



## ARRELL FOOD INSTITUTE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

### WHAT WE HEARD: MINISTER GOULD'S ROUNDTABLE ON THE NATIONAL SCHOOL FOOD POLICY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

Wednesday, January 18, 2023<sup>1</sup>

#### Executive Summary:

On January 18, 2023, 18 stakeholders spanning academia, school boards, school food and community food groups met with the Honourable Karina Gould, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, at the University of Guelph to discuss the development of National School Food Policy. The roundtable consultation was moderated by Dr. Evan Fraser, Director of Arrell Food Institute and Co-Chair of the Canadian Food Policy Council.

The conversation focused on four questions that are covered in detail in this report. The thematic areas covered topics included (1) who the program should serve and how to reduce stigma, (2) nutrition guidelines, (3) governance mechanisms and accountability measures, and (4) strategies for incorporating local and sustainable food.

#### The following are key insights from this roundtable:

1. Canada's School Food and Nutrition Program should serve all JK-12 students. Strategies for reducing stigma include making programs free, universally available, involve students, utilize a cashless system if applicable, and unify all school food offerings.
2. A National School Nutrition guide, curricular enhancements, adequate teacher training, and paid food service staff will be important component to enhance nutrition and promote lifelong healthy practices.
3. A dedicated Canadian School Food Evaluation Structure to conduct research, evaluation, and share best practices would help ensure the program is accountable and transparent. This body could be informed by a Canadian School Food Monitoring System based on harmonized metrics. Every province and territory should also convene a cross-Ministry working group to provide comprehensive support to programs and ensure there is adequate staffing and oversight to complete reporting requirements.
4. For a national school nutrition system to support local and sustainable food systems and economies, local food procurement targets and policy that enables culturally important practices like harvesting traditional country foods in Indigenous communities would be helpful. Dedicated funding to enhance schools' food service and other production and preparation equipment would also help enable these practices.

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**KEY QUESTIONS:**

**1. What approaches should the Federal Government consider, that would reduce the stigma, reduce financial barriers, and improve access to school food?**

The research is clear. School food programs targeted to serve disadvantaged students are stigmatizing and unsuccessful at reaching these students.<sup>2 3</sup> The need to develop good eating habits is not income-based.

**What's Needed:**

- **Programs for all students.** Students across the socio-economic spectrum struggle to eat healthfully, therefore, school food programs should be for all children. Compared to targeted programs, students eat more of the healthy food they are served in universal meal programs.<sup>4</sup> Student participation is also higher in universal free programs, particularly among disadvantaged students.<sup>5</sup>
- **Involve students.** Having students help in preparing and serving the food increases ownership of and pride in the program.
- **Unified school food offerings.** Integrate all meal and snack offerings into a single, all-at-once service area. Having some foods available for free in addition to snacks or meals available for purchase, so-called “competitive foods,” has been suggested to generate opportunities for status differentiation, since only children with money can purchase competitive foods.<sup>6</sup>
- **Cashless System.** Programs should adopt a cashless system to reduce stigma.<sup>7</sup>
  - **More research on ‘pay-what-you-can’ programs.** Proponents of pay-what-you-can school food programs claim that this model increases students’ access to food by reducing student stigma and financial barriers to participating; however, limited research has been conducted to confirm if this is the case. Stigma associated with the 3-tiered payment model (free, reduced-, and full-price) in the United States should be closely examined due to possible similar challenges

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<sup>2</sup> Leos-Urbel, J., Schwartz, A. E., Weinstein, M., & Corcoran, S. (2013). Not just for poor kids: The impact of universal free school breakfast on meal participation and student outcomes. *Economics of Education Review*, 36, 88–107.

<sup>3</sup> Raine, K., McIntyre, L., & Dayle, J. B. (2003). The failure of charitable school-and community-based nutrition programmes to feed hungry children. *Critical Public Health*, 13(2), 155–169.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen JFW, Richardson S, Parker E, Catalano P, Rimm EB. (2014). Impact of the new U.S. Department of Agriculture school meal standards on food selection, consumption, and waste. *Am J Prev Med*. 46(4):388–394. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2013.11.013

<sup>5</sup> Leos-Urbel et al., 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Bhatia, R., Jones, P., & Reicker, Z. (2011). Competitive foods, discrimination, and participation in the National School Lunch Program. *American Journal of Public Health*, 101(8), 1380–1386.

