



**Written Submission for the BC Budget 2023
Consultation**

**Submitted by the
BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food**



Samantha Gambling, Provincial Coordinator
BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food
Administered by the Public Health Association of British Columbia
bcschoolfood@phabc.org | 604-652-3793

May 30, 2022

**Attention: Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services
Regarding 2023 BC Government Budget Priorities**

Dear Committee Members,

This submission is written on behalf of the membership of the BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food (BC-CHSF). The BC-CHSF is a growing network of 45+ non-profit and community-driven organizations from across the province. Our members, endorsers and supporters include professionals from education, health, agriculture and food sectors, as well as school districts, local governments, stakeholder associations (e.g. BC Teachers' Federation, BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, and BC School Trustees Association) and school community members from across the province – many of whom deliver school breakfast, lunch, snack or other nutrition and food literacy programs. The national [Coalition for Healthy School Food](#) consists of over 200 member organizations from every province and territory, representing the largest school food network in Canada. Together, we are advocating for the creation of a universal cost-shared school food program that would see all K-12 students in Canada having daily access to healthy food at school.

Summary

The BC-CHSF urges the Government of British Columbia to build on existing commitments to create more local school meal programs, by **costing out and funding the first phase of a universal, healthy school food program for K-12 students in BC**. In particular, we recommend that the Government of BC:

1. Fund school communities to build capacity and increase readiness to deliver and expand on food programs.
2. Create a dedicated multi-year funding stream for school food programs. In the first year, commit a minimum of \$100 million to school communities that are ready to build on existing programs and increase students' access to healthy food at school.
3. Allocate resources to assemble both provincial and local school food advisory bodies.

We ask that the BC Government approach the Federal Government to request matching funds for these investments. We also ask that the BC Government support separate negotiations between the Federal Government and Indigenous leaders and Nations, to secure funding for Indigenous-led school food programs. This investment in school food would advance multiple provincial priorities, including improving the health, well-being and education of BC children, strengthening and stimulating local agriculture and food sectors, and building a low carbon economy. The investment would also support families experiencing food insecurity, advance economic recovery, and significantly reduce the \$3.3 billion in costs of the treatment and productivity losses due to nutrition-related chronic disease in BC ([BCCDC, 2018](#)).

Rationale & Background

Children have a right to adequate and nutritious food to enable a healthy life¹, yet Canada ranks 37th of 41 high income countries in ensuring children have access to nutritious food². In BC, it has been estimated that 1 in 6 children live in food insecure households³; according to several media outlets⁴, food insecurity worsened during COVID-19, with an increasing number of families turning to emergency food aid. In addition, a 2018 study found that only 10% of Grade 6-12 students in BC ate the recommended daily servings of fruit and vegetables⁵, and the [2018 BC Adolescent Health Survey](#) found that less than 4 in 10 Grade 7-12 students eat three meals a day on school days. Furthermore, [media](#) are reporting that COVID-19 has led children and their families to eat more pre-packaged and processed food, exacerbating poor diets.

Our kids are not ok. There is a real concern that our children will live shorter and sicker lives than their parents because of an increase in the rate of illnesses such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, cancer and other preventable diseases, most of which are closely linked to diet including inadequate access to healthy food. The current combination of inadequate nutrition, food insecurity and low levels of food literacy not only compromises a child's physical health but also their mental health and wellbeing, as well as academic performance, with long-term public health implications.

Around the world, universal school food programs that achieve food literacy and healthy eating behaviours from a young age are increasingly recognized as a foundational health promotion policy. [Research shows](#) that school food programs improve health and education outcomes in children from all socio-economic backgrounds⁶. They improve attendance and academic achievement⁷ by reducing hunger in classrooms, a known barrier to concentration and learning, and help students feel a sense of belonging within the school community.

Combined with poverty reduction strategies, school food programs can also alleviate the burden of food insecurity felt by families, especially as rising food costs are experienced. Investing in a school food program for all BC students that is [universal and without means-testing](#) can reduce stigma, help level the playing field and ensure that all students are able to access a healthy meal or snack each day. School food programs have a positive impact on families, particularly for women who often invest significant time preparing food for school. This initiative, along with childcare, would be a key component of a Gender Based Analysis Plus ([GBA+](#)) approach that would support women who have been hard hit during COVID as they return to work.

