June 1, 2023

The Honourable Michael Parsa
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services

Dear Honourable Minister Parsa:

Re: Request for Immediate Funding for Student Nutrition Programs and to Increase Funding for Future School Years

I’m writing to you on behalf of Huron Perth Public Health. HPPH has recently endorsed the Coalition for Healthy School Food (CHSF). The Ontario-chapter (ON-CHSF) members – many of whom deliver school breakfast, lunch, snack or other nutrition and food literacy programs – have identified the same concerns with their local Student Nutrition Programs (SNPs) as we are seeing locally.¹

Currently across Ontario, many school programs are unable to meet current demands, shutting down before the end of the school year or having to limit the foods served in order to get through to the end of the year, due to insufficient funds. There has not been a substantial annual increase to core Ontario SNP funding since 2014. Many programs have felt the strain for years, but the rising food costs of the last two years² and increased demand have significantly out-paced current funding. Other schools who have not previously had a program are seeing a demand, but there are no funds for new programs.

There are urgent and immediate needs now. Children and youth need access to nourishing food to thrive and, without further investment, many schools will be unable to continue to provide adequate nourishing food through the remaining school year. ON-CHSF members report, projected budget shortfall for future years is substantial.

We are writing to you to highlight the immediate and longer-term funding needs of SNPs in Ontario. The current reliance on fundraising, volunteers, and donations is inconsistent, unsustainable, and disadvantages those schools who most need the support.

A growing body of research demonstrates that school food programs can benefit students’ physical and mental health, improve food choices, and lead to student success (e.g. academic performance, student behaviour, and school attendance).³ These programs help reduce the $5.6 billion/year in costs due to nutrition-related chronic disease injuries in Ontario. Well-designed and non-stigmatizing SNPs also have broad, positive impacts on families, communities, and the economy by reducing household food costs, creating jobs, and strengthening Ontario’s agri-food sector.⁴

The Ontario government was among the first provincial governments to fund school food programs in Canada and now provides an annual $27.9M for SNPs in the province. Since Ontario’s initial investment, all provincial and

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¹ The national Coalition for Healthy School Food consists of over 250 member and 125 endorser 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.

² Consumer Price Index, monthly, not seasonally adjusted. Statistics Canada. Sept 2021 to Sept 2022, food costs increased 11.5% (have rates this high since 1981).

³ The case for a Canadian national school food program. Hernandez et al., 2018; Nourishing Young Minds, Toronto Public Health, 2012; The impact of Canadian School Food Programs on Children’s Nutrition and Health, Colley et al., 2018; Coalition for Healthy School Food

⁴ The Burden of Chronic Disease in Ontario. CCO & PHO 2019.
territorial governments have followed Ontario’s lead. In response to recent urgent calls for additional funding because of greater participation and rising food costs, which are not unique to Ontario, many provincial and territorial governments have increased their investments in school food. The 2022-23 school food funding increases include: $500,000 in Newfoundland and Labrador; $2 million in New Brunswick; $2 million in emergency funding in Nova Scotia; $1.3 million in Manitoba; $16 million in Quebec; $214.5 million over three years in Budget 2023 in BC; and $500,000 in the Yukon. Many of these increases are to the programs’ annual operating budgets. However, there has not been a substantial annual increase to core Ontario SNP funding since 2014.

We know Ontario’s student nutrition programs have greatly appreciated the additional support that MCCSS provided to SNPs throughout the pandemic, and also your recent statement that no student will go hungry under your watch. We ask MCCSS to again recognize the urgent need at this time and to (1) allocate urgent funding to those programs who need it immediately, and (2) allocate more core funding to programs for the 2023/24 and future school years, when significant shortfalls are expected.

As the federal government prepares to release a National School Food Policy and invest in programs across the country, greater provincial investment in Ontario programs will be seen favourably. We believe that there is a great opportunity for Ontario to show further provincial leadership on student nutrition at this time and to ensure students are well-nourished during the school day.

Your attention to this urgent issue is needed.

Sincerely,

Bernie MacLellan, Board Chair
Huron Perth Public Health

cc. Hon. Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education (Stephen.Lecceco@pc.ola.org)
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For example, see recent media coverage from PEI and Newfoundland and Labrador.