<sup>7</sup> James, J. (2012). Peer effects in free school meals: information or stigma? Working Paper No. 11, European University Institute, Max Weber Programme.

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associated with stigma and payment levels. More research is needed on how pay-what-you-can models impacts student participation and stigma.

- **More research on the relationship between the level of participation and stigma.** Ruetz & McKenna (2021) have noted that is unclear what level of student participation reduces stigma.<sup>8</sup> Programs with ‘universal access’ is not standardized in Canada, ranging from programs with only a handful of students participating but everyone *could* participate (universal access) to everyone participating (what Ruetz and McKenna distinguish as and call ‘universal participation’). More research to determine what level of student participation reduces stigma, program acceptance, and success is needed.<sup>9</sup>

***2. What sort of policies should be considered such that a school nutrition program for Canada would also enhance nutrition and promote lifelong healthy practices? How might we have both a national program in terms of nutritional guidelines while also allowing individual schools to adapt to such important issues as the need for culturally appropriate programming and dietary restrictions?***

A National School Food Policy and Program provides an excellent opportunity to update and strengthen the inclusion of food education in our curriculum. School food programs are an excellent conduit for children to learn about healthy eating in classes, develop preferences for healthy foods, and gain relevant skills such as food preparation, gardening, and appreciating food traditions and cultural foods. This is also an opportunity to model the 2019 Canada Food Guide’s recommendations about “how” to eat (e.g., being mindful of eating habits and taking time to eat, cooking more often, and involving others in planning, preparing, and eating meals, taking time to enjoy food, and acknowledging cultural and food traditions). Multi-component school food programs<sup>10</sup> that integrate additional activities such as hands-on learning opportunities have been found to also have the potential to address education outcomes, social inclusion, gender equity, food literacy, environmental sustainability, stewardship, and economic development.

**What’s Needed:**

- 1. National School Nutrition Guide.** The federal government could develop a nutrition guide for school food programs with specific recommendations based on the 2019 Food Guide.

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<sup>8</sup> Ruetz, A.T., & McKenna, M.L. (2021). “Characteristics of Canadian School Food Programs Funded by Provinces and Territories.” *Canadian Food Studies* 8.3. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v8i3.483>

<sup>9</sup> Ruetz, A.T., & McKenna, M.L. (2021).

<sup>10</sup> Oostindjer, M., Aschemann-Witzel, J., Wang, Q., Skuland, S. E., Egeland, B., Amdam, G. V., Schjøll, A., Pachucki, M. C., Rozin, P., Stein, J., Lengard Almlie, V., & Van Kleef, E. (2017). Are school meals a viable and sustainable tool to improve the healthiness and sustainability of children’s diet and food consumption? A cross-national comparative perspective. *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition*, 57(18), 3942–3958.

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2. **Culturally Appropriate Nutrition Guidelines.** The federal government should support the development of culturally appropriate nutrition guidelines and resources in partnership with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.
3. **Curricular Enhancements.** Develop curricula that promote the 2019 Canada Food Guide. The National School Food Policy could leverage existing Provincial and Territorial Comprehensive School Health approaches to student wellness/well-being and provide incentives to incorporate nutrition education into curriculum, policy, and practices.
4. **Adequate Teacher Training.** Teachers also need to be actively engaged and equipped to deliver food and nutrition-related curricula.
5. **Paid Food Service Staff/Chefs.** Food Service Staff can be agents of change within school nutrition programs, inspiring students to get involved with preparing food which increases food literacy and food skills and promotes lifelong healthy eating practices. Certified food service staff/chefs should be hired to ensure the sustainability and integrity of comprehensive local program operations.
6. **Infrastructure.** Schools need adequate infrastructure for teaching hands-on food literacy as part of a comprehensive school food and nutrition program, including an industrial kitchen, a cafeteria, a designated eating area, and a school garden.

