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September 21, 2023

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland, Deputy Prime Minister
Ministry of Finance
Email: chrystia.freeland@fin.gc.ca

The Honourable Jenna Sudds
Ministry of Families, Children and Social Development
Email: jenna.sudds@parl.gc.ca

The Honourable Lawrence MacAulay
Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food
Email: lawrence.macaulay@parl.gc.ca

The Honourable Jean-Yves Duclos
Ministry of Public Services and Procurement
Email: jean-yves.duclos@parl.gc.ca

Dear Honourable Federal Ministers Freeland, Sudds, MacAulay and Duclos:

Investing in a Sustainable Federal School Food Policy

I am writing on behalf of the Windsor-Essex County Board of Health. As the federal government prepares to release a National School Food Policy and invest in programs across the country, we wish to reiterate the call for the development of a universal, cost-shared school food program for Canada and share our concerns about the current state of student nutrition programs in Ontario and our region.

The Government of Canada has an opportunity to advance the health and well-being of all Canadian children and lay the basis for long-term health by including an investment in school food access in the Budget 2024. We applaud the Government's commitments to healthy school food in the 2021 Liberal Party Platform and urge you to act on those commitments in the next budget cycle.

Recommended actions to fulfill commitments to healthy school food in the Budget 2024:

The current state of school food programs across Canada is a patchwork with limited resources. While many schools in Ontario do have student nutrition programs partially funded by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, a significant investment from the federal government would allow for expansion of services and address existing gaps. The current reliance on fundraising, volunteers, and donations is inconsistent, unsustainable, and puts schools who most need the support at a significant disadvantage. (Ref: 1,2)

The Windsor-Essex County Board of Health supports the following recommendations proposed by the Canadian Coalition for Healthy School Food:

1. Allocate \$1 billion over five years in Budget 2024 to establish a National School Nutritious Meal Program as a key element of the evolving Food Policy for Canada, with \$200 million per year to contribute to provinces, territories and First Nation, Métis, and Inuit partners to fund their school food programs.
2. Enter into immediate discussions with Indigenous leaders to negotiate agreements for the creation and/or enhancement of permanent independent distinctions based First Nation, Métis, and Inuit school meal programs.
3. Create a dedicated school food infrastructure fund to provide schools with facilities and equipment for food production and preparation, so they can reliably and efficiently serve nutritious food in adequate volumes.

In addition, school food programs should be designed to *(Ref: 3)*:

- serve tasty, nourishing, culturally appropriate foods;
- ensure that ALL students in a school can access the program in a non-stigmatizing manner;
- be a cost-shared model, including federal support;
- be flexible and locally adapted to the context of the school and region, including commitment to Indigenous control over programs for Indigenous students;
- support Canadian farmers and local food producers;
- provide conflict of interest safeguards that prevent programs from marketing to children;
- promote food literacy.

The benefits of funding a sustainable food school program in Canada

Through our work supporting the 93 OSNP-led school food programs in Windsor-Essex County, we have seen first-hand the importance of school food to our students' health and wellbeing, including their academic success and the development of lifelong eating habits. As rising costs of food stretch school food program budgets, and leave many families struggling to make ends meet, the importance of federal investments in student nutrition programming cannot be overstated.

Research has long found school meals to be one of the most successful drivers of improved health, education, and well-being in children of all ages. 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.

School food programs offer many academic and nutritional benefits and should be implemented along with additional income supports to reduce health inequities and food insecurity for families across Canada. School food policy and programs alone cannot alleviate poverty and food insecurity *(Ref: 1,2)*. School food programs can, however, play an important role in improving nutrition intake, supporting healthy growth and development, supporting academic success, attendance, and educational attainment, and improving mental health and well-being *(Ref: 4)*.

The demand for comprehensive school food programs in Windsor and Essex County (WEC) and Ontario is high.

Based on the Canadian Health Survey of Children and Youth (CHSCY), **12.9%** of children aged 1 to 17 years old in WEC lived in food-insecure households in 2019 (5). Nationally, the cost of food purchased from Canadian stores rose 9.8% in 2022, the fastest rate since 1981 (+12.0%), after rising 2.2% in 2021 (*Ref: 6*). While many Canadians are feeling the effects of inflation and rising food costs, those living in food-insecure households are particularly vulnerable, as after paying for housing (i.e., rent or mortgage), many have little funds available for all other necessities including hydro, water, clothing and food.

Currently across Ontario, many school programs are unable to meet current demands, and as a result, these programs are left with the difficult decision of either limiting food provided or shutting down completely before the end of the school year. Many programs have been strained by limited increases to provincial funding since 2014, rising food costs, and increased demand. Locally, only \$0.65 per student per week is available through the OSNP food delivery model. This equates to 1.5 servings of fresh produce a week per student, which is far below minimum nutrition requirements for growth and development. Schools who have not previously had a school nutrition program are seeing a demand and there are no funds to support new programs. In addition, many elementary schools do not have adequate facilities to allow safe food handling and production of onsite food for meal/snack programs, or for hands-on food literacy learning opportunities for students.

The Windsor-Essex County Board of Health stands alongside other Ontario Boards of Health, School Boards, Municipalities, and other government agencies and organizations in supporting the Coalition for Healthy School Food's vision that every school-aged child and youth has a nutritious meal or snack at school daily.

We urge the federal Ministries of Families, Children and Social Development and Agriculture and Agri-Food to continue your work towards a comprehensive, cost-shared, universally accessible National School Food Policy and national school nutritious meal program with provinces, territories, municipalities, Indigenous partners, and stakeholders (*Ref: 7*). Every investment in children and youth counts.

Sincerely,

Sincerely,

Fabio Costante, Board of Health Chair

Dr. Kenneth Blanchette, CEO

CC:

- Ontario Boards of Health
- Local School Board Directors of Education
- Local MPPs, MPs

References

1. [Open Letter: Stop headlining the pan-Canadian school food policy as a way to reduce food insecurity among children](#). Dec 9, 2022.
2. [Ontario Dietitians on Public Health, Position Statement and Recommendations on Response to Food Insecurity](#). Dec, 2020.
3. [Coalition for Healthy School Food](#). Guiding Principles. 2022.
4. [Hernandez, Kimberley & Engler-Stringer, Rachel & Kirk, Sara & Wittman, Hannah & McNicholl, Sasha. \(2018\). The case for a Canadian national school food program](#).
5. Public Health Ontario. (2023). [Food Insecurity among Children using the Canadian Health Survey of Children and Youth](#).
6. Statistics Canada. (2023). [Consumer Price Index: Annual review, 2022](#).
7. [Prime Minister Mandate Letters, 2021](#).