



Feeding Students During COVID-19

A Report on the Impacts and
Needs of BC's School Food
Programs
Released: April 15, 2020



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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

On March 17th, 2020, in response to the rapidly accelerating global COVID-19 pandemic, the BC Ministry of Education announced the suspension of in-class instruction indefinitely across the province to protect the safety of students, staff and families. Since then, teachers, school administrators and families have been working tirelessly to navigate the complexity of online learning, and explore new ways of delivering school programs. The BC government has directed school districts to find solutions that ensure both the continuity of learning for students, as well as the continued provision of essential programs and services that many students and families rely on throughout the school year. School food programs – including breakfast, lunch, or snack programs that regularly provide students with access to food while at school – are included in this directive.

For many students, school food programs are an essential, irreplaceable food source and a valued part of the school day. Across the province, 75% of school districts have a meal program in at least one school ([Smith, 2018](#)). Many of these programs are run at classroom, school or school district levels, in partnership with local non-profit organizations, businesses, and school community members. With schools closed, these organizations and individuals are now redirecting their efforts and funds to ensure that their students have access to food during this time of heightened food insecurity. This report aims to capture these efforts and highlight the immediate impacts of COVID-19 school closures on school food programs across BC, as well as needs and opportunities for continued programming during this pandemic and beyond.

1.2 About the Coalition for Healthy School Food

The BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food (BC-CHSF) is a provincial network of school food stakeholders advocating for public investment in a universal, cost-shared, healthy school food program. Our 29 members include non-profit organizations, who manage or otherwise support school food programs across the province, as well as coalitions, food policy councils and provincial health and agriculture organizations.

The BC-CHSF is a provincial chapter of the [National Coalition for Healthy School Food](#) (CHSF) and is administered by the [Public Health Association of BC](#). All Coalition members across Canada and BC are committed to advocating for increased government investments in school food programs; this long-term vision informs members' short-term responses to COVID-19, as well as hope for beyond this crisis.

1.3 About the Survey

Given the unprecedented nature of this crisis, it is important to understand how school closures and social distancing measures are impacting existing school food programs across BC, as well as to understand the short-term needs of BC-CHSF members, school districts and other school food program coordinators. To capture this information, the BC-CHSF Steering Committee developed a short survey titled "**Survey of School Food Program Coordinators Re: School Closure Amidst COVID-19**". The survey was created by the BC-CHSF Steering Committee through Google Forms (*Appendix A: Survey Instrument*).

The survey was distributed to all 29 BC-CHSF member organizations, and shared through our members to network partners (school districts, non-profit organizations and individuals) who are engaged in school food programming across the province. This directed sample was intended to capture a quick snapshot of opportunities and threats to school food programs across the province and does not represent the full scope of experiences or needs of school food program coordinators in BC. Data was collected between March 19 and April 10, 2020, and analyzed by members of the BC-CHSF with support of volunteers from Public Health Association of BC (PHABC) and the National CHSF.

Due to the rapidly evolving COVID-19 emergency, and both provincial and federal government responses to it, survey respondents' situations may have already changed since submitting their feedback. Consequently, issues identified in our analysis of survey results may have already been addressed or may no longer be relevant under current circumstances. That being said, we believe it is important to capture and present the experiences of survey respondents during this extraordinary time, and to identify themes and recommendations to support the continuation of school food programs for students.

2.0 Survey Results

2.1 Respondent Demographics

This survey was completed by 33 respondents, representing seven school districts and 24 non-profit organizations from all corners of BC (Figure 1). Of the 33 respondents, all but two directly delivered school food programs prior to COVID-19; these programs range from breakfast, lunch, and snack programs, to education-based programs on healthy eating, school gardening, farming, cooking, and more (Figure 2). At the local and regional level, 30 respondents deliver programs to 294 schools, reaching 10,585 students. Provincially, one program provider reaches 1,451 schools and 586,300 students. There may be some overlap in students receiving food through separate programs; ten respondents indicated that they offer more than one food program through their school or organization. In addition, students may participate in programs delivered by one or more program providers, e.g. a weekly snack program through BC Agriculture in Classroom, and a daily lunch program delivered through their school PAC.

