



Student Nutrition Program: Update and Resource Needs during COVID-19

Date: January 5, 2021

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

When the 2020 Operating Budget was approved in February 2020, it was not foreseeable how COVID-19 would impact the ability of student nutrition programs to provide nutrition support to Toronto's vulnerable children and youth. The 2020 budget has been fully allocated to student nutrition programs, yet these programs are facing increased operational challenges as they deal with higher food costs, fewer volunteers, and appeals to support both in-school and remote learners who otherwise would have accessed a student nutrition program.

This report responds to a motion from the December 14, 2020 Board of Health meeting requesting the Medical Officer of Health to report at its January 18, 2021 meeting with an update on additional resource needs and any other challenges facing municipally-supported student nutrition programs in Toronto. Two scenarios were examined to provide an estimation of additional resources. Also, anticipating that COVID-19 may necessitate that a remote learning model continues for the 2021/22 school year, estimates capture the balance of the 2020/21 school year and the first part of the 2021/22 school year.

Student nutrition programs contribute to the health and wellbeing of students through nutritious food choices and have been demonstrated to improve learning outcomes among children. Toronto Public Health continues to monitor the evolving COVID-19 situation with schools and works with student nutrition programs, school boards, and their foundations to ensure the safe operation of student nutrition programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The Student Nutrition Program includes funding of \$16,029,626 gross and net in Toronto Public Health's 2020 Approved Operating Budget. On November 16, 2020, the Board of Health recommended an increase of \$409.8 thousand gross and net for inflationary cost increases in the Student Nutrition Program, bringing the total funding to \$16,169,376 gross and net.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has been provided with the financial implications associated with this report.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on December 14, 2020, Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to report to the January 18, 2020 of the Board of Health with an update on additional resource needs and any other challenges facing municipally-supported student nutrition programs in Toronto.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL24.6>

On November 16, 2020, the Board of Health recommended to Budget Committee that City Council approve an increase from the Toronto Public Health 2020 Operating Budget of \$409.8 thousand gross and net for inflationary cost increases in the Student Nutrition Program.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL23.3>

On June 29, 2020, City Council adopted the 2020 Student Nutrition Program service subsidies report.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL17.4>

COMMENTS

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Toronto Public Health has met regularly as part of the Student Nutrition Ontario-Toronto (SNO-Toronto) partnership to identify and understand emerging school community needs and take collaborative action to support student nutrition programs. The partnership is comprised of Toronto Public Health, Toronto District School Board (TDSB), Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB), Toronto Foundation for Student Success (TFSS), The Angel Foundation for Learning (AFL), and community representatives. Each organization continues to leverage opportunities within their own mandates to ensure that vulnerable students receive a daily nutritious meal at school.

City enabled nutrition support for remote learners when schools closed

On March 13, 2020, the Province of Ontario closed all publicly funded schools across the province as part of their efforts to manage the spread of COVID-19; schools remained closed to the end of June 2020. During this time, thousands of the City's most

vulnerable children and youth no longer had access to a daily nutritious meal through their student nutrition program.

The TFSS and AFL worked with school boards and corporate partners to swiftly establish the Food for Kids initiative in response to the immediate emergency. Through Food for Kids, 114,000 children from 60,000 families from the City's most at-risk neighborhoods each received a \$50 grocery gift card. In total, over \$5.7 million in grocery gift cards were distributed between March and August 2020, of which \$4.4 million was from the City's unspent funds in the 2019-20 Student Nutrition Program. The balance of the \$5.7 million, came from other funding sources including provincial funds and donations from private and corporate sources.

Food for Kids connected with families within weeks of the school closure and the \$50 grocery gift card was a welcome support for students during the school closure. That being said, the \$5.7 million in available funds could only provide support for approximately half of the children and youth who would otherwise have accessed a student nutrition program had schools remained open. In addition, the grocery gift card provided approximately 30 days' worth of basic breakfast for each student, which only covers one and half months of the three and a half months schools were closed. Food for Kids did provide immediate short-term relief, but is not a longer-term or sustainable approach for student nutrition programs.

Student nutrition programs modify delivery model to safely operate in COVID-19

Student nutrition programs generally use two main delivery models: meal is delivered to each classroom or meal is served in a cafeteria, gymnasium, or hallway.

When the Province reopened publicly funded schools for the 2020/21 school year, specific requirements were put in place to enhance health and safety procedures. The Ministry of Education outlined new student learning models where:

- elementary and secondary schools established student cohorts to reduce interaction between the student population;
- secondary schools operated with class cohorts attending school on alternate schedules for the morning hours with remote learning in the afternoon and on alternate days; and
- school boards provided remote learning options for students who would not be attending school in-person.

