

A Legislative Framework for Healthy Food at School: For Every Child

UNICEF Canada Submission: Bill C-322

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Introduction

Every school child should have access to a healthy meal every school day.

But one in three children goes to school hungry and one in four is food-insecure, while only one in five can access a school food program.

The total annual investment in school food programs (also called “school meal” and “school feeding” programs) among all levels of government in Canada will be an estimated \$500 million by 2025. This will provide about 2 million students with access to food during the school day: around one-third of all schoolchildren. With high rates of childhood food insecurity, hunger at school and obesity in Canada, school food programs are needed more than ever. The Coalition for Healthy School Food, of which UNICEF Canada is a member, estimates that current investment is less than one-quarter of what is needed to guarantee every child access to healthy food at school (around \$2.7 billion). Public funding averages \$0.48 per participating student per day, while the Coalition estimates that a minimum of \$5.00 per child per day is required for universal access. While investments in school food by all levels of government are trending upward, so is child poverty and food insecurity.

UNICEF Canada welcomes legislation to establish a higher ambition for the children of Canada. Federal legislation should be guided by Canada’s obligations to prioritize the best interests and fulfill the rights of every child. It should set out a sustainable commitment to children’s universal, pan-Canadian access to healthy school food – for every child, every school day. Bill C-322, *An Act to develop a national framework to establish a school food program*, is an important part of a rights-based framework that includes legislation, policies, programs and investments to guarantee the rights of every child to adequate nutrition, education and healthy development.

No Child Should go to School Hungry in a Wealthy Country

Canada’s child poverty rate rose in 2021, after years of decline accelerated by the 2016 Canada Child Benefit. The increase in child poverty was more substantial than the increase in poverty for the average Canadian. UNICEF modelling suggests that inflation, particularly a rise in food prices, contributed to an increase in child poverty of up to four percentage points across high-income countries in 2022. Food insecurity has been rising as well. Of the 1.1 million people experiencing food insecurity in Canada in 2021, 802,000 were in families with children. Children have the highest rate of food insecurity among all age groups in Canada—24 per cent in 2022, which translates to almost 1.8 million children.¹ It is not surprising, but it is unacceptable, that children comprise about one-third of all food bank users. Food insecurity is most prevalent among children living in poverty and facing discrimination, including Indigenous children, racialized children, children with a disability and children in lone parent families. The number of food-insecure people is highest among on-reserve Indigenous populations, at 48 per cent. In UNICEF Report Card 18, Canada ranked 33rd of 43 countries for the rate of overweight children, an indicator of poor diets, at 31 per cent.

The main reason that children experience food insecurity is because social protection policies, particularly income benefits, are insufficient to lift them out of poverty and to afford sufficient, healthy

¹ UNICEF Canada, UNICEF Report Card 18: Canadian Companion, Child Poverty in Canada: Let’s Finish This, UNICEF Canada, Toronto, 2023.

food. Limited access to nutritious food and the pervasiveness of inexpensive, nutrient-poor, ultra-processed food put children from poor families at greater risk of overweight and undernutrition. For most children, food insecurity is experienced as poor-quality food rather than a lack of food, but children miss meals for a number of reasons. In this context, increasing income support to families with children is a key policy response.

However, food insecurity is also prevalent above Canada's official poverty line, the Market Basket Measure. The rate of children's food insecurity is more closely aligned to the poverty level measured by a low-income threshold of 60 per cent of the median income. For instance, according to UNICEF Report Card 18, 44 per cent of children in lone parent families live in poverty by this measure: similar to the rate of food insecurity for these families.

Yet there is no stereotypical hungry child, confirmed by evidence and reported in the federal government's report on its 2023 public consultation on school food. One-third of students in elementary schools and two-thirds of students in secondary schools do not eat a nutritious breakfast before school. This is due to a range of conditions including food insecurity, family schedules, early school start and bus times, and adolescent development factors. In 2019, 33.2 per cent of children in Canada reported feeling hungry when arriving at school, every day or almost every day, above the OECD average of 27.4 per cent.² One in four children with parents having a high level of education (a marker of higher income) reported often feeling hungry when arriving at school (OECD, 2023). The diet quality of students across the socio-economic spectrum is poor. Only about one-third of children between ages 4 and 13 eat five or more servings of vegetables and fruit daily. About one-quarter of children's calorie intake is from food products not recommended in Canada's Food Guide (this number is even higher in Indigenous communities because of the lack of availability of affordable, nutritious food).