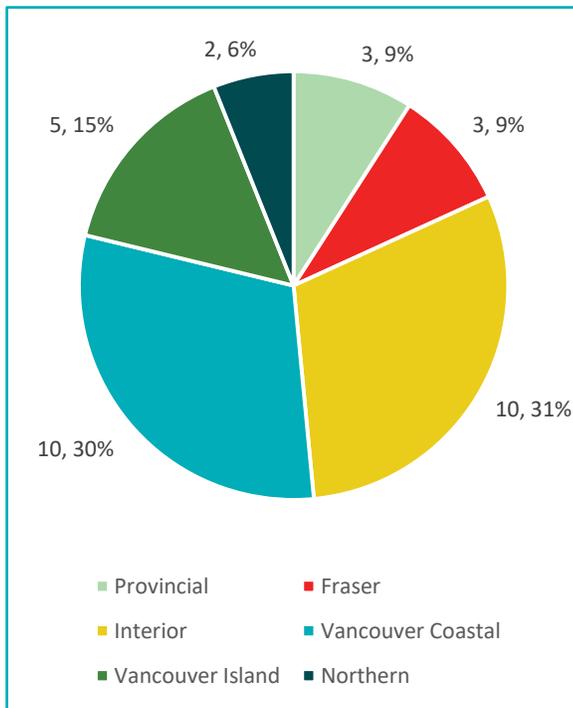


Figure 1: Survey Respondents by Health Authority Region

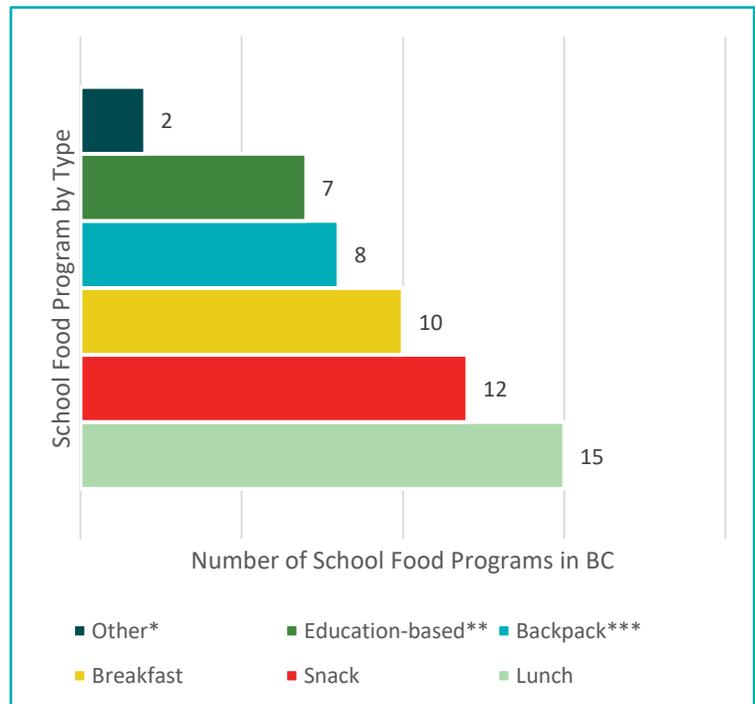


Figure 2: Types of school food programs delivered by respondents

* "other" refers to various indirect support for school food programs

**e.g. healthy eating, school garden, farm trip, food forest, cooking class, harvesting, chef training programs

***backpack programs provide students with non-perishable, easy-to-prepare foods over the weekend & holidays

2.2 Impacts on Programs

Survey question: *How are the food programs that you offer to school-aged children and youth being affected by school closures amidst COVID-19?*

All of the respondents indicated that their programs and services have been impacted as a result of COVID-19. Many organizations and school districts are struggling to operate at reduced capacity, while some have had to close down their operations entirely -- to the detriment of students, families and organizational staff (Figure 3).

Of the 29 applicable responses to this question, nine respondents (31%) indicated that they are reorganizing their mode of operation; for instance, by providing delivery and pick up options to students and families, or weekly deliveries of groceries to vulnerable families. Eight respondents (26%) indicated that they have had to cancel their school programs completely due to school closures. At the time of their response, four respondents (14%) were waiting to hear from their respective school districts or other stakeholders to inform decision making. Of note, some respondents expressed challenges navigating program delivery, given restrictions at school food preparation sites, commercial kitchens and farming sites.

Nine respondents (31%) explicitly expressed concern that a lack of school food programming will negatively impact students, families and organizational staff, and three noted an increased need for these types of services from families struggling to feed themselves and their children. One school district representative indicated that $\frac{1}{4}$ of their school population will be affected by the disruption to school food programs. Another respondent wrote that "our children will be hungry, no doubt about that. I'm most concerned that we will not have the financial /donation support that we so rely on to continue to provide healthy food to so many of our kids. It is keeping me up at night."

