

# Children's Health & Nutrition Initiative

Feed the Kids, Change the World



## A Proposal to Make Safe and Healthy Food Available to All of Canada's Children

Presented by Olivia Chow, MP

### Why do we need change?

Too many of the influences on children's diets are now out of line with healthy eating. Social, economic, cultural and environmental factors at the household, neighbourhood, regional and national levels combine to influence, yet many children's diets are poor and diet-related outcomes such as obesity, Type 2 diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol are rising among Canada's children. The dramatic changes to our food system over the last century have resulted in an abundant food supply but much of it is dominated by processed foods high in salt, sugar and/or fat.

The media environment can also have an enormous influence on children's eating, often undermining family influences. Food marketing to children is now more intense than ever and has been found to influence eating habits in favour of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods. Efforts

have been made to improve nutrition education in schools and in the media, yet too many children and parents are still confused about what food choices are best for a healthy body and mind, as well as for a healthy planet

### Children's Diets and Health

Relative to other countries, Canada's children are doing better than many. But given this country's tremendous wealth and our future challenges, many trends are worrisome. More than seven out of 10 children don't eat the recommended daily minimum of five servings of vegetables and fruit. More than a fifth of total calories consumed by 4-18 year olds come from the "other foods" category (typically foods high in sugar, fat and/or salt). A quarter of Grade 4 students and almost half of Grade 8 girls don't eat breakfast every day. Type 2 diabetes and risk factors for chronic disease such as hypertension and hypercholesterolemia have increased among children.

Overweight and obesity doubled among 6-17 year olds between 1979 and 2004 and obesity tripled among Canadian teens. Many of these outcomes also disproportionately affect children from low income families.

### Consequences of Poor Diet

Unhealthy eating habits during childhood can interfere with optimal growth and development while setting the stage for poor eating habits during adulthood and begin to increase risks for premature death and disability due to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, certain forms of cancer and other illnesses. Poor nutrition has

also been linked to low academic performance, classroom behaviour problems and low self-esteem.

### Cost of Poor Diet

Total health care spending was \$4,548 per capita in 2006, with more than two thirds of direct

health care costs being expended on chronic diseases. Health Canada estimates that diet-related cases of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and certain forms of cancer among adults rob the national economy of \$6.6 billion annually due to health care costs and lost productivity.

### What are We Already Doing?

Children's nutrition programs are already available in many parts of the country. Assistance is provided to some children, but not all, and the continuation of these efforts is subject to fundraising and volunteer time. Canada is one of the few developed countries without a nationally funded child nutrition program. There are also no national nutrition guidelines for children's food in schools, community centres or vending machines. Food marketing to children is regulated by the industry itself and its self-imposed code provides little protection for children's nutrition or health. Governments, communities, businesses and parents in this country all need to take up the challenge to create environments that support optimal child health.

*More than 7 out of 10 Canadian children don't eat 5 servings of vegetables and fruit daily*

*A higher percentage of school children in France, Ireland, Portugal, Russia and Latvia eat breakfast every day than in Canada.*

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# Children's Health & Nutrition Initiative (cont'd)

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*Number of new children's food products introduced in North America between 1994 and 2004 - 3,936*

*Number that were vegetables or fruit - 52*

*Total government expenditure on health care in Canada (2006) - \$148 billion*

*Difference in spending over 2005 - +\$8 billion*

*First year cost of CHNI to begin ensuring all children access to healthy food - \$250 million*

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## What are we proposing?

The Children's Health and Nutrition Initiative (CHNI) seeks to build a broad-based coalition of diverse stakeholders that are passionate about Canada becoming a world leader in making safe and healthy food available to all children and reshaping social, cultural, economic and environmental influences to optimally support child health. As a first step, the Initiative calls for a nutritious breakfast, snack or lunch to be available to any Canadian child under eighteen years of age in the form of nutritious food programs. This would be based on a flexible made-in-Canada community development model building on the existing knowledge base of local organizations and parent groups. Funding support would be provided

by the Federal government to expand pre-existing programs and build efforts in parts of Canada where independent programs aren't in place. Programs would be created and managed locally by parents, educators, public health and local government representatives to

meet the needs of local children and families. The Federal government will be required to develop national program standards for healthy foods, with an emphasis on nutrition education, cooking and growing skills, and inclusion of locally and sustainably sourced foods. Long-term monitoring and evaluation of standards and implementation will also be critical.