Similarly, there is no distinct age at which children would not benefit from a school food program. While some programs skew to access by primary age children, often due to limited resources and their sensitive developmental stage, the school environment constitutes a powerful influence on adolescent eating behaviours. With ease of access to fast, cheap, ultra-processed foods around many schools, adolescents face an array of unhealthy food choices in their everyday environments. This is compounded by their high rates of exposure to food marketing techniques promoting unhealthy food choices, at a time of life when the brain is especially vulnerable to food marketing messages. Many adolescents have diets high in sugar and salt, along with unhealthy dietary habits that include skipping meals and snacking. All of these factors are associated with obesity and overweight.

Despite the widespread deprivation of enough nutritious food, only one in five children currently accesses a school food program in Canada. Participation rates within provinces and territories vary widely, resulting in inequitable access. Demand for these programs exceeds their availability. Canada is the only G7 country and one of the only OECD countries without a national approach to a school food program. Globally, nearly every country (9 in ten) has a school health and nutrition program and 1 in 2 primary schoolchildren receives school meals (388 million children in 161 countries). In high-income countries, school feeding programmes reach on average 78 per cent of children in elementary

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 'OECD Child Well-Being Portal', <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/child-well-being/data/dashboard/>

school, making them one of the most widely implemented public policies and the world's most extensive safety net.

A Healthy Meal for Every Child, Every School Day

Canada has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, assuming the legal duty to guarantee to every child the right to adequate food as well as interdependent rights including non-discrimination, education, healthy development, an adequate standard of living and participation. Article 24 of the Convention articulates children's right to "the provision of adequate nutritious foods". Children and their families have the right to social protection policies that provide adequate and inclusive income support through cash transfers and parental leave, and universal public services including quality childcare.

Increasingly, school food is regarded by governments as part of a child policy package guarantee (e.g., the European Union Child Guarantee). Social protection programs alone are not enough to ensure that children have access to nutritious diets. Social protection programs that are combined with evidence-based, complementary interventions, such as "in kind" school food and nutrition policies, can lead to improved nutrition for children. UNICEF promotes child-sensitive social protection systems, with an overall aim to address child poverty and promote child development. There is evidence that school food programs can improve nutrition outcomes for school-age children and adolescents. In fact, they are one of the smartest, most feasible and effective investments governments can make in the education, health and well-being of their children and in the future of their nations. School food programs also improve the cost-effectiveness and policy coherence of other investments, policies and programs of national interest including education, health and skills development.

What Impact will a Universal School Food Program(s) Have?

Household food insecurity has detrimental effects on children's health and development, including malnutrition, developmental delays, increased hospitalizations, higher risk of chronic conditions including cardiovascular disease and diabetes, reduced cognitive ability and psychosocial dysfunction. These impacts increase children's risk of poor school readiness, poor school attendance and performance, lifelong health disparities and chronic poverty.

Global evidence demonstrates that school food programs are an important social protection policy that supports the fulfilment of children's rights and a range of positive child outcomes.³ They can yield a triple dividend by improving the well-being of children today, their adulthood, and the generation of children to come. Healthy, well-nourished, happy children and adolescents learn better and are more likely to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. A 2021 meta-analysis of school food programs in OECD countries (which did not include Canada) found positive associations between student participation in school food programs and diet quality, food security and academic performance. Improving children's access to nutritious food has widespread benefits to children's physical health, mental health, future eating habits, behaviour, and school performance. School health and nutrition contributes to the

³ *State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020 | World Food Programme*. (2021, February 24). <https://www.wfp.org/publications/state-school-feeding-worldwide-2020>

fulfillment of Canada’s children’s rights obligations and to its goals for well-being, inclusion and gender equality, environmental sustainability, economic development and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

While not an income security policy, there is some evidence from international school food studies that school food programs can reduce children’s food insecurity to at least some extent, among other benefits. According to one meta-analysis of school food programs in wealthy countries⁸, the most direct benefit of school meals is in terms of children’s nutrition and food security. The most substantial experimental study researchers found on the positive impact of school food programs on food insecurity in an EU country was undertaken in Greece (Dalma et al., 2020; Petralias et al., 2016). At the start of the program, 64.2 per cent of children experienced food insecurity and 26.9 per cent experienced hunger. During the program, food insecurity dropped by a statistically significant 6.5 per cent, and for each additional month of participation the odds of reducing food insecurity increased by 6.3 per cent, with a more important effect among poor students and those who participated for a longer period in the programme (Petralias et al., 2016). In Finland, there are also indirect indications of the importance of school meals in terms of food sufficiency (Kangas, 2020, p. 10): ‘On Mondays, the consumption of food can be 20 per cent more than on other weekdays—which may indicate that during the weekend children in low-income families may not get enough food’. Qualitative research in Portugal also highlights the importance of school food programs in balancing food budgets among low-income families and their role in poverty alleviation (Cardoso et al., 2019). Studies have found that school food programs can take some pressure off family incomes and save families around \$200 CND every month (USA) and 2.8 per cent of their income annually (Sweden). Canadian research has found that implementing a national program covering breakfast and lunch would save household budgets **\$130 to \$190 a month per child** for most families. For households with two children this totals \$3,780 in savings per school year.