The new learning models meant that student nutrition programs needed to adapt rapidly. Not all programs were able to modify their delivery model quickly and many were temporarily put on hold until safe to resume. Specifically, before-school breakfast programs in elementary and secondary schools where students from different cohorts congregate were paused, as were afternoon-time lunch and snack programs in secondary schools since students were only in school for the morning hours. Nevertheless, student nutrition programs have been creative in adapting their delivery models to ensure that as many students as possible continue to receive a nutritious meal each school day. For example, elementary school lunch programs are now delivered to the classroom rather than eaten in the school cafeteria or gymnasium; and many breakfast programs changed to a morning meal program to ensure that students continued to receive a nutritious meal. So with some modifications to program delivery,

the majority of student nutrition programs are operating during the pandemic.

Student nutrition programs face increased operational challenges

School boards and their foundations reported that student nutrition programs experienced greater challenges from September to December 2020 as a result of new COVID-related restrictions in schools. These challenges amplified long-standing issues related to infrastructure, funding, and economical access to nutritious food both in and out of school.

Measures have been put in place to limit contact in schools. These measures also limit visitors to the school, so fewer or no volunteers are available to prepare and serve food at student nutrition programs, which are largely dependent on the collaboration between parent and community volunteers with the school. The availability of volunteers is also affected by the unavailability of parent volunteers who remain home to care for their child(ren) who are now remote learners. With fewer volunteers, programs are depending more on food items that were already single-serve and required less preparation. Nutritious options are available; however, the variety is less and generally more costly than bulk food items or foods requiring some preparation to wrap in individual portions. In addition, the constant fluctuation in the number of students who are learning in-school, remotely, or temporarily isolating, and the unknown risk of school closures makes it difficult for programs to plan for and take advantage of price savings when ordering large volumes of perishable foods. Programs are also reporting fewer parent donations this fall and increased demand for nutrition support by more students. It is anticipated that these challenges will continue into 2021. Despite the challenges, school communities and student nutrition program partners are working diligently to ensure that healthy food is available to nourish over 200,000 students each school day.

Increased food insecurity observed in school communities

*Who's Hungry 2020*ⁱ reports staggering figures of food bank use. Before COVID-19, food bank visits in Toronto were 5% above the previous year, which was equivalent to the values at the peak of the 2008/09 financial crisis. By June 2020, food bank visits increased to 22% above and to 51% above by August 2020 compared to the previous year. Increased food costs are added stressors for families struggling even more as a result of the economic impact of the pandemic. *Canada's Food Price Report 2021*ⁱⁱ forecasts that prices for all food categories could increase by up to 5% in 2021 compared to 2020, which is in addition to the rise in food prices of up to 4% in 2020 as a result of the pandemic and other factors.

Not surprisingly, student nutrition programs have observed more food insecurity in their school communities, in particular among secondary students from marginalized and racialized communities. In response, some secondary schools have set up 'grab and go bins' which they report are emptied rapidly as students take food home for the afternoon and the following remote learning day. In addition, Toronto Public Health has received requests for funding from new schools to start up student nutrition programs for the first time and for requests to support remote learners.

While the City's Student Nutrition Program has provided some immediate relief during COVID-19 to address food insecurity, the Program was not envisioned or designed to be a food security support mechanism or to address systemic food security issues. A

more holistic approach was put forward on December 16, 2020 to City Council where City Council adopted a report from the Deputy City Manager Community and Social Services, *TO Supports: COVID-19 Equity Action Plan*, which outlined key actions related to addressing increased food security issues and other long-standing, system health inequities related to poverty.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.HL24.1>

COVID-19 creates equity gaps among students accessing student nutrition programs

The pandemic has changed where and how students learn and challenged student nutrition programs to provide equitable nutrition support to students regardless of whether they are learning in-school or remotely.

Based on discussions with the TDSB and TCDSB, Toronto Public Health knows that an average of 30% of students who attend public schools are learning remotely, which reflects 35% of elementary students and 25% of secondary students. Looking specifically at the demographic characteristics of students who attend school TDSB preliminary data shows:

- proportionally more grade 3-12 students whose parents have less education and/or who are from lower socioeconomic status families are remote learners;
- proportionally more South Asian and East Asian students chose to attend school remotely; and
- student place of birth and time in Canada of students attending in-person and remotely were similar.