Furthermore, an investment in school food that embeds local food procurement, infrastructure development and community building will stimulate job growth and advance provincial *Buy BC*, *Feed BC* and *Grow BC* initiatives, supporting local economies in agriculture as well as other sectors such as food

¹ [Food Secure Canada, 2022](#)

² [UNICEF 2017 Report Card](#)

³ [PHSA, 2016](#)

⁴ e.g. [National Observer](#), [Vancouver Sun](#)

⁵ [Minaker and Hammond, 2016](#)

⁶ [Oostindjer, 2017](#)

⁷ E.g. [Turner & Chaloupka, 2015](#); [Anderson, Gallagher & Ritchie, 2017](#)

services, food manufacturing and distribution, construction, environmentally sustainable industries, and health. Thoughtful procurement standards for meal programs can actively contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions through sustainable land management, which is urgently needed in light of the 2021 [IPCC report](#).

Today, Canada remains the only G7 nation without a national school food program; however, this doesn't mean school food programs don't exist locally. In BC, 75% of school districts report having a meal program in at least one school⁸, which rely on parent or staff volunteers, non-profit and community organizations to develop and run. These sought-after programs are an essential service for students and families in BC; during the COVID-19 crisis, when schools shut down, school communities quickly [pivoted their existing activities and funds](#) to ensure students still had access to healthy food, including distributing meals, gift cards and food boxes.

While there is some provincial guidance and funding for school food (e.g. via CommunityLINK), 81% of these school food programs rely on additional charitable funds, which often have long waitlists for support. Furthermore, districts and schools in BC have variable baselines of experience, equipment, infrastructure and relationships to run effective food programs. This current patchwork of school food programming reaches only a small percentage of BC's students, and does not meet the needs of hungry and undernourished students. In BC, 80% of teachers have at least some students who arrive at school without any food for lunch or snacks; in response, teachers contribute a total of \$3.85 million per year to meet the needs of hungry students⁹ and the BCTF has identified a need for rights-based, universal, and place-based and culturally relevant school food programs in BC¹⁰.

We believe that the time is right to build on [federal momentum for a national school food program](#), and commit to funding healthy school food programs in BC. There has been both national and international attention to develop a school food program for Canadian children; for example, a new global [School Meals Coalition](#) has called on the government of Canada to join the rest of the G7 countries in investing in school food to meet key federal policy priorities, including its 2030 Sustainable Development Goal commitments. Furthermore, the latest Canadian Federal [Budget 2022](#) (Chapter 8, page 190) included a statement committed to working "*with provinces, territories, municipalities, Indigenous partners, and stakeholders to develop a National School Food Policy and to explore how more Canadian children can receive nutritious food at school*". With investment from the Provincial Government, we believe there is an opportunity for BC to be a leader in Canada to showcase what healthy, just, student-centered school food programs look like¹¹.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food's 2022 federal pre-budget consultation [submission](#) requested that the federal government provide all provinces and territories with \$200 million as soon as possible to fund their existing school food programs; to invest an additional \$200 million Canada-wide to support capacity-building for schools or community organizations that provide programs in schools; and to enter into discussions with Indigenous Nations and leaders to negotiate separate agreements for Indigenous-led school food programs.

⁸ [Smith, 2018](#)

⁹ [BCTF, 2015](#)

¹⁰ [BCTF, 2020](#)

¹¹ As recommended by [Black et al. \(2022\)](#)

Recommendations

Members of the BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food were pleased that the 2020 mandate letters to Ministers of Education and Agriculture, Food and Fisheries included directives to “work with school districts to create more local school meal programs based on district data and priorities” and to “integrate Feed BC into this plan so that districts can include locally grown food”. We ask that Budget 2023 act on this commitment to “ensure students are properly fed for learning”, by costing out and funding the first phase of a universal, healthy school food program for all K-12 students in BC.

Evidence suggests that the creation of a province-wide universal school food program should be implemented incrementally, and research has shown that these programs are more likely to be effective when designed in partnership with the local community. Building on our [March 2022 Recommendations to the BC Government](#), the BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food urges the BC Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services to act on our following recommendations:

1. **Fund school communities¹² to build capacity and increase readiness to deliver and expand on food programs.** This includes:
 - a. Providing funding for a minimum of one full-time School Meal Program Coordinator or equivalent dedicated staff in every school district.
 - i. This staff would provide support with program design, implementation and evaluation, including planning, budgeting, supporting food procurement and food literacy activities, and more.
 - ii. This staff would act as the district representative on local school food advisories, ensure equitable distribution of resources as well as program alignment with district-wide, provincial and national standards.
 - b. Providing funding for school communities to engage in capacity building and planning.
 - i. Expenses may include consultation, research, professional development, and infrastructure.

