

Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2024 Federal Budget

**Institute for Public Education/British Columbia
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Submission to the Federal Budget 2024 Consultation
Institute for Public Education, British Columbia

Introduction to Institute for Public Education BC

The Institute for Public Education/BC is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing analysis, information and leadership on public education issues. IPE/BC believes that a quality, accessible, inclusive public education system is the cornerstone of a strong democracy. While we recognize that, in Canada, the responsibility for public education rests with the provinces, we firmly believe that a national, universal, culturally sensitive and well-funded school food program is in the best interests of all Canadians.

We applaud the federal government's commitment to putting a school food program in place, however we are concerned that, since the commitment was first made in 2019, the program has not yet been established, nor has a schedule for its implementation been announced.

IPE/BC's Recommendation

That the government ensure that the necessary funding for a universal national school food program is included in the 2024 budget and that the implementation of the program be an urgent federal priority for the upcoming budget year.

Increasing food insecurity

It's clear that food insecurity is a growing concern for an increasing number of Canadians. The skyrocketing price of groceries, including very basic healthy food options, is leaving many children and their families/caregivers in precarious circumstances. Food Banks Canada reports a nearly eighty percent increase in food bank usage between March 2019 and March 2023. In the month of March 2023 alone, there were nearly 2 million food bank visits across the country with a third of those being children.¹ To be clear, IPE/BC believes that a universal school food program is just one aspect of addressing child and family/caregiver poverty, but a very important step to take.

Impact of hunger on child and youth health and learning

It stands to reason that, for people of all ages, when we're experiencing hunger, it's very difficult to fully concentrate on anything else. However, for children and youth, who are dependent on healthy food to obtain the nutrients necessary for healthy growth and development, the impact is pronounced and can affect energy levels, memory, problem solving skills, creativity and concentration, all necessary for successful academic and social skill development.²

¹ Food Banks Canada, Hunger Count- Overall findings, 2023,

² The Coalition for Healthy School Food School Food Programs Contribute to Student Learning and Success at School, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>

Additionally, research has revealed that school food programs, with a focus on healthy food choices, can have a positive impact on students' mental health, behaviour and social interactions.³

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Attempts to meet the need with stop gap measures

Teachers, educational assistants and principals, knowing the impact of hunger on student well-being, frequently try to alleviate that hunger with snack food they've purchased out of their own pockets. Additionally, some schools keep "emergency" food items on hand for hungry children and youth.^{5 6 7} However, as compassionate and well-intentioned as this practice is, it is not a fair or reasonable responsibility to place on school staff nor a sustainable practice, especially in light of growing food insecurity in our country. Ensuring that children and youth are not hampered in their growth and development by prevailing food insecurity and hunger is a responsibility that we should all share as Canadians and an imperative our government needs to address.

Where Canada Stands

According to the National Healthy School Coalition, over 388 million children in at least 161 countries around the world receive free or subsidized meals at school. There is a great deal for Canada to learn from these countries, many of which have had universal school meal programs for decades.⁸ Canada has the means to prioritize the health and well-being of children and youth by putting a stable, universal program in place in all schools throughout the country without further delay. In fact, UNICEF Canada, in its December 2023 report, "Child Poverty in Canada; Let's Finish This" pointed to the fact that Canada has the resources to address child poverty. It included a call for Canada to "provide every school child with healthy food at school, every school day."⁹

Acting on the Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, to which Canada became a signatory in 2015, include the following calls to action:

³ Quamel Hanks, School Meal Participation Contributes to Positive Mental Health Outcomes, Food Research and Action Center, <https://frac.org/blog/school-meal-participation-contributes-positive-mental-health-outcomes>

⁴ The Connections Between Food Insecurity, the Federal Nutrition Programs and Student Behaviour, Food Research and Action Center, 2018, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfast-for-behavior.pdf>

⁵ Gerry Bellet, Vancouver Sun, Adopt a School-Teacher Feeding Hungry Kids at Her Own Expense, December 2021, <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/local-news/adopt-a-school-teacher-feeding-hungry-kids-at-her-own-expense>

⁶ Cailynn Klingbell, Edmonton Journal, Many Alberta Teachers Give Emergency Food to Hungry Students, Survey Says, [Many Alberta teachers give 'emergency food' to hungry students, survey says | Edmonton Journal](https://www.edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/many-alberta-teachers-give-emergency-food-to-hungry-students-survey-says)

⁷ Josh Hoffman, School Staff Struggle to Fill Gaps as More Students Show Up Hungry, Advocates Say, CBC Nova Scotia, January 24, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/school-staff-struggling-more-students-hungry-1.7093054>

⁸ The Coalition for Healthy School Food, School Food Programs Around the World, Lessons for Canada, <https://www.healthyschoolfood.ca/school-food-programs-around-the-world>

⁹ Child Poverty in Canada; Let's Finish This, UNICEF Canada, Canadian Companion to UNICEF Poverty Report Card 18, <https://www.unicef.ca/sites/default/files/2023-12/UNICEFReportCard18CanadianCompanion.pdf>

- end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
- ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

The Canadian government regularly reviews and reports on its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals in the Canadian Indicator Framework to Sustainable Development Goals and has described the goals as “a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere.”¹⁰ To that end, a universal school food program would be a significant step in demonstrating action towards meeting these goals.

The importance of a universality

In calling for a federal universal school food program, UNICEF Canada had this to say:

“Schools aren’t just teaching students grammar and arithmetic. They’re also teaching the next generation about what it means to live in our society. Apart from maybe universal healthcare, public schools are the single most important equity-supporting institutions we’ve got. What we make time for in our schools shows students what it is we value. If healthy, culturally-appropriate, environmentally-responsible, shared mealtimes are made a part of their school day, they’re all the more likely to make them a part of their lives as well.”¹¹

Universal food programs provide the opportunity for all students to learn about food and nutrition literacy, the importance of healthy food choices, the role of food in community and culture, and the positive impact of taking time to share in meals together. By providing school meals only to those students whose families/caregivers are not able to afford sufficient nutritious food, these benefits are lost to the student population as a whole. Additionally, while there may be well-intention efforts to eliminate stigma arising from a school food program based on socio-economic factors, the identification of those who “qualify” for such a program ensures stigma is inevitable.¹²

Making a National School Food Program an Urgent Priority

IPE/BC is dedicated to quality, accessible, inclusive and well-supported public education and believes that a universal national school food program is a necessary support for the children and youth in our public schools. We have been heartened by the level of engagement in the recent federal consultations on the matter and the introduction of Bill C-322, intended to ensure that a framework for the program is established. However, our organization is very concerned with the delays in acting on the commitment to put such a programme in place. Each year that the program is delayed is another year in which the health, well-being and achievement of many children throughout the country is being adversely affected and another year in which the benefits of a

¹⁰ Canadian Indicator Framework for Sustainable Development Goals Data Hub, <https://sdgcif-data-canada-oddic-donnee.github.io/>

¹¹ Amberley T. Ruetz and Terrance Hamilton, Universal School Meals: Putting Child Health Back on the Front Foot, UNICEF Canada, December 15, 2022, <https://www.unicef.ca/en/blog/universal-school-meals-putting-child-health-back-front-foot>

¹² Arrell Food Institute, Establishing a National School Food Program In Canada, October 19, 2023, <https://arrellfoodinstitute.ca/establishing-a-national-school-food-program-in-canada/>

universal school food program are not being realized. We urge the government to ensure that the funding needed to move ahead quickly on this urgent priority is in place in the 2024 federal budget.

Respectfully submitted by the Institute for Public Education/ British Columbia,

Dr. Steve Cardwell, Chairperson