

Department of Finance and Treasury Board
PO Box 187
Halifax NS B3J 2N3

Date: February 3, 2023

Dear Honorable Allan MacMaster,

Thank you for this opportunity to provide input into the development of Nova Scotia's 2023-2024 budget. The [Nova Scotia Advisory to the Coalition for Healthy School Food](#) (NS-CHSF) brings together stakeholders from regions and sectors across Nova Scotia to engage in dialogue, share resources, and collaborate on collective advocacy towards the development of a cost-shared pan-Canadian school food program that meets the diverse needs of Nova Scotia school communities based on the Coalition's [guiding principles](#). Nourish Nova Scotia hosts and coordinates the activities of the NS-CHSF.

This letter is to request the NS Government repeat their recently enhanced 2022-2023 investment of \$3.7M for healthy school food. In addition, investment is needed in infrastructure, human resources, broad consultation and ongoing engagement to prepare the NS education system to receive & implement federal funding for school food programs. Our province is an ideal site for the federal government to pilot a national school nutritious meal program, but provincial investment in these areas is required to ensure federal funding is leveraged and used effectively. Our current system lacks the infrastructure and human resources necessary to engage school communities to understand their needs and to implement flexible, locally adapted school food programs that meet those needs.

In the past year, the Auditor General's [Healthy Eating in Schools Report](#) and the [School Healthy Eating Programs report](#) from Public Health have exposed serious challenges and gaps in Nova Scotia's school food programming. We support all recommendations in both of these reports. We also want to emphasize the importance of using a community development approach to meet the varied & unique needs of school communities. Government cannot and should not be solely responsible for school food. In particular, stronger partnerships are needed with public health and the NS Coalition for Healthy School Food.

Specifically, we request funding to support the following activities:

1. Invest in school food service managers and finance clerks at the Family of School or other appropriate level to support procurement, overall coordination, training, and adherence to school food program standards. This is based on success from the [South Shore School Food Program](#). It is important to learn from this example, while at the same time recognizing that local flexibility and adaptability are crucial to success
2. Increase human resource capacity and improve pay and working conditions for school food service staff. Given the importance of creating healthy supportive school food environments, we need sufficient staff who are paid a living wage, as well as given sick

days and regular professional development. Reliance on other school staff and parent/community volunteers is not sustainable.

3. Better utilize existing human resources within Public Health and partner with the Coalition for Healthy School Food to build community partnerships, create supportive school food environments, implement evaluation frameworks, and support youth engagement.
4. Match federal school food infrastructure funding with provincial funds needed to deliver school food programs
5. In consultation with school communities, revise procurement policies and work with the Departments of Agriculture and Fisheries and Aquaculture to facilitate serving more local foods in schools
6. Undertake provincial consultation of school food stakeholders, including parents and non-profits, to ensure buy-in and assess program needs respecting the diverse nature of NS communities, with special consideration for BIPOC families and cultural appropriateness.

These recommendations compliment those made in the federal pre-budget submission by the national Coalition for Healthy School Food:

- Allocate \$1 billion over five years in Budget 2023 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.
- 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.
- Create a dedicated school food infrastructure fund to enhance food production and preparation equipment and facilities so they can reliably and efficiently serve healthy food in adequate volumes.

Today, we are urging you to invest in human resources and infrastructure to augment the federal commitment to help strengthen the health and wellbeing of all Nova Scotia children, and to build resilience into our food system.

MLAs and members of the Budget Committee, it is time to put forward the significance of a universal healthy school food program. We ask you to take action to advance this program in the upcoming 2023-2024 budget.

On behalf of the Nova Scotia Coalition for Healthy School Food,



Lindsay Corbin
Coordinator, NS Coalition for Healthy School Food

Supporting Rationale

Overall health and social benefits: Working with the federal government on the establishment of a universal, cost-shared National School Nutritious Meal Program along the lines set out in this submission will complement and enhance the existing network of diverse food programs across Nova Scotia. It will address critical gaps in school meal availability and ensure a more equitable and inclusive approach to meeting the food needs of school children. By ensuring improved access to adequate healthy food, the Program would begin to address critical problems associated with insufficient and non-nutritious food for school children, affecting their physical and mental health, risks of lifelong chronic diseases, school attendance and performance, self-esteem, and longer-term personal development and well-being. This is of great—and growing—significance because of the rising challenges faced by many school children and their families in ensuring reliable access to healthy foods and avoidance of over-reliance on unhealthy, cheap, ready-made, ultra-processed food.

Child nutrition needs and food insecurity: All of the children enrolled in elementary and secondary schools across NS need access to healthy food at school. School meal programs along the lines proposed here can take the pressure off family budgets and can play an especially critical role in supporting the most vulnerable children and youth living in food-insecure households who are unable to access healthy food. School meal programs are not a replacement for income security measures (e.g., minimum wage and child tax benefits), but indeed constitute a strategic and cost-effective complement to them. This is because they have a specific focus on the quality, adequacy and healthiness of food, are directly targeted to children, and serve as a highly efficient mode of delivery with a comprehensive and convenient reach to all children in local school settings.

Equity: There are currently serious social inequities in the access of school children to adequate and nutritious food. Significant food disparities face school children who live in low-income families, are from racialized populations, reside in rural and remote areas, and/or live in Indigenous communities. A universal and inclusive Program would ensure equitable access to healthy food and avoid the stigmatization of participants. It would have the added benefits of reducing burdens on families, especially mothers and single parents, who typically are responsible for daily meal preparation. Moreover, such a Program can be designed to promote and support culturally appropriate, locally-grown and sustainably-sourced and produced foods that reflect the values, traditions and circumstances of different communities and sectors of society.

Sustainable local food economies: Establishment of a universal school meal program along the lines proposed presents a significant opportunity for Nova Scotia to contribute to the development and viability of green and sustainable local economies. The approach is to: maximize reliance on local sources of foods; align school meals with the new dietary guidelines proposed in Canada's Food Guide; and encourage green infrastructure. This will encourage the development and viability of local food production and preparation businesses that will: generate meaningful local jobs and sources of community income; respect and support the use of

traditional and country foods in Indigenous and northern communities; and reinforce sustainable food production practices.

Avoidance of food and plastic waste: The proposed approach to the Program's design and implementation is to ensure the adoption of environmentally responsible practices that minimize food waste, eliminate use of plastics, and avoid other food preparation materials and processes that are harmful to the environment. In addition to limiting direct negative impacts on the environment, the Program will help strengthen knowledge and awareness of responsible approaches to food preparation and service, and promote the adoption of lifelong green practices.

Fulfillment of Government commitments: Nova Scotia's healthy school food program can support the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act's goal of enhanced awareness of, improved access to and increased production of local food to achieve 20% consumption of local food by 2030. Furthermore, it will support the Minister of Agriculture's mandate letter instructions to examine policies and programs to reduce costs of healthy foods for consumers, in acknowledgement of the barriers in cost to eating healthy; and create policy and infrastructure that support getting more local, healthy food into public institutions and facilitate the relationship between agriculture and these institutions.