

# With food costs soaring and no national program, Canadian schools struggle to feed students

CAROLINE ALPHONSO > EDUCATION REPORTER

PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

UPDATED 36 MINUTES AGO



Thea, a grade 1 student at Cathy Wever Elementary School with a banana from the school's Tastebuds food program, speaks with grade 1 teacher Lindsay Steeves, on March 2. The Hamilton, Ont. elementary school has a Tastebuds food program where students have access to healthy snacks during the day. The neediest students receive a weekend food hamper provided by Food4Kids.

FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Lindsay Steeves, a Grade 1 teacher at Cathy Wever Elementary School in Hamilton, knows that if she wants to feed young minds, she also needs to make sure their little bellies are properly nourished.

So, on a Thursday morning earlier this month, when a young girl pulled out two slices of white bread from her lunch bag, Ms. Steeves added some cream cheese from her classroom snack counter.

The spread, along with bananas and mini-bagels, on that day were offered to students as part of her school's free daily nutrition program – one that is struggling to survive till the end of the school year.

“They need this,” said Ms. Steeves, “so they can focus and they’re not thinking ‘I’m so hungry and I can’t focus on anything else.’ ” She scanned her room so she could supplement packed lunches that too often consisted of sugary, salty snacks.

Cathy Wever offers nutritious snacks to its more than 500 students each day, many of whom come from some of the lowest-income families in the city. But those responsible for the school's nutrition program as well as others across the country are facing difficult decisions as they feel the strain of soaring food prices, coupled with growing demand from families struggling to make ends meet after three years of pandemic-related shutdowns.

There was always a need, school food proponents say; it's just become worse.

Among G7 countries, Canada is the only one without a national school food program. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made an election commitment in 2021 of investing \$1-billion over five years, and tasked his agriculture minister and minister of families, children and social development to build a school food policy. Advocates are hopeful that a federal government plan could lead to a universal school food program.

In an e-mail statement, Saskia Rodenburg, a spokesperson for Employment and Social Development Canada, said a national policy would build on “existing efforts,” and Ottawa would work with provincial and territorial governments and Indigenous communities.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh said on Tuesday that he'd like the coming budget to include federal funding for school food programs to help families. “With the cost-of-

living skyrocketing, we need concrete measures to help families. School food programs are one of them,” he said.

In the meantime, what exists is a patchwork of programs that serves a snack, breakfast or lunch to roughly one million school-age children, 21 per cent of the country’s student population – thanks to non-profit agencies and an army of volunteers.

### Canada school food program funding

Researchers at the University of Guelph and the University of New Brunswick surveyed provinces and territories on their contributions to school food programs. The data were collected in 2018-19. Some jurisdictions have made increases since then.

Ont.		\$27,900,000
Que.		\$19,089,385
Alta.		\$15,500,000
B.C.		\$13,231,713
Sask.	\$2,337,044	
Nunavut	\$1,945,092	
N.S.	\$1,700,000	
Nfld.	\$1,093,700	
Man.	\$976,000	
NWT	\$675,000	
PEI	\$200,000	
Yukon	\$116,500	

Note: Saskatchewan reports a range from \$936,044 to \$2,337,044

SOURCE: CANADIAN FOOD STUDIES

The B.C. government included a \$214-million investment over three years in its recent budget to expand existing school food programs – the largest single investment in school food in Canadian history.

Outside of that, however, provinces have provided incremental increases to school food programs, nowhere near the cost of inflation. And Ontario has remained consistent in its core funding of \$28-million since 2014 even though the cost of food has increased, although there have been one-time top-ups during the pandemic.

That means programs receive a portion of their funding from governments, but also rely heavily on non-governmental organizations for support, as well as community donations.

“What I’m hearing most is that people are going to run out of money by April,” said Debbie Field, co-ordinator of the Montreal-based advocacy group Coalition for Healthy School Food.

School food programs, she said, have seen their costs increase by as much as 30 per cent this year. They don’t want to turn away children, but she worries that they’re struggling to keep up. Ms. Field said programs are forced to either reduce the number of items they offer children or how often a program can run each week.

She said the federal government can’t afford not to act. “These programs are vulnerable, and they have a huge health impact on our children.”

At Cathy Wever, school officials are not sure they’ll have enough funds to carry them till June.



Healthy snacks from the Tastebuds food program at Cathy Wever Elementary School.

FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The daily nutrition program costs \$11,000 a month and is administered by the non-profit Hamilton Tastebuds. The organization allotted \$75,000 to the school this year to spend on food, and now, with the help of the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, it's looking for grants and donations to carry the program till the end of the academic year. (Tastebuds receives only 15 per cent of its funding from the provincial government, and the rest through grants and donations. It feeds children in 106 Hamilton schools. There are five schools on its waiting list, but it has no extra money to help.)

Each morning at Cathy Wever, students push trolleys carrying reusable yellow grocery bags into classrooms. Those bags generally hold a fruit or vegetable, a grain, dairy and protein. The food is accessible to all students in the classroom, a way to remove the stigma.