2. **Create a dedicated multi-year funding stream for school food programs,** distinct from CommunityLINK, to fund school communities that are ready to build or expand school food programs. This funding should:
 - a. Account for regional diversity and the rising cost of food and labour to ensure students can have access to meals that reflect Canada's Food Guide.
 - b. Allow for a variety of expenses, including but not limited to:
 - i. Food & other program costs
 - ii. Staffing costs (chefs, food prep staff, dietitians, etc.)
 - iii. Staff professional development
 - iv. Cooking, growing and eating infrastructure and equipment
 - v. Food literacy resources and costs associated with experiential food literacy education

¹² This includes a wide variety of stakeholders involved with/impacted by school activities, including but not limited to students, parents, teachers, school staff, non-profit organizations, and other community partners. See our [March 2022 Recommendations \(Appendix D\)](#) for options for flowing provincial funds.

- vi. Program governance and oversight
- vii. Evaluation
- c. Allow for creative approaches to food service and program implementation, and maintain flexibility to reflect school communities' specific needs and contexts.
- d. Include program guidelines and minimum requirements to meet provincial objectives¹³.

In the first year, we recommend that the BC Government commit a minimum of \$100 million¹⁴ to school communities that are ready to build on existing programs and increase students' access to healthy food at school. Funding should increase each year as additional school communities are ready to deliver programs. Eventually BC should provide half of the funding for school meal programs for all BC students attending public schools (cost-shared with the federal government), plus additional funding for independent and First Nations schools.

3. **Allocate resources to assemble both provincial and local school food advisory bodies**, to ensure those impacted by school food programs are involved in the development and implementation of a province-wide school food program. The BC Chapter recommends that the Government of BC provide the resources necessary to create:
 - a. **A BC School Food Task Force** composed of diverse provincial school food stakeholders¹⁵ and researchers, to:
 - i. Provide recommendations on a provincial program vision and objectives;
 - ii. Advise on the development and implementation of the first phase of a universal healthy school food program for BC¹⁶;
 - iii. Outline the ongoing phased implementation of school food programs across BC, including ongoing evaluation and the creation of permanent governance structures.
 - b. **Technical Working Groups** composed of experts in specified areas of knowledge or practice, to:
 - i. Explore and/or conduct research on specific aspects of school food programs (e.g. local food procurement and distribution, food literacy, local governance structures, student engagement);
 - ii. Provide recommendations to inform the Task Force's work.
 - c. **Local School Food Advisory Committees** composed of diverse school food stakeholders and school community members at a school district or regional level, to:
 - i. Inform the design, implementation and expansion of school food programs in their community;
 - ii. Act as local conduits to provincial advisory bodies.

¹³ See the BC Chapter's [March 2022 Recommendations](#) for our suggested provincial objectives

¹⁴ This would fund roughly 20% of BC's [545,000 public school students](#), at \$5/student/school day.

¹⁵ See the BC Chapter's [March 2022 Recommendations](#) for our suggested list of school food stakeholders

¹⁶ Including but not limited to: budget and costing; coordination and governance; evaluation metrics; and knowledge mobilization.



The BC Chapter asks that the BC Government approach the Federal Government to secure matching funds to cost-share these investments. Additionally, we ask that the BC Chapter support the Government of Canada to negotiate separate funding and support for Indigenous school food programs with Indigenous Nations and leaders, and work together to establish appropriate vision/s and objectives to guide this funding. Care must be taken to ensure that principles of equity are monitored and maintained.

There is a growing, grassroots movement for healthy school food in BC, and there are countless examples of innovative and successful programs in all corners of the province. But many students are being missed. Building off existing programs, we believe that investment in the development of universal, local, healthy school food programs across the province could help address the root of widespread public health, educational and economic issues. Your attention to this urgent issue is appreciated.

Sincerely,

Samantha Gambling, BSc, MSc
Provincial Coordinator
BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food
bcschoolfood@phabc.org

Shannon Turner, BA, BSc, MSc, PHD(c)
Executive Director
Public Health Association of BC
execdir@phabc.org