Remote learners do not have the same access to their in-school student nutrition program that they did before COVID-19, which is concerning since student nutrition programs operate in schools that reach proportionally more students who experience greater levels of external challenges¹.

The expectation is schools will one day return to the in-school learning model so the need for a model for remote learners is a short term need. Nonetheless, an equity gap exists for remote learners that requires immediate attention to ensure that the needs of vulnerable students who rely on student nutrition programs are met.

Student nutrition programs need stability in a changing environment

Within its mandate to allocate municipal and provincial funds, SNO-Toronto examined how it could provide as much funding stability to programs within the COVID-19 response which is an evolving environment. It was important that programs had enough funds to open and operate in September, even though they did not know exactly how many students would be enrolled in their schools or what COVID-19 restrictions they would face. The following key decisions were made:

- The funding allocation for each student nutrition program was based on the participation numbers requested in each program's original application since the

¹ The Education Opportunities Index produced by the Ministry of Education ranks relative need of all publically funded schools in Ontario including public, Catholic, and French boards and is used to confirm eligibility for student nutrition program funding.

actual enrolment was not known at the time. That is, if the program requested funds to reach 500 students and 30% or 150 fewer students enrolled for September, the program had additional funds to offset pressures from increased food costs due to COVID-19.

- The funding for 170 breakfast programs was temporarily redirected to enable a morning meal format. Congregate meal programs are not permitted in an effort to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools. Breakfast programs generally serve a smaller number of students (e.g. 50 students) whereas a universal morning meal program serves the entire school population. As a result, about half of the schools with breakfast programs received additional funds to help them pivot and reach more students than before COVID-19. In the remaining schools, while the breakfast program was not available, students continued to access other student nutrition programs operating at these schools, such as snack or lunch programs.
- Funds were flowed monthly to the programs to ensure there was flexibility to adjust funding allocations in the event that some programs were able to reopen, student numbers leveled off or schools closed again.

SNO-Toronto's plan is to reassess the above funding decisions in February 2021.

Nutrition support for remote learners can take many forms

Municipal and provincial funding for student nutrition programs is allocated and structured to support students attending in-school settings only, which impacts whether remote learners can access student nutrition programs. In October 2020, the Province broadened the purpose of its provincial student nutrition program funds to include providing nutrition support to remote learners who otherwise would have accessed a student nutrition program. No additional provincial funds were provided to support remote learners.

Models mobilized across the province when schools first closed, such as grocery gift cards and delivery of meal kits to home, only provided immediate short-term relief and are not sustainable. Nonetheless, the Board of Health recognized that immediate support is needed for remote learners who previously accessed student nutrition programs and on December 14, 2020 provided the same extension for municipal funds as did the Province. The intent of this approval is for student nutrition programs to have the flexibility to determine the best way to address local nutrition needs of remote learners who attended their school before the pandemic. There is not a one size fits all solution and actions will depend on the unique situation experienced locally by schools and students. In some schools, support may take the form of extending grab and go programs to remote learners, reinitiating the Food for Kids grocery gift card program and/or other local solutions. All of these supports are more costly than offering traditional in-school meals. As such, existing funds may not be sufficient to provide support for students currently learning in-school and remotely. School boards and their foundations are expected to provide guidance to and engage with student nutrition programs to help determine the best local approaches to support their respective remote learners, while at the same time not destabilizing the in-school student nutrition programs.

The reach of the 2020 municipal funding is impacted by COVID-19

The 2020 municipal Student Nutrition Program funding of \$16.06 million was projected to provide 214,000 nutritious meals each school day to 195,000 individual students across 624 Toronto school communities. Some schools offer more than one student nutrition program, based on identified local needs. Also, while morning meal programs in elementary schools are universal and reach the full school enrolment, programs in secondary schools reach about one-third of the students. Based on the 2019/20 enrolment figures, if all students enrolled in a student nutrition program school accessed their program, then the number of students accessing programs would increase from 195,000 to approximately 251,000 students.

COVID-19 has impacted the initial 2020 funding projections. Not all student nutrition programs opened on the first day of school, some programs have not been able to open or are serving a reduced number of students based on October 2020 figures of in-school enrolments. Student nutrition programs which had breakfast programs that pivoted to universal morning meal programs, increased the number of students participating in a program. So from a financial perspective, the impact of students moving to remote learning may be offset by the increased number of students benefiting from a universal morning meal and the increased cost of food.