Ms. Steeves, the Grade 1 teacher, keeps the non-perishable extras of the day in a classroom cupboard, so she can offer a fruit cup, for example, to a student who may need it. “You can see the struggle a bit more,” she said, of student need now that the pandemic lockdowns are lifted. At the end of the week, she regularly packs bags of fruit or bread if families have expressed a willingness to accept the extra food.

Principal Jacqueline Kurtz said staff are working within their budget to offer nutritious snacks to students. She acknowledged that it’s becoming more expensive to manage, with the rising cost of food.

“Sometimes the program is the meal, and sometimes it supplements the meal,” she said. Feeding children is “just part of the reality right now,” Ms. Kurtz added.

“Food shouldn’t be a barrier to learning. We just need to make sure that kids are fed, so we can teach them how to read.”

A growing body of evidence suggests that a nutritious school food program promotes better student attendance and participation in classroom lessons, not to mention the physical benefits, said Flora Zhang, who is doing her master’s degree in public health at the University of Toronto, and has documented the studies for the Coalition for Healthy School Food.

Countries such as Sweden and Finland offer a free school lunch to their students. One study published in 2021 looked at the long-term effects of Sweden’s free school lunch program that was rolled out between 1959 and 1969. The study found that those exposed to the program through their entire elementary school years had 3-per-cent greater lifetime earnings, with those from poorer households benefitting the most.

The study’s authors note that the lunch program was introduced in a wealthy country, where schoolchildren did not necessarily face food insecurity “but where parents lacked knowledge about healthy food habits.”



The daily nutrition program costs \$11,000 a month and is administered by the non-profit Hamilton Tastebuds. The organization allotted \$75,000 to the school this year to spend on food.

FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

School food advocates say providing nutritious meals is not only about feeding children who come hungry to school but also about setting all children up for a healthier lifestyle. Remember celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's crusade to drive out junk food from British schools? Well, there's no better place to teach those invaluable lessons than in a school building where children spend a large chunk of their waking hours.

Amberley Ruetz, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Saskatchewan who has researched school food programs and worked to advance them, said children have increased the consumption of unhealthy foods.

"It's been documented that children's diet are poor across the socioeconomic spectrum, because even if you come from a well-off family, you don't necessarily know what healthy eating means," Ms. Ruetz said.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the School Lunch Association, a registered charity based in St. John's, is trying to change that eating behaviour.

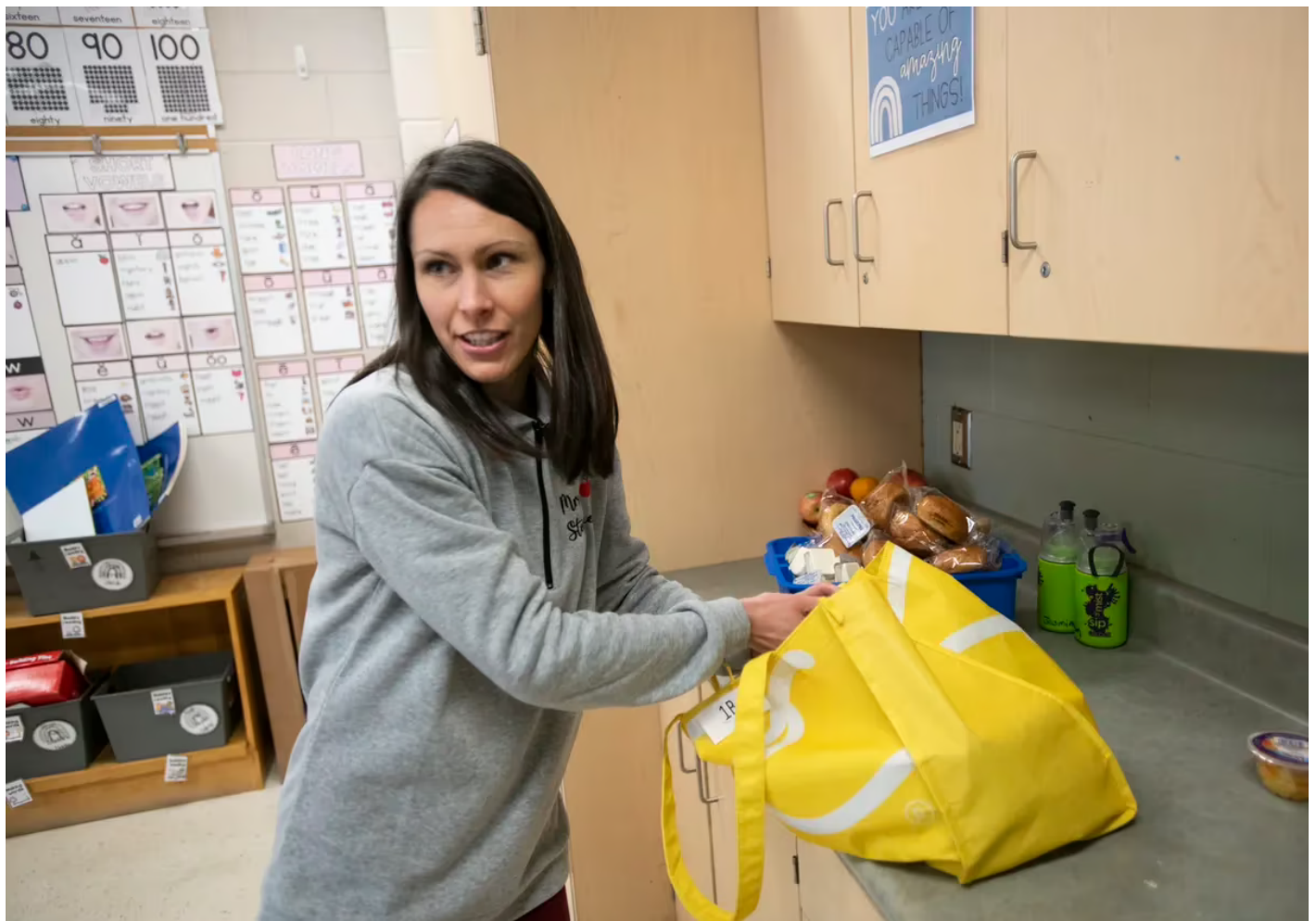
The group serves about 140,000 meals over the course of a month to schools mostly located in St. John's but also as far as Gander, which is about 300 kilometres away. Families pay what they can, with a suggested price of \$4 a lunch (it was \$3.75 last year). A typical meal could include lasagna, garlic naan, vegetables and fruit salad with milk or water. Another day, children are served chicken fajitas with roasted potatoes, carrot sticks and mandarin oranges.