***3. What sort of governance system will ensure that a National School Food Program is accountable and transparent?***

The federal government could build on existing school food policies to ensure that programs have strong public accountability measures in place including conflict of interest safeguards that prevent programs from marketing unhealthy food and specific products, as well as an evaluation framework. Corporate food donations and the use of branded products is of concern. On one hand, funneling rescued food into programs could potentially reinforce a charitable perception of programs that could increase stigma; on the other, there are innovative community programs repurposing rescued food into high quality products such as soups that could be used in programs. Standards for programs should be based on current models, and guidance materials should be created to ensure quality and accountability are maintained and programs continuously improve.

**What's Needed:**

- **Nationally Harmonized Standards.** The commitment of federal funds to supporting existing and new programs through harmonized nutrition standards — including

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appropriate safeguards to ensure the independent oversight of food procurement — that are fully implemented, monitored, and regularly evaluated.<sup>11</sup>

- **Establish a dedicated Canadian School Food Evaluation Structure.** Establish a national body to conduct research, evaluation, and share best practices to enhance program quality, and optimize resources.
- **Develop a Canadian School Food Monitoring System.** Create a Canadian School Food Program Database and Monitoring System by incorporating school food program-related questions into Statistics Canada’s Elementary-Secondary Education Survey and future iterations of the Canadian Community Health Surveys (CCHS).<sup>12</sup> The Canadian School Food Program Survey and the corresponding indicators developed by Amberley Ruetz and Mary McKenna, utilized in 2018/19 and 2020/21 surveys of the provinces and territories, is a helpful resource from which to start.
  - **Develop Harmonized Metrics.** School food program-related terminology and monitoring practices within and between provinces and territories is not always well defined, agreed upon, or utilized.<sup>13</sup> Consistent definitions, equitable funding, nationally harmonized metrics, and monitoring practices need to be established.<sup>14</sup> Establishing a standardized funding per meal (that is tied to yearly increases to reflect inflation) would be helpful, for example.
  - **Oversight.** Government-led data collection and verification.
- **Establish Provincial and Territorial Cross-Ministry Working Groups.** Every province and territory should convene a cross-Ministry working group to provide comprehensive support to school food programs.<sup>15</sup>
- **Staffing.** Adequate staffing to complete reporting requirements.

### ***4. How can we design a national school nutrition system such that it also helps to support local and sustainable food systems and economies?***

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<sup>11</sup> Haines, J., & Ruetz, A.T. (2020). Comprehensive, integrated food and nutrition programs in Canadian schools: A healthy and sustainable approach. Arrell Food Institute. [https://arrellfoodinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/SchoolFoodNutrition\\_Final\\_RS.pdf](https://arrellfoodinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/SchoolFoodNutrition_Final_RS.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Ruetz, A.T., & McKenna, M.L. (2021). “Characteristics of Canadian School Food Programs Funded by Provinces and Territories.” *Canadian Food Studies* 8.3. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v8i3.483>

<sup>13</sup> Ruetz, A.T., & McKenna, M.L. (2021).

<sup>14</sup> Ruetz, A.T., & McKenna, M.L. (2021).

<sup>15</sup> Haines, J., & Ruetz, A.T. (2020). Comprehensive, integrated food and nutrition programs in Canadian schools: A healthy and sustainable approach. Arrell Food Institute. [https://arrellfoodinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/SchoolFoodNutrition\\_Final\\_RS.pdf](https://arrellfoodinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/SchoolFoodNutrition_Final_RS.pdf)

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School food programs have the potential to support Canadian farmers and food businesses and contribute to Canada's agri-food sector.<sup>16 17</sup> Farm-to-school (F2S) approaches to school food endeavors to maximize local food through direct connections and short food value chains.<sup>18</sup> F2S is a promising practice, however, they require adequate staffing, infrastructure, and food procurement expertise. More solutions to last-mile food delivery are needed, along with infrastructure funding. Community-based food service models such as food hubs are one option for preparing meals for schools that also contribute to community economic development. Food packaging waste from single-serve products is also a concern; a problem resulting from inadequate staffing and school food infrastructure to prepare food from scratch.