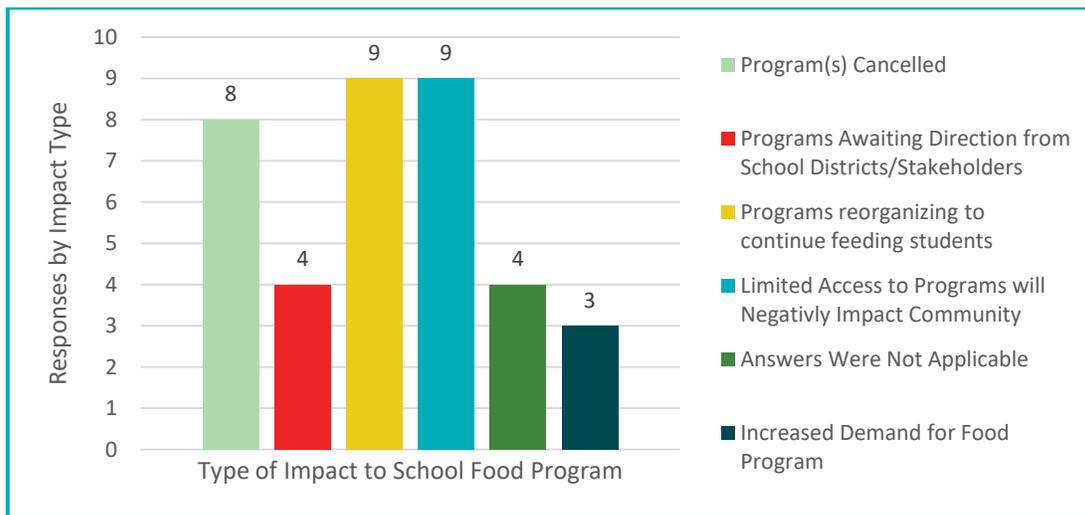


Figure 3: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic & School Closures on Food Programs as Reported by Respondents

Featured Program: Food for Thought

"Food banks have experienced an unprecedented level of demand and some families don't have transportation to access food banks easily. Food for Thought is partnered with the school district, to ensure food packages continue to be delivered to each school. This allows easy access for student/families to pick up each week. The packages arrive at each school by 1:00 pm and we have heard, they are lined up waiting, and within minutes the packages are all taken. The Assistant Superintendent told me today, that there has been so many positive stories this week. He has received many emails, and there has been parents in tears, emotional as they did not think the food would continue once schools closed."

-Cheryl Hoffman, Food for Thought Program Coordinator, Hope for the Nations (Central Okanagan)

2.3 Moving Forward

Survey question: *What, if any, plans or ideas do you, your community partners, or school districts have for alternative programming to serve children and youth during school closures?*

While five respondents (15%) indicated that they were not modifying programs or still deliberating alternative program delivery strategies, 18 respondents (54.5%) said that they planned to modify their existing programs in some way. They shared ideas and plans to continue serving students and their families in different ways while schools are closed, such as: food delivery to students; increased backpack food packages; emergency food hubs at schools where students or families can pick up bagged lunches or hot meals; or other models. One of the respondents wrote that their school is "offering to help vulnerable families, that may not have financial means, with grocery money" in lieu of in-school lunch programs.

Other respondents are taking different approaches (Figure 4). Six (18%) said they were hoping to reach students by creating online learning opportunities around food literacy, social emotional learning opportunities, gardening and cooking skills. Four respondents (12%) indicated that they are partnering with, or re-directing families to established Food Banks in their communities. One respondent spoke of efforts to advocate for the development of public policy where health equity is a priority along with 'poverty reduction measures' in the community. Responses also indicated long term goals such as 'investment in community healthy living programs and infrastructure that builds healthy resilient people, connections and social capital'.

