

School Food Program Implementation

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the Coalition for Healthy School Food?

The Coalition for Healthy School Food is Canada’s largest school food network of over 400 organizations – 270+ non-profit member organizations and 130+ endorsers - from every province and territory who are seeking public investment in and Canada-wide standards for a cost-shared school food program. We are working towards all children in Canada having daily access to healthy food at school. Supported by our [key guiding principles](#), our members and endorsers advocate for stable funding and support at the federal, provincial, territorial and local levels.

2. What does the Coalition for Healthy School Food mean by a school food program?

School food programs include breakfast, snack, and lunch programs that provide school-aged children and youth with nutritious and culturally appropriate food at school. While provinces and territories have different names for their school food programs (e.g., “Student Nutrition Program” in Ontario), the Coalition uses “school food” to encompass the variety of programs in Canada and to align with federal language. School food programs can range from a small offering such as cheese cubes, a bagel and/or an apple to, in some communities, full hot breakfasts and lunches. The type of program being offered depends on the history, choices and capacity of the community (e.g. time and presence of a parent, volunteer, teacher, or NGO “champion”) and existing assets of a school community including financial partners.

School food programs can support a range of goals including ensuring that students are nourished for their school day, that students achieve improved educational outcomes, creating a caring school environment, that students experience cultural foods and participate in traditional foodways, enabling food literacy education, and supporting community economic development.

3. How are school food programs currently organized in provinces and territories?

In the absence of a national school food program, Canada has a patchwork of programs that vary widely in scope, consistency, and quality. All provinces and territories partially fund school food programs in the range of \$0.14-\$3.45 per participating student (\$0.03-\$0.94 per meal per capita) depending on the province or territory.¹ Provinces and territories often partner with one or more non-governmental organizations to run programs and rely on that organization’s staff and/or school community volunteers. Some provinces and territories only provide funding for breakfast or a mid-morning snack, while others (e.g. BC, PEI, MB and NL) also fund lunches. Most programs are universally accessible (i.e. are available

¹ Ruetz, A. T., & McKenna, M. L. (2021). Characteristics of Canadian school food programs funded by provinces and territories. *Canadian Food Studies La Revue Canadienne Des études Sur l'alimentation*, 8(3). <https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v8i3.483>.

to all students) within the school. Although most provincially and territorially funded programs provide food at no cost to students, some programs use a pay-what-you-can model.²

In Indigenous communities many programs are funded in whole or in part by the band or tribal council, in some cases using federal education funding provided by Indigenous Services Canada, through provincial and territorial agreements or programs (e.g. the [British Columbia Tripartite Education Agreement](#) and Ontario First Nations Student Nutrition Program) and/or by community grants and funders.

Across the country, demand often exceeds supply, program funding is variable, and monitoring and evaluation is inconsistent.

4. How many students do school food programs currently reach?

School food programs currently reach 20-40%³ of children and youth in Canada. We do not have accurate data because Canada does not yet have a harmonized school food program that can monitor and track programs. However, Drs. Ruetz & McKenna have developed a survey to collect updated data in the interim.

5. How much money do other levels of government put into school food programs?

It is estimated that provinces, territories and municipalities currently contribute around \$200 million each year towards school food programs. Government funding for school food represents only a fraction of total program costs, while other sources of revenue and in-kind support to operate programs comes from granting agencies, private donors, families and/or other sources depending on the region.

6. Why are advocates asking for federal investment in school food programs?

Families are struggling. Inflation and affordability pressures mean that more and more children are having a hard time accessing nutritious food, with food insecurity [affecting 1 in 4 children](#) (1.8 million) in Canada. As families experience skyrocketing household costs, demand for school food programs is rising. At the same time, rising food and other program costs are stretching school food program budgets, which is impacting the quality and quantity of nutritious food available to students. Some programs are at risk of shutting down or suspending operations before the end of the school year.