The impacts of school food investment must achieve substantive equity for Indigenous children, and priority is given to Indigenous communities in recent funding commitments by the federal government and by some provincial governments such as Manitoba, with investments tailored to address their specific food security challenges. Collaboration among provinces, territories, the federal government and Indigenous partners will be essential to ensure culturally appropriate solutions.

The beneficial impacts of universal access to free school food are also well-recognized by young people. UNICEF Canada has polled young U-Reporters on their views about school food programs through U-Report Canada (<https://canada-en.ureport.in/>). The results ([U-Report Canada \(ureport.in\)](https://canada-en.ureport.in/)) revealed important aspects of what a successful school food program should include. Most of the young people (64 per cent) who took the poll did not have a meal program in their school. A significant majority (70 per cent) said they believed students in their schools would benefit from a school food program, and most (69 per cent) said they would use a school food program if they had access to it. Six percent of respondents said they wouldn’t use the program because they’d be worried about what other students would think – a small but important reminder that school food programs should be universal in design to avoid the stigma that can be attached to selective or targeted food programs. In other engagements with young people, UNICEF Canada heard that they place great importance on access to a variety of food, including “comfort” food and culturally appropriate foods. “Junk” food has a place within an overall nutritional diet. Hearing young people’s perspectives is crucial to the design of effective school food programs and policies.

Legislating a Guarantee of School Days Free from Hunger

A school food program can be viewed as an important part of a number of systems that cross federal boundaries in Canada with shared aims of educating people, optimizing their health and preventing material deprivation. The interdependencies between education, nutrition and health call for a more integrated, systems approach and coordinated action to bring effective policies and programmes to scale. Legislation should provide governments and other partners with a framework to increase and better align investments and efforts to bring proven interventions to scale and respond to children's holistic rights and needs. School food must be implemented universally and sustained by political and financial commitments. To that end, legislation is a critical part of the infrastructure for children along with investments, sectoral policies and community-based programs.

Federal legislation should include these minimum provisions:

- Explicitly recall Canada's obligations to fulfil children's rights, a shared duty among all levels of government. The best interests of the child should be a guiding principle and given priority among other considerations.
- Incorporate the core principles for school food programs developed by the Coalition for Healthy School Food: chief among them the principle of universal access by every child. Universality is an important principle for many reasons: it ensures equitable and dignified access for children, without stigma; it is consistent with the aim of other social protection benefits; and it is efficient (while targeting is costly and inaccurate considering the diverse population of children who would benefit).
- Regulate the marketing of foods and beverages to children in and around schools, as recommended to Canada by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child pursuant to Canada's implement of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Sustain and grow a federal investment toward a universal school food program in partnership with provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments.
- Support the development of Indigenous-led and -oriented school food programs and advance Indigenous food systems and sovereignty.
- Engage young people in the design of school food programs that meet their needs and their right to participate in decisions affecting them.
- Sustain Canada's participation in the Global School Meals Coalition in 2022 — an initiative of governments and diverse partners to improve and scale up food and education systems and develop a measurement framework and global evidence database.

The 2019 Global Survey of School Meal Programs found that 80 per cent of 85 respondent countries had a national policy on school feeding. The proportion of high-income countries with an established policy framework for school food increased from 79 per cent in 2013 to 84 per cent in 2020. Growing evidence documenting the return on investment from school food programs may have contributed to increased policy commitment for school food around the world. Policy and legislation have resulted in

an increase in domestic financing for, and the number of schoolchildren covered by, school food programs in these countries.

About UNICEF Canada

UNICEF is the world's farthest-reaching humanitarian organization for children. With a presence in more than 190 countries and territories, we work tirelessly in the world's most complex situations to bring life-saving aid and long-term support to children and their families. From our role as the world's largest provider of vaccines, to supporting child health, nutrition and education, we are determined to create a better world for every child. And we won't give up.

UNICEF Canada works to address and advance children's rights in Canada and around the world. Our life-saving work for every child is funded entirely through voluntary donations. Visit unicef.ca and follow us on Facebook, X/Twitter and Instagram to learn more.

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