

A national school food program for all ^[1]

Towards a social policy legacy for Canada

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Excerpted from article:

In the 1930s and 1940s, the United States, the UK, and many other countries developed a National School Lunch Program in response to the Great Depression—the biggest economic crisis of the last century—however, Canada did not choose this path. In the spirit of building back better in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have the opportunity to create a social policy legacy for Canada: a world-class, universal, healthy school meal program for all children and youth. We should not let this moment pass us by.

What does school food look like in Canada?

When it comes to national school lunch programs, Canada is an outlier. Internationally, school meals are the norm: 83% of all countries provide free or subsidized school meals, according to the World Food Programme.

While over 35% of Canadian elementary and secondary schools offer one or more school food programs (breakfast, lunch and/ or snacks), most are only partially funded by provincial or territorial governments. The lack of coordinated and adequate funding inhibits universal access for all junior kindergarten to grade 12 students. School food programs in Canada are abysmally under-resourced by a patchwork of funders, including governments, and non-profit and for-profit organizations. In 2018/19, most provincial and territorial contributions only accounted for a small portion of resources required to provide meals to children and youth—an average of \$0.48 per student per school day. As a result, programs rely heavily on the goodwill of volunteers, who are often already busy teachers and parents from the school community juggling many responsibilities.

The (neoliberal) shifting of responsibilities for food provision and health promotion from governments to communities or individuals/ households also means that programs have to apply for funding every year and compete with other schools to support these programs. Program coordinators are not only tasked with preparing and buying food in the most cost-efficient ways possible but are also continuously seeking out charitable sources of funding to 36 sustain their programs. The reliance on volunteerism has depoliticized the problem of school food and nutrition, leaving the responsibility of such programs to the private realm and reinforcing short-term charitable responses. Systemic solutions for providing access to food and nutrition for all children and youth are required. In 2017, UNICEF raised the alarm about the state of child nutrition in Canada, ranking us 37 out of the 41 wealthiest nations for children's access to nutritious food; below the United States and just above Bulgaria. We can and we must do better.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: nutrition ^[4]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-development> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/family-policy>