School food programs significantly improve children's access to nutritious food, which has widespread benefits for their physical health, mental health, future eating habits, behaviour, and school performance. School food programs set children and youth up to succeed and, over time, can help reduce the [\\$15.8 billion](#) in annual productivity losses and costs of treatment due to diet-related diseases in Canada. School food programs have also been shown to have broad, positive impacts on families, communities, and the economy by reducing household food costs, creating jobs, and strengthening sustainable food systems.

Canada is an outlier when it comes to supporting children and youth with nutritious food at school. We are the only G7 country, and one of the only OECD advanced industrialized economies, without a national school food program. Worldwide 83% of all countries provide school meals to students at no

² Some "Pay-What-You-Can" lunch programs operate across Canada, including in PEI where PWYC is the province-wide model. PWYC enables students/caregivers to choose the amount they pay via an online system (stigma-free). Payment of the full price of the meal is encouraged for those who can afford it to off-set the costs for those who cannot.

³ Ruetz, A. T., & McKenna, M. L. (2021). Ibid.

cost or at subsidized rates.⁴ Canada ranks 37th out of 41 among the world's richest countries when it comes to providing healthy food for kids.⁵

By investing in school food programs, governments can advance the health, wellbeing, and academic performance of all Canadian children and youth, making sure that they can access nutritious food, are ready to learn, and are set up to succeed each school day. Federal leadership would also catalyze additional investment from provinces and territories, municipalities, and other sources by building a stronger foundation for strong school food programming.

7. How would federal funding be distributed?

The Coalition is advocating for federal funding to be transferred to provinces and territories, all of which already provide some funding for school food programs. Provinces and territories would then distribute this federal funding, along with the funding that they already provide, to existing program providers. Each province and territory has a system in place to flow funding to school food providers who currently implement programs on the ground. They also all have food and nutrition policies, and a mechanism for public accountability for funds that they allocate. Federal funds would be able to reach schools across the country without difficulty, and would allow providers to amplify and expand existing programs.

Regarding funding school food programs in Indigenous communities, funding could be provided through newly negotiated agreements with First Nations, Metis and Inuit nations and leadership, and/or through existing channels including provincial and territorial agreements and programs as discussed in Q#3. The Coalition is advocating for federal decision-makers to immediately consult and collaborate with Indigenous leadership on the urgent creation and/or enhancement of independent, self-managed and distinctions-based nutritious meal programs for First Nation, Métis and Inuit school children, in recognition of their unique needs, traditions and priorities, and in line with federal obligations and commitments for reconciliation, Indigenous self-determination and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

8. How do we know that federal funding would reach the children and youth who need it most?

Programs funded by provinces and territories have been set up to make best use of the funds available and serve school communities that are most in need. However, gaps exist. Federal investment would amplify this funding to boost existing programs, reaching communities with a strong need, and would also expand school food programming to schools and communities where there would be a significant impact. Note that any funding provided to First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities will reach children and youth who would greatly benefit from these programs given the high level of food insecurity in Indigenous communities.

As funding for school food programs increases from all levels of government, more school food programs can be established in new communities to eventually reach all K-12 students in Canada in the same spirit as universal health care and public education. Our vision is that universal school food programs will be eventually offered in all schools across Canada.

⁴ World Food Programme. (2021). [State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020](#). *World Food Programme*

⁵ UNICEF Office of Research. (2017). 'Building the Future: Children and the Sustainable Development Goals in Rich Countries', *Innocenti Report Card 14*, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence. Retrieved from https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC14_eng.pdf

9. What does the Coalition mean by a “universal” school food program?

The Coalition is calling for a [universal](#) school food program for Canada. This means that, in schools that have a program in place, all students in the school would have access to the meal or snack that is offered at little to no cost or without economic barriers. Research shows that this approach reduces the stigma associated with participating in programs and leads to higher participation rates.⁶

10. Would there be requirements for how school food providers spend the federal funds?

The Coalition is advocating for flexible funding with some key standards to ensure strong programs. We are asking for federal funding that allows school food providers to invest in areas that are right for their local context, allowing them to build on local knowledge, skills, infrastructure and partnerships. Flexible program funding would also support a range of innovative food service models that are culturally appropriate and locally adapted, including increasing local procurement and enhancing food literacy. Alongside this flexibility we are asking for key standards to ensure program quality and accountability. (see Q19)

11. Is the Coalition proposing that the federal government be the only funder of school food programs? Would their investment replace current provincial and territorial funding?

