



**Written Submission for the Pre-Budget
Consultations in Advance of the 2023 Budget**

**Submitted by the
Coalition for Healthy School Food**

The Coalition for Healthy School Food recommends that the Government of Canada:

- 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.

Invest in a Canada-wide school nutritious meal program as a critical element of a school food policy

Dear Mr. Fonseca and Committee Members:

The Coalition for Healthy School Food is pleased to submit proposals in support of the inclusion of an item in Budget 2023 to develop a National School Food Policy and establish a National School Nutritious Meal Program as key elements of the evolving Food Policy for Canada. Our recommendation is that the Government of Canada work in partnership with provinces and territories, Indigenous peoples and non-profit organizations, as follows:

- ***Investment:*** Allocate \$1 billion over five years, with \$200 million per year to contribute to provinces, territories and First Nation, Métis and Inuit partners to fund their school food programs that: serve food based on the 2019 *Canada's Food Guide*; are universal; do not market to kids; and provide effective monitoring, accountability and reporting that will support future evidence-based decisions on a comprehensive permanent Canada-wide Program.
- ***Cost-Sharing:*** Negotiate cost-sharing funding agreements with provinces and territories that are willing and ready to co-invest in, and implement, school meal programs in line with the proposed Guiding Principles set out below.
- ***Indigenous-led programs:*** Enter into immediate discussions with Indigenous leaders to negotiate agreements for the creation and/or enhancement of independent distinctions-based First Nation, Métis and Inuit school meal programs, with long-term and sustainable funding.
- ***Global School Meals Coalition:*** Actively participate as a member of the global School Meals Coalition to ensure that every child has the opportunity to receive a healthy, nutritious meal in school by 2030.
- ***School Food Policy:*** Proceed with the development of a more comprehensive National School Food Policy that: a) addresses such factors as food literacy, local production and supply, and best practices and standards; b) is aligned with the Coalition's eight Guiding Principles detailed below; and c) is supportive of the further development of the Food Policy for Canada and deliberations of the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council's School Nutrition Working Group.
- ***Equipment and infrastructure:*** Create an additional dedicated school food infrastructure fund to enhance kitchen, food service, and other production and preparation equipment and facilities so that they can reliably and efficiently serve healthy food in adequate volumes.

The Coalition is a Canada-wide, non-partisan network of more than 200 non-profit organizations advocating for public investment in a universal cost-shared nutritious school meal program with consistent standards. Our vision is that the approximately five and a half million children aged 3-18 enrolled in elementary and secondary schools across Canada will have daily access to a healthy meal at school.

The Coalition has consulted widely with its members, supporters and stakeholders across Canada to develop the proposals and supporting rationale in this submission. We present them with our strong support for the Government's commitment to advance a National School Food Policy and a National School Nutritious Meal Program.

We urge you to act now.

Yours sincerely,



Melana Roberts
Chair, Food Secure Canada Board



Debbie Field, Coordinator
Coalition for Healthy School Food

The proposed investment under Budget 2023

The proposed investment of \$1 billion over five years is to launch the first phase of a universal Canada-wide nutritious school meal program with the following elements and objectives:

- 1. Delivery of healthy school meals:** support to provinces and territories to augment their investments in school meal programs, delivered through appropriate local partnerships in line with proposed standards and best practice.
- 2. Strengthening of food literacy and lifelong dietary habits:** influence of children's food awareness, knowledge and habits through a combination of leading-by-example in the sourcing, preparation and delivery of school meals, and support for development and sharing of knowledge, information and skills in initiatives aligned with the school meal Program.
- 3. Promotion of responsible and supportive school food policies and practices:** advocacy and action to promote school-based access to healthy foods and prevent marketing of unhealthy foods to students.
- 4. Development of local, environmentally sustainable and culturally appropriate food sourcing and production:** policies and practices to emphasize production and sourcing of appropriate foods for school meal programs and that support the establishment and viability of local, sustainable producers, suppliers and food preparers, including traditional and country foods.
- 5. Enhancement of equipment and infrastructure to support school-based meal delivery:** support for a range of in-school facilities and off-site operations such as community kitchens or gardens, that support efficient and accessible supply, preparation and delivery of school meals.

Supporting Rationale

Overall health and social benefits: 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 Canada. 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 millions of school children in Canada, 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 approximately five and a half million children aged 3-18 enrolled in elementary and secondary schools across Canada need access to healthy food at school. School meal programs along the lines proposed can take the pressure off family budgets and can play an especially critical role in supporting the most vulnerable 1.4 million children and youth under the age of 18 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., 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 the Government to contribute to the development and viability of green and sustainable local economies, in line with its commitments to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). 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: Implementation of the Program and advancement of the Policy along the lines proposed will deliver on commitments in the Prime Minister's mandate letters to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development to develop a National School Food Policy and advance a National School Nutritious Meal Program. The proposed investment of \$1 billion over five years will not meet the full needs and potential of a comprehensive national Program. However, it will greatly augment current school meal offerings, build on the interest and commitment of a growing number of provinces and

territories, and establish a solid foundation and evidence basis for future enhancements and refinements for an eventual permanent Program. It will also serve as a signal element of meaningful progress on the Government’s evolving *Food Policy for Canada* in support of its stated vision: “*All people in Canada are able to access a sufficient amount of safe, nutritious and culturally diverse food. Canada’s food system is resilient and innovative, sustains our environment and supports our economy.*”

Guiding Principles

The National School Nutritious Meal Program should be designed and delivered in alignment with the Guiding Principles developed and endorsed by the Coalition for Healthy School Food:

- **Health-Promoting:** Serve tasty, nourishing and culturally appropriate whole foods, focusing on vegetables and fruits. Ensure that programs are in line with the revised *Canada’s Food Guide* and that they foster a healthy food environment where students can develop a positive relationship with food.
- **Universal:** Ensure that ALL children in a school can access the Program in a non-stigmatizing manner. Over time, all children in Canada will be able to participate in a school food program.
- **Cost-shared:** Use federal funding to both expand on current provincial, territorial, city, parental and community funding and to initiate new programs in a cost-shared model.
- **Flexible and Locally Adapted:** Successful school food programs reflect and respect the local context of the school and region and are connected to their local communities. Ensure that funding builds on existing programs, local knowledge, skills and relationships and that it supports different food service models, from breakfast to lunch to snacks.
- **Committed to Indigenous Control over Programs for Indigenous Students:** Embed Indigenous Food Sovereignty in a School Food Program for Canada and negotiate funding for school food programs with First Nations, Métis and Inuit leadership.
- **A Driver of Community Economic Development:** Encourage school food programs to set local and sustainably produced food purchasing targets, which would create jobs for Canadian farmers and local food producers.
- **Promoting of Food Literacy:** Support the conditions for school food programs to be integrated into the curriculum and enable food literacy and experiential food skills education.
- **Supported by Guidance and Accountability Measures:** Ensure that programs are guided by Canada-wide nutritional standards, conflict of interest safeguards that prevent programs from marketing unhealthy food and specific products, as well as a framework for consistent Canada-wide program evaluation.