



Breakfast Club of Canada

Since 1994, the Breakfast Club of Canada has been supporting the implementation and development of high-impact breakfast programs in schools from coast-to-coast-to-coast. Today, the Club and its school community partners support more than 3,300 school breakfast programs, reaching over 500,000 students every day, including 41,000 students in schools that have a predominantly Indigenous student population.

We work with partners from all sectors to deliver a high-quality national school food program. Together, we create a nurturing environment, where children and youth can flourish.

Challenges to good nutrition in Canadian Children

Nutrition plays a key role in overall health, wellbeing, and learning capacities of children and youth. It is well known that a healthy and nutritious diet is important to support optimal growth and development, to prevent various physical and mental health conditions, and to enhance cognitive skills like concentration and memory, which are essential to learning. Yet many Canadian children and youth are at risk for inadequate food or nutrient intake.

Numerous children and youth do not follow government dietary guidelines. In fact, 65 percent do not consume the recommended servings of vegetables and fruit per day, one-third consume food that are not included in the Canadian Food Guide on a daily basis, and 70 percent consume fast foods at least once per week. In addition, 30 percent of children and youth are overweight or obese. In First Nations and Inuit communities, this number increases to 58 percent and 50 percent, respectively.

Moreover, nearly 2 million Canadian children and youth, or over one in three, are at risk of going to school on an empty stomach. Studies have found that, depending on age and sex, between 25 percent and 55 percent of students do not eat breakfast regularly. This figure is striking considering the evidence that children and youth who consume breakfast are more likely to have higher nutrient intakes, more healthful and adequate diets, enhanced cognitive and academic performance and improved psychosocial functioning.



Furthermore, 17 percent of Canadian children and youth live in food insecure households. Consequently, 1.2 million children and youth live in households that have a limited or uncertain access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs. Nunavut and the Northwest Territories have the highest prevalence of children living in food-insecure households at 79 percent and 30 percent, respectively. Household food insecurity rates are also 3 to 5 times higher in First Nations communities than the general Canadian population. Children and youth in food insecure households are more likely to have poor diets, with low intakes of milk products, fruits, and vegetables, as well as mental health challenges, such as hyperactivity and inattention.

The Need for A National School Nutritious Meal Program

Because children and youth consume a significant proportion of their daily nutrient intake while in school, schools represent an ideal setting for interventions that establish and promote good nutrition and support overall health. We believe that a National School Nutritious Meal Program is the most effective intervention to address the challenges to good nutrition in Canadian children by ensuring that all children and youth have access to healthy foods, promoting good nutrition and health habits and supporting optimal health outcomes.

In the presence of strong nutrition standards, school meal programs are associated with improvement in children and youth's nutrient intakes and overall diets. For instance, studies have found that participation in school meal programs is associated with higher vitamin intakes, increased vegetable and fruit consumption and lower consumption of calories from fat. This effect can be direct, through the provision of healthy foods, or indirect, as that healthy school meal consumption is also associated with decreased intake of less healthy foods outside of school. Several studies found a potential reduction in obesity risk associated with universal school meal programs.

The benefits of school meal programs go beyond the health of children and youth. Academic performance may also be positively influenced by universal school meal programs. School meal programs are associated with increased test grades, attendance, and punctuality. In a few studies, students perceived that eating breakfast or a snack in school increased their energy and ability to pay attention. Studies have also found that universal school meal programs are associated with increased psychosocial functioning in regard to depression and anxiety and reductions in students' behavioral incidents and suspensions.



School meal programs may also positively influence the school climate. A few qualitative studies have found that universal school meal programs increase the sense of community in the school, lead to interactions between students and staff members that otherwise may not have happened and contribute to a positive school culture. Positive school climates support children and youth's emotional wellbeing.

Although the benefits of school meal programs may be particularly more significant for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the population typically targeted by such programs, many studies found that universal school meal programs also benefit students from advantaged backgrounds.

The Current School Nutrition Ecosystem in Canada

The current school nutrition landscape in Canada is complex and dynamic. Municipal, provincial, and territorial governments, a few federal government departments and agencies, and non-governmental organizations at all levels support an incoherent patchwork of programs across Canada. During the 2018-2019 school year, an estimated minimum of 35 percent of JK-12 schools provided free breakfasts, snacks, and/or lunches to a minimum of 1,018,323 Canadian students.

As there is no concerted approach to school nutrition in the country, programs operate under varying mandates and models, with multiple and overlapping sources of funding and limited coordination and monitoring. In the absence of sufficient funding, school meal programs in Canada are implemented primarily in schools in lower socio-economic contexts, limiting their reach and benefits to a small portion of the student population.

A nationally harmonized, comprehensive, and properly funded school meal program is necessary to effectively address the challenges to good nutrition and support positive health outcomes for *all* children and youth. A properly funded and coordinated National School Nutritious Meal Program would:

- Leverage current resources invested by stakeholders and strengthen the existing student nutrition ecosystem, meeting community needs more efficiently.
- Support access to healthy foods and promote good nutrition.
- Achieve national universality.
- Ensure consistent and standardized monitoring and evaluation.



- Address gaps in research on school nutrition programs in Canada to inform policymaking and practices.
- Build capacity, invest in local food infrastructure, and replicate promising practices across Canada.
- Incorporate the sharing of knowledge and best practices.

Conclusion

As we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now more important than ever to develop a National School Nutritious Meal Program. Such a program would support all students across the country and act on important areas of children's well-being, including nutrition, health, and education, as well as support Indigenous communities. We must work collectively to ensure that they have access to the nutritious food they need to thrive

The evidence is compelling. School meal programs, that incorporate strong nutrition standards, have a great potential to improve nutrition and health in children and youth, increase academic performance, and stimulate economic activity in the agriculture and agri-food sectors. Children are our future, and we are responsible for supporting their development.

We would be happy to provide testimony to the committee and share our knowledge and expertise on school nutrition.

Contact

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*Please note that a thorough appendix equipped with all relevant references can be made available upon request.