Not at all. School food programs require a significant investment and need to be cost-shared. Federal funding would support existing programs by investing \$200 million or more to match the [\\$230+ million](#) currently invested by provinces, territories and municipalities. This would improve the quality and quantity of food, and stabilize programs for the children and youth that currently participate. It would also allow programs to expand to other communities where there would be a significant impact.

A pay-what-you-can model can provide another source of revenue from families who have the means to pay, while making sure that all children can still access the program. There are many examples of this model emerging across the country. Programs also secure funding from a wide range of community sources.

12. What types of meals would federal funding support?

Federal funding would support existing program models which may serve breakfast, lunch and/or snack depending on the specific needs of each community.

13. How many schools and students are currently on waitlists for programs?

We estimate that over 1,000 schools, of the 14,600 schools across the country, are on waitlists for school food programs. This amounts to more than 390,000 students in schools on waitlists (using an [average](#) of 390 students per school). Not all provinces and territories, however monitor these numbers and so this number likely does not capture the full need / demand.

14. How many programs / students / meals would a federal investment of \$200 million support?

A federal investment in school food will support the health and education of up to 2 million children and youth by ensuring that they are well nourished and ready to learn in schools across Canada. If the Government of Canada fulfills its election commitment of \$200 million per year to a national program, it

⁶ Cohen, J. F. W., Hecht, A. A., McLoughlin, G. M., Turner, L., & Schwartz, M. B. (2021). Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*, 13(3), 911. MDPI AG. DOI: 10.3390/nu13030911

would match current provincial, territorial and municipal investment and would improve the quality and quantity of food for students in the approximately one third (5,000+) of schools across the country who currently provide school food programs. This investment would also support expansion of programs into communities where there would be a significant impact.

15. How much would it cost to feed all students across the country every day?

In the short term, the Coalition would like to see investment in the existing programs that are set up to reach students most in need, and to ensure that these students receive high quality culturally appropriate meals every day.

Once these programs have been strengthened we would like to see programs expand so that *all* children and youth across the country have access to at least one healthy and culturally appropriate meal or snack at school each day. Estimating this cost is challenging given the lack of consistent data available. However, one estimate puts the cost for all K-12 students to access one meal at school each day at around \$5.75 billion per school year⁷. This cost would be shared among the many funders outlined in Q11. In any detailed costing exercise, significant consideration needs to be given to the elevated costs of food and distribution in Northern and remote regions.

16. How much funding should the federal government allocate to school food programs?

While we can not reach all children and youth overnight, every dollar invested will feed more kids and support them to grow and learn. Larger investments will also support jobs, economic development and other policy priorities, with significant returns on investment.⁸

17. Why is this an issue that the federal government should be involved in?

School food programs address many issues within federal jurisdiction: health promotion and disease prevention; dietary guidance; health protection including in relation to food; social development; equity and inclusion; gender-based equity; Indigenous rights, services and self-determination; children's human rights; sustainable local food economies, including traditional and country foods; agriculture and agri-food policy and programming; rural and regional development; and environmental protection and a green economy.

As with the national childcare program the federal government also steps in from time to time to show visionary leadership on the creation of new transformative programs that have national implications. In this case federal funding and leadership would:

- Provide stable, predictable and dependable cost-shared funding;
- Provide national guidelines and standards;
- Support consistency and coherence across programs;
- Build on the interest and commitment of a growing number of provinces and territories;
- Establish a solid foundation and evidence basis for future enhancements and refinements for an eventual permanent Program; and

⁷ Calculation: 5,394,783 students in public and private/independent schools with an average of \$5.50/meal over 194 school days per year. The meal cost of \$5.50/meal has been calculated based on US costing and accounting for inflation of an average breakfast of \$4.82 and lunch of \$6.75 including all costs of program delivery (staffing, food, infrastructure, delivery etc...). Please contact the Coalition for more information about this rough costing.

