages to children and increasing awareness of the impacts of food marketing on food choice
- ◆ Striving to promote food literacy and food skills, including: strengthening knowledge of the connections between food and health, culture, and the environment; healthy eating; and, reducing food waste
- ◆ Ensuring food is safe to minimize the risk of pathogens, and that relevant health and safety-focused regulations are followed



Promote programming that is culturally appropriate, relevant, and inclusive

- ◆ Striving to provide children with opportunities to learn about other cultures
- ◆ Ensuring that information on school food programming, including how students and families can participate, is accessible and clear
- ◆ Food offerings reflect a mindfulness of dietary needs and allergies and the importance of including foods that reflect students' cultural identities (for example, country, halal and kosher food)
- ◆ Leveraging the experience and expertise of First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners and community leaders, such as Elders, to ensure programs are culturally appropriate
- ◆ Involving students in menu planning or food preparation, where possible
- ◆ Ensuring opportunities for input and feedback from students, parents and the community

Create opportunities for local economies and reflect of local and regional circumstances

- ◆ Maximizing opportunities to source food locally and foster connections with local food producers, hunters and harvesters, processors, and suppliers
- ◆ Benefiting local economies and job creation
- ◆ Ensuring partnerships (for example, with businesses and corporations) are mutually beneficial and support healthy living
- ◆ Striving to support the participation of under-represented groups in the Canadian agriculture and food sector



Moving forward together: next steps

The Government of Canada knows that partnerships are essential to implementing school food programs that work for all Canadian children and intends to collaborate closely with partners and stakeholders to deliver the long-term vision set out in this Policy.

In recognition of provincial and territorial jurisdiction over education and health, under which school food programming generally falls, with the exception of education for First Nations students ordinarily resident on reserve, the Government of Canada will continue to work closely with provinces and territories.

In recognition of the unique rights of Indigenous peoples and commitments to reconciliation and self-determination, the Government of Canada will work closely with First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners to reflect and understand Indigenous perspectives and priorities to meet the needs of Indigenous students.

While there are many school food success stories across the country, there are currently limited ways to share them. The Government of Canada will work with other orders of government, partners and stakeholders to explore ways to improve access to information on school food programming, report on progress, and share best practices.

