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Health Promotion
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Ontario Association of
Public Health Dentistry

Ontario Association of
Public Health Nursing
Leaders

Ontario Dietitians in
Public Health

April 5, 2024

Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau
Prime Minister of Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario,
Canada
K1A 0A6

Dear Prime Minister,

**Re: alPHa Resolution A23-06 - Advocating for a National School Food Program in
Canada.**

On behalf of the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHa) and its Boards of Health Section, Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health Section, and Affiliate Organizations, I am writing to congratulate and thank you for this week's announcement of the long-awaited national school food program.

Providing children with adequate access to healthy food to grow, learn and thrive is important for achieving optimal child development outcomes and well-being. Given that school-age children consume one-third of their food at school, this is an ideal opportunity to ensure equity through universally accessible nutritious food and promote food literacy.

We are therefore pleased to congratulate the federal government for following through on its commitment to establish a National School Nutritious Meal Program as a key element of the evolving food Policy for Canada, and in so doing, answering the call that our members made via the attached resolution, which was passed at our 2023 Annual General Meeting.

We look forward to playing our role at the provincial level as this important program is implemented.

Sincerely,



Dr. Charles Gardner,
President

Copy: Hon. Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education
Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health, Ontario
Elizabeth Walker, Executive Lead, Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health

Encl.

The Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA) is a not-for-profit organization that provides leadership to Ontario's boards of health. alPHA represents all of Ontario's 34 boards of health, medical officers and associate medical officers of health, and senior public health managers in each of the public health disciplines – nursing, inspections, nutrition, dentistry, health promotion, epidemiology, and business administration. As public health leaders, alPHA advises and lends expertise to members on the governance, administration, and management of health units. The Association also collaborates with governments and other health organizations, advocating for a strong, effective, and efficient public health system in the province. Through policy analysis, discussion, collaboration, and advocacy, alPHA's members and staff act to promote public health policies that form a strong foundation for the improvement of health promotion and protection, disease prevention and surveillance services in all of Ontario's communities.

RESOLUTION A23-06

TITLE: **Advocating for a National School Food Program in Canada.**

SPONSOR: **Kingston, Frontenac and Lennox & Addington Board of Health**

WHEREAS children attending school hungry or undernourished have their energy levels, memory, problem-solving skills, creativity, concentration, and other cognitive functions negatively impacted^{1,2}; and

WHEREAS over the past two years, rising costs of food and higher program uptake have significantly outpaced provincial school food programs (SFPs) funding³. In 2023, some programs have had to place limitations on the amount of food served or pause all operations for the school year due to insufficient financial support. Many SFPs are also projecting budget shortfalls for the 2023-24 school year and beyond which will have a significant negative impact on children who rely on these programs to meet their nutritional needs; and

WHEREAS providing children with adequate access to healthy food to grow, learn and thrive is important for achieving optimal child development outcomes and well-being⁴; and

WHEREAS children consume one third of their daily food at school⁵, making it the ideal environment to support having nutritious food choices and improve food literacy; and

WHEREAS SFPs provide universally accessible school breakfast, lunch, and snack programs to students, and play a fundamental role in improving the diet of children and youth by providing access to nutritious food^{6,7}; and

WHEREAS SFPs have been associated with reductions in behavioural and emotional problems, bullying, aggression, anxiety, and depression^{8,9}; and

WHEREAS in Canada, only 35% of schools have some form of SFP that is funded, in part, by provincial and territorial governments^{10,11,12}; and

WHEREAS this current patchwork of food programming varies greatly in scope, consistency, and quality, reaching a small percentage of the over 5 million students in Canada^{10,11,12}; and

WHEREAS the lack of coordinated structure and adequate resources inhibits universal program access for all K-12 students, and results in an unsustainable delivery model that relies heavily on teacher and parent volunteers from the school community⁷; and

WHEREAS federal government action is required to establish an accessible, equitable, and sustainable nutritious SFP as a critical element of school food policy in Canada.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA) call on the Federal Government to:

- Follow through on its commitment from 2021 and allocate \$1 billion over five years in Budget 2024 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 Nations, Métis, and Inuit partners to fund their school programs^{10,13}.
- Enter 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^{10,13}.
- Create a dedicated school food infrastructure to enhance food production and preparation equipment and facilities so they can reliably and efficiently serve healthy food in adequate volumes^{10,13}.

AND FURTHER that alPHa endorse the work of the Coalition for Healthy School Food; a non-partisan network of more than 260 non-profit organizations advocating for public investment in a universal cost shared nutritious SFP, with consistent national standards¹³.