The second component of the Initiative calls for innovative ways to protect children from manipulative marketing messages that encourage poor nutritional habits, relying on the best examples from other jurisdictions. For example, all commercial advertising directed at children under the age of 13 years has been prohibited by the Consumer Protection Act in Quebec since 1980.

## Who will benefit?

The Initiative will promote healthy eating habits in childhood, providing life long benefits for all Canadian children and play a role in reducing overweight/obesity, Type 2 diabetes and early onset of risk factors for chronic disease such as hypertension and high cholesterol. Healthier children grow up to be healthier adults, thus helping to relieve the financial strain on Medicare. The Initiative will provide critical support to food insecure families, especially in those regions of the country where independently run programs don't currently exist. Research has repeatedly shown that these households are disproportionately affected by poor health, social isolation and family dysfunction.



Providing children with healthy food, sound nutrition education in a setting with positive teacher and peer modeling is also critical in reconnecting this generation with the food on their plate. Children that have the

opportunity to establish healthy eating habits early on and can learn about nutrition and where their food comes from are more likely to become adult consumers and producers that support just and sustainable food systems which, in turn, are supportive of strong local economies, farm communities, a clean environment and a strong and healthy Canada.

## Summary of cost

To be successful, the initiative would require a federal government contribution in the order of \$250 million in the first year with incremental increases for the next 5 years. The funding will initially cover 30% of total meal costs which are estimated at \$1 to \$2 per day per child, depending on regional food prices, volunteer time, parental contribution, local fundraising, charitable donations and availability of cooking facilities.

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## Canada's Right to Food Commitments

The Children's Health and Nutrition Initiative will be an important step forward in fulfilling Canada's right to food commitments that are enshrined in several international declarations to which our Federal government is a signatory. Canada has commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) to the highest attainable standard of health for all children. Article 24 states: "parties shall pursue full implementation of this right and, in particular, shall take appropriate measures to combat disease and malnutrition, ...through the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking-water,..."

The same year, all parties in the House of Commons passed a resolution to "seek to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000". In 2005, the United Nations Children's Fund singled out Canada as a wealthy nation that has failed to make significant strides in eliminating poverty.

A decade ago, Canada also signed on to the Rome Declaration on World Food Security (1996), committing to "implement policies aimed at eradicating poverty and inequality and improving physical and economic access by all, at all times, to sufficient, nutritionally adequate and safe food and its effective utilization".

## What are Other Jurisdictions Doing?

Many other jurisdictions have already moved ahead to reshape the social, economic, cultural and environmental influences on children's diets. For example:

Dramatic changes have been made to school food in England. The government's new guidelines require at least two servings a day of fruit and vegetables and oily fish should be served at least once every three weeks. Schools should also provide free, fresh drinking water and salt should not be available at lunch. Manufactured meat products such as chicken nuggets may only be served occasionally. The only savoury snacks available at lunchtime should be nuts and seeds with no added salt, fat or sugar, the guidelines stipulate. The government will also spend an extra £240m (\$520m CAN) on subsidizing healthy ingredients in schools.

Ofcom, the British broadcast regulator, announced in late 2006 that ads for foods and beverages high in fat, salt and sugar will be prohibited in and around all TV programs of particular appeal to children under the age of 16. The use of celebrities and characters licensed from third-parties (such as cartoons) and promotional claims (such as free gifts) will also be prohibited in ads directed to primary school children. In the Province of Quebec, all advertising to children under 13 years of age has been prohibited by law since 1980.

In the U.S., 29.5 million children participate in the National School Lunch Program through more than 98,800 schools and child care institutions. On a typical day, 59% receive free or reduced price lunches. About 9.6 million children also participate in the School Breakfast Program. Total federal funding for these programs was \$8.8 billion (U.S.) in 2005.

In 2004, France passed legislation to ban soft drink and junk food vending machines in middle and secondary schools. The following year, the government introduced a 1.5% tax on food and beverage advertisers who do not add public health warnings to television ads for products high in sugar and salt.

In Italy, 68% of school meals use organic products, and many municipalities are emphasizing local and traditional food. The 140,000 meals served every school day to children in Rome must include a healthy and organic snack and a warm meal based on traditional recipes. The government offers rebates to public sector caterers that purchase local and organic products. The incentives help increase the production of quality foods, lower environmental impacts, provide more sustainable local employment, and support better child nutrition and health.



*"Every nation that permits people to remain under the fetters of preventable disease and permits social conditions to exist that make it impossible for them to be properly fed,... is trampling on a primary principle of democracy."*

*Dr. Charles Hastings  
Toronto's Medical  
Officer of Health  
(1918)*

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