



Opinion

Feed the children: Canada needs to sign on to Global School Meals Coalition

It's both a strategic mistake and a failure of leadership that the federal government hasn't yet advanced a school food program for young Canadians and signed on to an important and visionary world movement for school food.



There appears to be a troubling pattern where our government makes a global commitment to school food for children in other countries but is hypocritically silent domestically, write Amberley T. Ruetz and Debbie Field. *Pexels photograph by Katerina Holmes*

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Comment

Internationally, school food programs are one of the most successful drivers of improved health, education, and economic growth, and yet Canada is the only G7 country, and one of the only countries in the highly industrialized Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) without a nationally harmonized school food program.

Presently, all provincial/territorial governments, several municipal and federal government departments/agencies join non-governmental organizations in supporting an inconsistent patchwork of programs across Canada. The good news is that pre-COVID, these programs were in more than one-third of schools. The bad news is that without federal funding and guidelines, there will continue to be inequitable access to these free or significantly subsidized universal, health-promoting breakfast, snack, and lunch programs. In the 2019 budget, the federal government pledged it would "work with the provinces and territories towards the creation of a National School Food Program," yet more than two

years later, little progress has been made with zero dollars committed to date.

Flash forward to 2021, students in Canada are about to be left behind again. The federal government has yet to advance a school food program for all Canadian children and youth and sign on to an important and visionary world movement for school food.

This is both a strategic mistake and a failure of leadership.

Canadian school food advocates are concerned that the health and well-being of children in Canada are continuing to be ignored again by the Canadian government. In June 2021, a new international initiative, called "School Meals Coalition: Nutrition, Health and Education for Every Child," formed with the goals of: 1) re-establishing school meals programs lost during the pandemic; 2) expanding programming to "ensure that every child has the opportunity to receive a healthy, nutritious meal in school"; and 3) "supporting all countries to implement comprehensive programs that incorporate local, sustainable sourcing by 2030." More than 44 countries, including key G7 and OECD countries like Finland, France, the U.S., and Russia, have already signed on. There appears

to be a troubling pattern where our government makes a global commitment to school food for children in other countries—like in the World Bank's recent *The State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020* report—but is hypocritically silent domestically.

Unfortunately, none of this comes as a surprise.

More than a decade ago, a 2007 House of Commons Standing Committee report on child obesity raised the alarm about the pervasiveness of diet-related diseases. The report found that youth today may be the first generation to have sicker, shorter lives than their parents. Ten years later, very little has changed. In 2017, UNICEF ranked Canada 37th out of 41 wealthy nations for children's access to nutritious food. All children and youth in Canada, regardless of their parents' incomes, have not been meeting the Canada Food Guide's recommendations for decades. A universal, cost-shared, healthy school food program with federal funding and regulations should be implemented to help reverse these troubling trends. Other countries in the world, such as Germany, also have complex jurisdictional issues between their federal and state or provincial governments, but that

does not keep the majority of countries in the world from funding and expanding school food programs.

Leading medical voices are calling for government action. The Canadian Paediatric Society's January 2020 position paper *School nutrition: Support for providing healthy food and beverage choices in schools* points out that children spend most of their day at school and that "comprehensive school health is an internationally recognized framework for supporting improvements in students' educational outcomes while addressing school health in a planned, integrated, and holistic way." In January 2021, all the medical officers of health and directors of education in Ontario called on the premier of Ontario to increase commitments to school food, especially during COVID, and also asked that the province engage with federal partners to grow support for universal school food programs in their joint statement.

We urge Canada to become the global development leader it should be and invest in school food programs at home and in other countries. This means it is past time for Ottawa to also make the overdue domestic commitment to a universal, healthy school food program for all children. In the middle of an election in which the health and well-being of children and families is on everyone's minds as schools reopen this fall, now is a pivotal time for our government to take much-needed leadership by signing onto the School Meals Coalition's initiative; action that would also help to fulfill the federal government's 2019 budget commitment. COVID has demonstrated that school food programs are an essential service for the health and well-being of children. We urge Canada to act now.

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