Backgrounder: A National School Food Program in Canada

Sponsor: Kingston, Frontenac and Lennox and Addington Board of Health

Background:

An important part of promoting health is ensuring equitable access to nutritious food. Internationally, School Food Programs (SFPs) are widely implemented, and are a successful driver of improved health and education¹⁴. Healthy students are better prepared to learn, yet in Canada one third of students in elementary schools and two thirds of students in secondary schools do not eat a nutritious breakfast before school¹⁵. When children attend school hungry or undernourished their energy levels, memory, problem-solving skills, creativity, concentration, and other cognitive functions are negatively impacted^{1,2}. SFPs provide students with snacks or meals while at school and are common throughout the world. These programs can play a fundamental role in improving the diet of children and youth and addressing health disparities^{7,16}. SFPs have been associated with reductions in behavioural and emotional problems, bullying, aggression, anxiety, and depression^{8,9}. Increased student enrollment, retention and school performance have also been observed alongside SFPs¹⁷. Given that children consume 1/3 of their daily food at school⁵, it is the ideal environment to support nutritious food choices and improve food literacy.

In Canada, only 35% of schools have some form of SFP that is funded, in part, by provincial and territorial governments^{10,11,12}. In the 2018/2019 school year, provincial and territorial funding for these programs equated to \$0.48 per participating student per day, with remaining funds provided by donors, private funders, and other sources depending on the region¹¹. This current patchwork of food programming varies greatly in scope, consistency, and quality, reaching a small percentage of the over 5 million students in Canada^{10,11,12}. The lack of coordinated structure and adequate resources inhibits universal program access for all K-12 students, and results in an unsustainable delivery model that relies heavily on teacher and parent volunteers from the school community⁷. Federal government action is required to establish an accessible, equitable, and sustainable nutritious SFP as a critical element of school food policy in Canada.

Current Status:

International Level

A national SFP is an opportunity for more than just food provision. Many programs in leading countries integrate other aspects of food literacy, food quality, sourcing, and policy into their program^{10,17}. Ninety-one percent of schools surveyed in the Global Child Nutrition Foundation (GCNF) report incorporate nutrition education into their SFPs, and 78% paired their food programs with school gardens¹⁷. Food programs in Italy and Brazil include a strong focus on local food sourcing, with the latter stipulating that 30% of all school program foods be purchased from small family run farms^{18,19}. In Japan and England, programs feature a strong emphasis on food systems, with funding allocated for sensory gardens and gardens designated for growing fruits and vegetables^{20,21}. Food programs in the United States have focused on investment in school food preparation infrastructure and staffing²².

Federal Level

In December 2021, mandate letters were released to cabinet and marked the first-ever commitment to a national SFP. These mandate letters, addressed to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food (Marie-Claude Bibeau) and the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development (Karina Gould) included directives to work with provinces, territories, municipalities, Indigenous partners, and stakeholders to

develop a national program^{23,24}. Accompanying these mandate letters was a commitment of \$1 billion of funding over five years.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food (CHSF) is a Canada-wide, non-partisan network of more than 260 non-profit organizations advocating for public investment in a universal cost-shared nutritious SFP, with consistent standards¹⁰. The *#NourishKidsNow* campaign has encouraged member and endorsing organizations to engage with Ministers of Parliament to advance the government's commitment to a national, nutritious SFP. In fall 2022, the CHSF submitted two key documents to the federal government: (1) a set of proposals, strongly recommending that the federal government develop a National School Nutritious Meal Program as a key element of the evolving Food Policy for Canada, and (2) a written submission for the pre-budget consultations in advance of the 2023 budget.

Despite advocacy efforts, the federal government did not include funding for a National School Nutritious Meal Program in Budget 2023²⁵. Over the next year, the CHSF will continue advocacy efforts; urging the Government of Canada to develop a National School Food Policy and an implementation plan to ensure successful rollout of a School Food Program for Canada as pledged in two federal election platforms in 2021 and as included in two Ministerial mandate letters.

Provincial & Local Level

In 2004, Ontario launched the Student Nutrition Ontario (SNO) program. SNO is made up of representatives from 14 Lead Agencies who distribute provincial funds from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. These funds contribute up to 15% of program costs to help develop and implement healthy breakfasts, snacks, and lunch programs across the province. These 14 Lead Agencies work with over 39 community partnerships across the province. These community partnerships engage school boards, public health units, communities, and parents to support school programs at the local level²⁶.

Supporting Documents:

- [The Coalition for Healthy School Food: Proposals for a National School Nutritious Meal Program](#)
- [The Coalition for Healthy School Food – Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2023 Budget](#)

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