It's all about exposing children to a nutritious midday meal so they can continue learning, said executive-director John Finn.

The program started more than three decades ago, when an inner-city church group noticed higher absences among students at the end of every month. Money was tight at home and parents were reluctant to send their children to school because of the stigma associated with hunger.

What started at one school ballooned to providing nutritious lunches in 41 schools this year. All participating schools have kitchens, which is not necessarily common across the country.





Ms. Steeves keeps the non-perishable extras of the day in a classroom cupboard, so she can offer a fruit cup, for example, to a student who may need it.

FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The organization relies on funding from the province, but also from the sale of its food.

But Mr. Finn said fewer families can afford to pay and more are relying on the program. In October, 2021, about 800 families couldn't pay at all. By last October, that number climbed close to 2,000 families. Meanwhile, there were about 18,000 more meals served over that time period, a 15-per-cent increase year over year.

The association also saw a 20-per-cent increase in the cost of the food, and a 25-per-cent jump in the cost of supplies, which includes storage equipment and cleaning items, in the past school year.

“We're challenged to maintain status quo as it stands now,” Mr. Finn said.

That anxiety is also shared by Gord Androsoff, who heads CHEP Good Food in Saskatoon. His group runs a host of initiatives, including community markets and school food programs.

Almost every day, Mr. Androsoff checks his organization's bank account. It's very rarely in the black.

"Before the pandemic, I don't know if we ever used our line of credit. And now, if we don't use it, we would have to lay off staff or shut down programs," he said of the rising costs of food and fuel.

The organization is one of eight agencies that taps into money from the province for school food programs. The provincial grant makes up about one-third of CHEP's budget. Last year, CHEP received about \$492,000. Like others, Mr. Androsoff spends his days applying for grants so the organization can support 27 schools by buying and delivering food to be cooked in the building, and 30 schools that receive bagged lunches.

He had hoped the federal government would have rolled out a program last fall.

"The cost of food keeps going up. The cost of fuel goes up. We're continually squeezed," Mr. Androsoff said.

At Cathy Wever in Hamilton, educators not only feed children during the school day, they also send food home for the weekend.

In a classroom on the first floor, education assistant Vicki Raposo was on a phone around 1 p.m. on Thursday calling classroom teachers to send students to her room. She checked off the names in a blue folder.

Along one corner of the classroom sat 10 large totes filled with plastic grocery bags. They were delivered earlier in the day and carried weekend hampers for 70 students. In each hamper, there was a sleeve of whole grain bagels, fruits and vegetables, cereal and milk, and healthy snacks, enough for two breakfasts, two lunches and four snacks.

The program is run by Food4Kids Ontario, a not-for-profit group that fills the gaps on weekends and school breaks, feeding 3,500 children in southwestern Ontario. Cathy Wever has 70 kids registered, and another 11 children on its waiting list. In all of Hamilton, Food4Kids has 150 children waiting for a hamper.

Demand is so high this year that the program can only help families who are considered in crisis, where they rely on free food and food banks. Food4Kids doesn't receive any provincial funding, and relies on grants and donations.

One by one, or in small groups, children came by Mr. Raposo's classroom to grab their bags.

The young ones cradled it in their arms like precious cargo.

In many ways, it was. "We would have students who wouldn't come to school if we didn't have all of this," Ms. Raposo said.



Brianna, a grade 1 student, and Vicki Raposo, an Educational Assistant at Cathy Wever Elementary School, deliver food bags to classrooms on March 2.

FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## **Sign up for the Morning Update Newsletter**

Start your day with news briefs on the day's most important stories as selected by and written by Globe editors.

**SIGN UP**