

May 10, 2021

Councillor Joe Cressy, Chair Board
Toronto Board of Health
Toronto City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto Ontario

By email to: boh@toronto.ca

Re: Item HL28.2 – 2021 Student Nutrition Program Service Subsidies.

Dear Councillor Cressy and Board of Health Members:

My name is Sandy Maxwell and I am a Registered Dietitian at Nutrition Connections, a centre for promoting healthy eating and nutrition within the Ontario Public Health Association. OPHA is a member-based, not-for-profit charitable organization that has been advancing the public health agenda since 1949. OPHA provides leadership on issues affecting the public's health and has a vision of optimal health for all.

As a member of the [Coalition for Healthy School Food](#), I urge you to support recommendation #3 to request the Federal Government to provide core funding for a national school food program, to strengthen this recommendation by including concepts of universality and health, and to endorse the Coalition for Healthy School Food.

As someone who has been involved in Student Nutrition Programs (SNPs) for over two decades, both at the local and provincial level, I am keenly aware of the benefits of school food programs for the health and well-being of children and youth.

I am also familiar with Student Nutrition Programs in Toronto, and I am impressed with the degree of commitment at all levels to ensure that programs are well supported and resourced. I would like to applaud the City of Toronto for their continued investments in Student Nutrition Programs and being leaders in this area. As one of the largest funders of SNPs in the country, lending your voice to the call for a universal, cost-shared healthy school food program will be significant.

Our research (and that of others) on the state of healthy eating behaviours in children and youth, shows some disturbing trends. Many of Canada's young people are at risk for inadequate food or specific nutrient intakes, notably calcium, vitamin D, and magnesium. Often, they are also ingesting too little fibre and potassium and too much sodium and sugar.

The most recent Canadian data from 2015/2016 reports that almost 80% of youth ages 12 to 19, are failing to consume adequate vegetables and fruits, putting them at an increased risk of developing chronic diseases.

Canadian research shows that school food programs increase consumption of healthy foods, reduce the risk of chronic disease, and improve mental health, positively influencing children's nutritional

knowledge, dietary behaviours, and food intake. School food programs improve educational outcomes and increase graduation rates by reducing hunger in classrooms, a known barrier to concentration and learning. They help students feel connected and that they belong; feelings that have been eroded during Covid-19. A National School Food Program would have a positive impact on families, particularly women who invest significant time preparing food for school.

This past January, the Council of Ontario Directors of Education and the Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health [wrote](#) to Premier Ford, pointing out that “school food programs are increasingly seen as vital contributors to students’ physical and mental health”, noting the growing research that shows the value of school food programs to improve food choices and support student success, including academic performance, reduced absenteeism, and improved student behaviour. Yet, as these public health and education leaders explain, SNPs have been consistently underfunded and under-supported.

They underline the importance of school food programs, especially during the pandemic and encourage Ontario Ministries to engage with federal partners to facilitate the development of universal SNPs across Ontario. They highlight the many unintended consequences of COVID-19’s impact on families making this a vital time to pilot new approaches to SNPs.

Covid-19 has brought significant unemployment and rising food insecurity, and an increasing number of families have had to turn to emergency food aid. Statistics Canada recently shared that 19.2% of Canadians living in a household with children reported experiencing food insecurity. We also know that Black households experience significantly more food insecurity than white households and this has almost certainly been exacerbated by Covid-19.

It is widely recognized that structural racism and systemic inequity have created the economic and social conditions for increased rates of high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes, which are among the biggest risk factors for sickness and mortality from Covid-19.

Now is the time to support a national school food program that will take pressure off the family budget and be a support for the millions of children and youth who are unable to access healthy food at this time. Investing in a national school food program that is universal and without means-testing can contribute to leveling the playing field and ensuring that all students are able to access a healthy meal or snack each day, although it would not be a replacement for needed income supports for the unacceptable number of Canadians living in poverty.

While the federal 2019 budget recognized the critical importance of healthy meals for a child’s education and announced the government’s intention to work with provinces and territories towards the creation of a national school food program, budget 2021 did not support that commitment. That is why I am writing today, to urge you to lend your voice to the Coalition for Healthy School Food, to help make a national school food program a higher priority.

Sincerely,



Sandy Maxwell, Registered Dietitian
Senior Nutrition Policy and Program Analyst
Nutrition Connections, a centre within the Ontario Public Health Association