⁸ For example, US school meal programs receive an investment of \$18.7 billion annually, but provide a \$40 billion return on investment in relation to the human health and economic benefits they provide. These benefits come from improved equity, education, and productivity in adults as the result of better health outcomes. See <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/true-cost-of-food-school-meals-case-study/>.

- Catalyze additional investment from provinces and territories, municipalities, and other sources by building a stronger foundation for strong school food programming.

18. Are provinces and territories going to be critical of federal investment for being involved in school food programs?

It costs a lot to fund school food programs and none of the provinces and territories have yet been able to fund them adequately. Provinces and territories across Canada are stepping forward to tell the federal government that they welcome their investment in a similar partnership as with the Early Learning and Child Care Agreements as well as Healthcare. Nova Scotia has sent a [letter](#) to Minister Freeland; Ontario has written to the federal Minister of Children, Families and Social Development; and the BC government has been advocating to federal counterparts for matching investment to BC's new Feeding Futures funding.

19. What are the Coalition's recommendations for federal-provincial/territorial agreements to ensure that programs are in line with national guidance and accountability measures?

The Coalition is recommending that the Government of Canada create transfer payment agreements with provinces and territories that include a small set of conditions to receive federal funding. These Canada-wide principles would help provide consistency across the country in line with a best practices framework, while providing local flexibility in how programs are implemented.

The Coalition recommends that conditions in these transfer payments include:

- 1) Following nutrition standards and ensuring food served is in line with Canada's Food Guide and is culturally appropriate (allowing flexibility in First Nation, Métis and Inuit and northern programs which may look to other more relevant nutrition guidance)
- 2) Providing meals and snacks to children and youth without stigma
- 3) Not marketing to kids
- 4) Establishing conflict-of-interest safeguards regarding program governance
- 5) Participating in data collection, monitoring and reporting for tracking purposes, financial accountability and program evaluation
- 6) Not cutting or redirecting current provincial and territorial school food funds once receiving federal funding

20. Why is school food one of the best investments the federal government can make in a very tight budget 2024?

Families are struggling because of the affordability crisis. A [US study](#) found that if free school breakfasts and lunches were available to all students, families' monthly household grocery bills could go down by as much as 19% for families with two children.

Investing in school food programs:

- Allows the government to act on an issue that is top of mind for Canadian families
- Aligns with current Federal programs and prior commitments; (this is a natural extension of childcare, etc.)
- Is ready to be implemented
- Provides a modest investment with concrete results for Canadian families.

21. Where else might revenue be found to support school food programs?

Funding might be found from a range of sources including pay-what-you-can models, tax measures on the grocery industry, a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (as is done in Newfoundland and Labrador), and other creative measures.

22. What strong school food models can we look to within Canada?

School food programs across the country are so different and they all have unique offerings and strengths. Exemplary programs include the Yukon First Nations Education Directorate's [Nutrition Program](#) and PEI's [Universal School Food Program](#). School food programs are prominent in Nova Scotia, with 98% of schools offering a school breakfast. Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador offer strong pay-what-you-can hot lunch programs. BC's new [Feeding Futures program](#) is focused on providing stigma free, healthy, locally-sourced school food programs in all 60 school districts.

23. What is the Return On Investment of school food programs?

School food programs have been shown to provide **2.5-7 times the Return on Investment** in human health and economic benefits in high-income countries including health care cost reductions, increases in jobs and domestic food sales, and less stress for families, especially for women ([Ruetz et al., 2023](#) citing [Lundborg et al., 2022](#) & The [Rockefeller Foundation](#), 2021).

24. Is the public in support of an investment in school food programs?

There is widespread consensus in Canada that the government needs to act on its commitments. As the Breakfast Club of Canada [survey](#) released on June 13, 2023 reveals, 84% of Canadians believe that the federal government should keep its election promise **as soon as possible**. It also reveals that 77% of Canadians are disappointed that nothing has been put in place by the government to deliver on the expected meal program.