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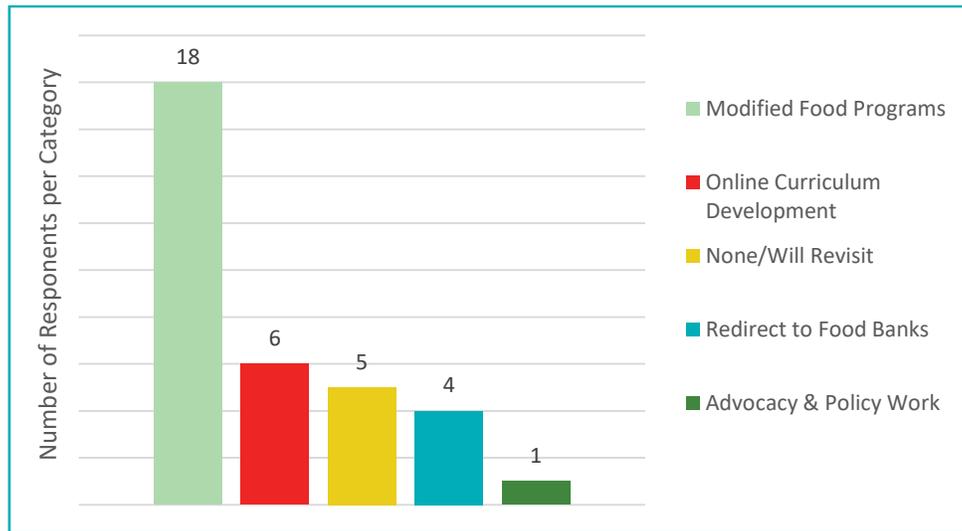


Figure 4: Short- & Long-Term Goals/Plans to be Implemented by School Food Programs During COVID-19 Pandemic

Featured Program: Mamquam Edible Schoolyard

"Mamquam Edible Schoolyard (MESY) Program, a project of the Squamish Climate Action Network, is moving learning materials and activities online via video to give students the opportunity to grow and connect with food at home. Normally I see the more than 350 students at Mamquam Elementary in the garden each week for hands on learning about growing food. We include harvesting, cooking and eating fresh food from the garden as much as possible. The food grown in the gardens and greenhouse is sold at a farm stand during the summer, with surplus donated to the food bank. This year, in place of the farm stand, MESY will have a pay-what-you-can weekly vegetable bag for the families at Mamquam Elementary. Our students love eating what we grow!"

-Constance Wylie, Mamquam Edible Schoolyard Program Manager & Educator (Squamish)

2.4 Program Needs

Survey question: *What additional supports might you need from governments or community partners and funders in carrying out these alternative programs during school closures?*

The majority of respondents indicated a need for government support to sustain or expand their programs, especially given the increasing food insecurity experienced by students and families in communities across the province.

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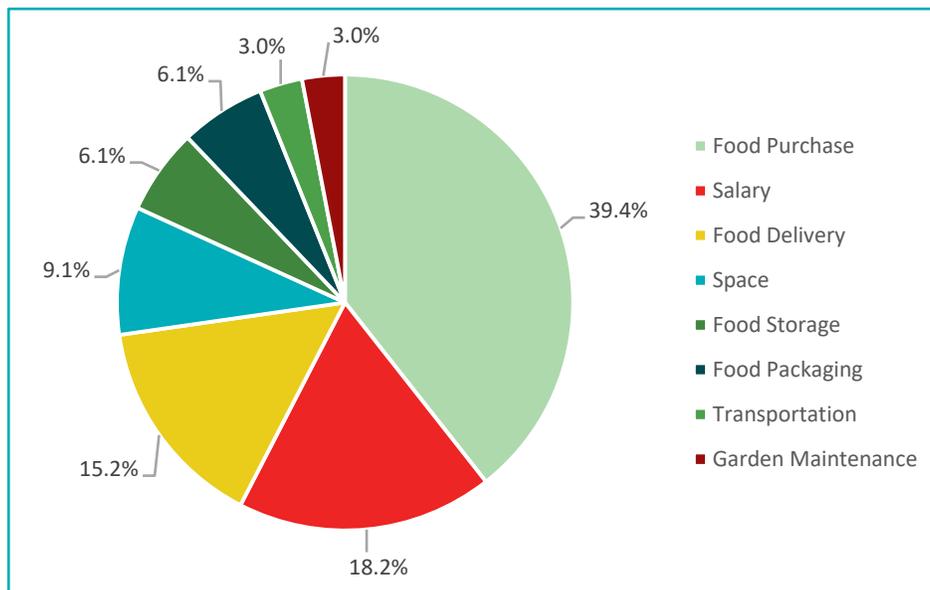
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Of the 29 applicable responses to this question, twenty-three (79.3%) of the respondents identified a need for more funding, specifically to cover additional operational expenses that are unique to COVID-19 circumstances, “to keep the program as safe and accessible as possible for everyone”. Respondents suggested they would use these funds for a variety of operations, including purchasing food supplies, paying salaries to their staff, food delivery, securing spaces to prepare food, food packaging, transportation, and garden maintenance (Figure 5). One respondent noted the need for specific funds to support community food delivery: “I think the FoodBank is getting a lot of resources and donations, but those funds also need to get down to community groups like us doing the front line in the community food delivery.”