### What's Needed:

- 1. Human Resources.** Food procurement, food management as well as certified food preparation staff with experience in the food service industry need to be hired to deliver programs.
- 2. Infrastructure.** Invest in local food system infrastructure and opportunities to build community capacity. School food infrastructure assessments will need to be conducted along with future capital planning to ensure the necessary updates are made to kitchens, cafeterias, teaching spaces, and eating areas.
- 3. Funding.** A portion of the funding could be used to create a school food infrastructure fund, akin to the Food Policy's local food infrastructure fund, to build and strengthen local food systems and economies.<sup>19</sup>
- 4. Local Food Procurement Targets.** Provinces and territories could set individualized local food procurement targets.<sup>20</sup>
- 5. Policy.** Ensure that current policies enable culturally important practices like harvesting traditional country foods in Indigenous communities.

### Policy and Program Options:

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<sup>16</sup> Ruetz, A., & Fraser, E. (2019, March 26). National School Food Program a short-term opportunity for jobs creation and economic growth. *CSPC*. <http://sciencepolicy.ca/posts/national-school-food-program-a-short-term-opportunity-for-jobs-creation-and-economic-growth-2/>

<sup>17</sup> Ruetz & Fraser, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Becot, F., Kolodinsky, J. M., Roche, E., Zipparo, A. E., Berlin, L., Buckwalter, E., & McLaughlin, J. (2017). Do farm-to-school programs create local economic impacts? *Quarter CHOICES*, 32(321), 2–9. Department of Economics.

<sup>19</sup> Ruetz, A. T. (2021, January 17). Canada's pandemic recovery urgently needs a national school meal program. *The Conversation Canada*. <https://theconversation.com/canadas-pandemic-recovery-urgently-needs-a-national-school-meal-program-174226>

<sup>20</sup> Ruetz, A. T., and McKenna, M. L. (2021). Characteristics of Canadian school food programs funded by provinces and territories. *Can. Food Stud.* 8, 70–106. doi: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v8i3.483

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- **Community Infrastructure.** Utilize existing community food infrastructure assets, i.e., kitchens in golf courses, community centres, hockey areas to centrally prepare food for schools when not in use. Consider requiring new community and supportive housing developments to include community kitchens, which could be leveraged to support school food programs.
- **School Food Supply Chains.** School districts that have developed their own school food supply chain (e.g., own their food transportation vehicles, employ food purchasing and distribution experts, and chefs) have reported cutting their meal costs in half, compared to relying on restaurant food suppliers. In an indigenous-run school district in Alberta, their previous model of a third-party-owned supply chain they stated was “antithetical to food sovereignty”.



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### **Annex A: Participants (note: participation in this event does not imply an endorsement of all elements of this brief report).**

- The Honourable Karina Gould, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development
- Lloyd Longfield, Member of Parliament, Guelph
- Dr. Charlotte Yates, President and Vice-Chancellor
- Dr. Evan Fraser, Director, Arrell Food Institute
- Mellissa McDonald, AVP, Government Relations and Community Engagement
- Tom Armitage, Operations Manager, Guelph Community Health Centre – The SEED
- Laura Arrell, Managing Director, The Arrell Family Foundation
- Dr. Alison Duncan, Professor, Human Health and Nutritional Sciences
- Mike Glazier, Director of Education, Wellington Catholic District School Board
- Dr. Jess Haines, Associate Professor, Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition
- Terrie Jarvis, Program Director, Food4Kids Guelph
- Brendan Johnson, Executive Director, Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition
- Brent McDonald, Executive Superintendent, Upper Grand District School Board
- Anita Macfarlane, Director, Children’s Foundation Food & Friends Program
- Dr. Kate Parizeau, Associate Professor, Geography, Environment & Geomatics
- Dr. Amberley Ruetz, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Saskatchewan & 2017 Arrell Scholar
- Rolie Srivastava, Director, Tablee des Chefs
- Teen Steeves, Food & Logistics Specialist, Student Nutrition Programs, YMCA Three Rivers
- Dr. Kathryn Walton, Assistant Professor, Family Relations & Applied Nutrition