Additional resources required for remote learners

As requested by the Board of Health, this report includes an estimate of additional resources needed to provide nutrition support to remote learners who otherwise would be accessing their student nutrition programs. The additional funding will allow student nutrition programs to increase their support to remote learners while mitigating against destabilizing programs for in-school learners.

To arrive at an estimate of additional resources needed to support remote learners, Toronto Public Health examined two scenarios: (1) providing \$50 grocery gift cards per student and/or providing in-school meal equivalent options such as a "grab and go meal" for students; and (2) providing additional funding to programs equivalent to the financial support provided for an in-school meal per student such as a "grab and go" option. The approaches take into consideration the following assumptions:

- 35% of elementary students and 25% of secondary students have moved to remote learning;
- the number of students that moved to remote learning is based on the full enrolment of the school, not on the number of students who accessed the student nutrition program previously. This recognizes that student nutrition programs which are not universal always have the option to become universal based on student needs. It also recognizes that secondary students in the adapted model are part-time in-school and part-time remote;
- the value of \$50 grocery gift card represents 30 basic breakfasts, is based on food costs only, is applied equally for elementary and secondary students, and recognizes that a student does not have the same buying power as a student nutrition program;
- the cost of providing an in-school meal per student is based on food costs only, considers that more elementary students than secondary students moved to remote learning, different food costs are applied to recognize the different nutrition needs for elementary and secondary students, and recognizes that student nutrition programs

- can take advantage of economies of scale when buying food; and
- student nutrition programs can use the funds to determine the best way to address local nutrition needs of remote learners.

The City's 2021 Budget covers two school years: January to June 2021 (73 school days in the 2020/21 school year) and September to December 2021 (115 school days in the 2021/22 school year). So in anticipation that COVID-19 may necessitate a remote learning model for the first four months of the 2021/22 school year, funding estimates are categorized into two time periods: (1) January to June 2021 and (2) September to December 2021.

Table 1: Estimates for Additional Resources for Nutrition Support for Remote Learners

Time Period	Scenario 1 \$50 gift card and/or in-school meal equivalent per student (i.e. a "grab and go" option)		Scenario 2 In-school meal equivalent per student (i.e. "grab and go" option)	
	Total Program estimate	20% Municipal Contribution	Total Program estimate	20% Municipal Contribution
2020/21 school year (January - June)	\$15,493,090	\$3,094,618	\$13,181,362	\$2,636,272
2021/22 school year (September - December)	\$9,670,680	\$1,934,136	\$8,569,463	\$1,713,893
2021 Additional Resources Required	\$25,163,770	\$5,028,754	\$21,750,825	\$4,350,165

To align with the municipal funding applied to existing student nutrition programs, additional resources are applied towards the purchase of nutritious food at a contribution rate of 20 per cent of total costs. The projected reach for both options is 77,000 remote students. If the other 80 per cent of additional funds is not raised from other sources, the projected reach of the additional municipal resources would decrease to 15,400 students.

Toronto Public Health used the two scenarios above to estimate an amount of additional resources needed to provide immediate support to remote learners. With either scenario, the additional funds can be applied at the local level to provide student nutrition programs the flexibility to determine the best way to address local nutrition needs of remote learners. Of the two, Scenario 1 is a more equitable option in comparison to Scenario 2. The funding amount in Scenario 1 provides more flexibility

where local student nutrition programs can apply a broader range of actions to support remote learners, while the funding estimates in Scenario 2 are based primarily on grab and go supports. Also, Scenario 1 takes into consideration that remote learners do not have the same buying power as in-school programs do which enjoy some economies of scale and access to bulk purchase, which a single remote learner does not.

Toronto Public Health continues to monitor the evolving situation with schools and works with student nutrition programs, school boards and their foundations to ensure the safe operation of programs. Emerging needs of students and school communities which currently are not funded for a student nutrition program are not included. Extending funding to additional school communities would be considered an expansion of the municipal Student Nutrition Program.

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SIGNATURE

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ⁱ Daily Bread Food Bank, North York Harvest Food Bank, *Who's Hungry 2020, Beyond COVID-19: Building a Future without Poverty*. accessed December 12, 2020 <https://www.dailybread.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Whos-Hungry-Report-2020.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Dalhousie University, University of Guelph, University of Saskatchewan, The University of British Columbia, *Canada's Food Price Report 11th Edition 2021*. accessed December 17, 2020 [https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/sites/agri-food/Food%20Price%20Report%202021%20-%20EN%20\(December%208\).pdf](https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/sites/agri-food/Food%20Price%20Report%202021%20-%20EN%20(December%208).pdf)