In light of perceived supply shortages, seven respondents (24%) - mostly from rural or remote regions -- also identified a need for secure and stable access to resources including food, internet and tech support, storage spaces and equipment. In addition to access to funding and resources, six respondents (20.6%) requested clear communications and supportive policies from leadership, to ensure the continuity of high-quality food programming that meets the needs of local conditions. Finally, three respondents (10.3%) identified a need for volunteers and/or additional staff capacity to conduct food programs. (Figure 6).



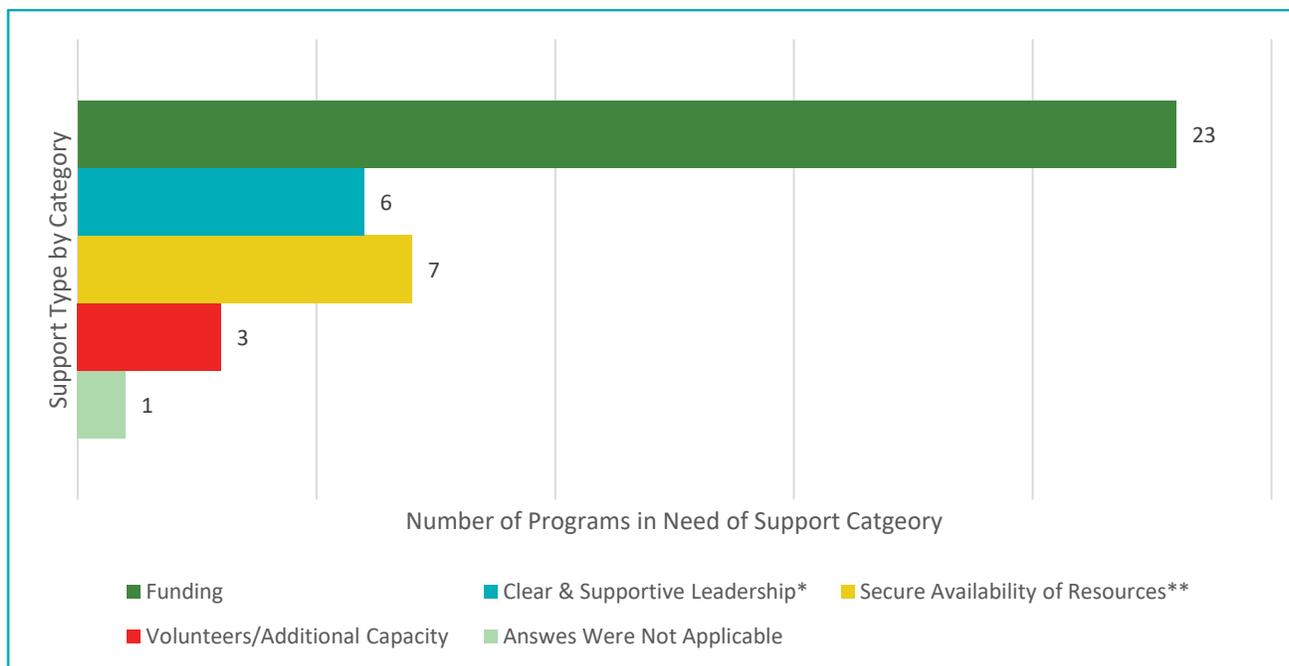


Figure 6: Immediate Support Needed for School Programs

*accountability to ensure high quality food provision, access to resources and spaces to continue programming, support with partnership, etc.

**including food, internet and tech support, storage spaces and equipment

Featured Program: LunchLAB, a Partnership Between Growing Chefs and Fresh Roots

"Growing Chefs! and Fresh Roots are pivoting our LunchLAB school meal program to prepare and distribute healthy food to kids and families that need it most during these turbulent times. In response to this crisis, LunchLAB will be significantly increasing both our number of students served from 220 up to 800-1200 individuals, and the number of meals served from 440 to 3,600 per week. The new LunchLAB program will support the entire food system, including local sourcing, diversion of food waste, and employing chefs from the hard-hit restaurant industry. To start, we will provide 3600 meals per week, which will consist of healthy, fresh, nutritious meals, as well as fresh produce and snacks. It is our hope to scale these efforts in the coming weeks, but will be dependent on resources and funding."

-Helen Stortini, Executive Director, Growing Chefs! (Vancouver)

3.0 Recommendations & Next Steps

In light of these findings, the BC-CHSF recommends that the BC government provide enhanced support for school food programs in three ways:

3.1 Dedicated Funding for School Food Programs

Since this survey was developed, the federal government has announced a \$100M investment in support of food banks, [Community FoodCentres](#) and local food organizations. Many BC organizations and school districts may choose to apply for these funds to support their school food programs. Provincially, the BC government has announced [\\$3M of emergency food bank funding](#); however, this funding is only available to food bank organizations.

In line with the Alberta government's allocation of a [supplementary \\$3M](#) for school nutrition programs, the BC-CHSF recommends that the BC government dedicate \$3M to support the creation, modification and/or expansion of school food programs that continue to provide food to students during school closures. These funds should be accessible to school districts and/or non-profits engaged in school food programs.

3.2 Clear Guidance

The continuation of school food programs is dependent on clear communication and supportive policies at all levels; however, there is no provincial oversight to support local decision making. This results in a highly variable landscape of programs, each with different abilities to access key resources for growing, preparing and distributing food to students. While flexibility is critically important to ensure that programs are responsive to local contexts and conditions, there is a need for overarching provincial clarity on both the privileges and the responsibilities of school food programs.

The BC-CHSF recommends that the BC government develop a provincial toolkit for outlining guiding principles and frameworks to create, modify, and/or expand school food programs both during and following school closures. We recommend that this toolkit be developed as a collaboration between Ministries of Health, Education and Agriculture, in consultation with local school food stakeholders across the province.

3.3 Comprehensive Scan

Due to quickly changing conditions and a small sample size, we believe that this survey only scratches the surface of what is happening across BC with regards to school food program responses. Through our networks, we are constantly learning of new, innovative solutions emerging in BC and Canada in response to COVID-19. Some of these solutions are establishing new models, partnerships and supply chains that may strengthen school food programs when schools open once again.

The BC-CHSF recommends that the BC government conduct an ongoing comprehensive scan of programs across the province, to understand and document what is happening and how best to support these initiatives.

3.4 Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of school meals in supporting food access for children, and the value of social safety nets and institutional support in British Columbia, Canada, and around the world. School food is an essential service, and many school food providers - both school districts and non-profit community partners alike - are struggling to continue providing students with enough food to stay healthy and nourished during these challenging times. While many respondents are modifying programs to meet current extenuating circumstances, they also indicated a need for enhanced support during this time in the form of funding, supportive leadership and clear operational guidance. While we recognize the limitations of this data in capturing the full range of experiences of Coalition members or school districts across the province, the BC-CHSF still believes that it is important to provide a glimpse of what is happening to school food programs during this pandemic. This report illustrates that there is an opportunity for further investigation into the threats and opportunities facing program providers, and points to the need for immediate action from the provincial government.

We strongly believe that our recommendations will help to support British Columbian students and families during this time of increased need. The BC-CHSF is committed to provide full support and allyship to work on these recommendations and stand ready to immediately work cooperatively with the BC government in response to current challenges. We hope that through this collaboration we can both address the immediate needs of British Columbians, and work together towards a longer-term vision for school food in BC.

Please forward any comments or questions about this report to:

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Phone: 1-604-652-3793

Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Survey of School Food Program Coordinators Re: School Closure Amidst COVID-19

Name

Your answer _____

Organizational Affiliation

Your answer _____

Community / region you work in:

Your answer _____

Number of schools that you work with:

Your answer _____

Number of students impacted:

Your answer _____

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Type of

- lunch
- breakfast
- snack
- Other: _____

How are the food programs that you offer to school-aged children and youth being affected by school closures amidst COVID-19? (You may not fully know the repercussions of this yet. Please share what you know now.)

Your answer _____

What, if any, plans or ideas do you, your community partners, or school districts have for alternative programming to serve children and youth during school closures?

Your answer _____

What additional supports might you need from governments or community partners and funders in carrying out these alternative programs during school closures?

Your answer _____

Are you interested in hearing about examples of others who are putting in place ways of distributing healthy food to children and youth during school closures in ways that meet public health COVID-19 guidelines?

Your answer _____

Submit