

## **Realizing A Universal Student Nutrition Program in Toronto**

**Date:** October 2, 2024

**To:** City Council

**From:** Medical Officer of Health

**Wards:** All

### **SUMMARY**

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In April 2024, the federal government announced the creation of a National School Food Program. The announcement included an investment of \$1 billion nationally over five years to reach 400,000 more students each year.

Domestic and international evidence shows school food programs (known locally as student nutrition programs) contribute to the wellbeing of children, their families, and communities. The City of Toronto is a leader in advocating for and investing in student nutrition programs. In 2012, City Council endorsed a vision for a universal student nutrition program - one that is delivered in all Toronto elementary and secondary schools so that all children and youth would benefit from this nutrition strategy. The federal commitment is a significant step towards this goal.

This report provides an overview of student nutrition programs in Toronto, as well as a phased plan to implement a universal student nutrition program in Toronto with the support of federal funds. A phased approach to expanding nutrition programs should reflect school readiness, stakeholder collaboration, funding for start-up costs, and capacity building to ensure all Toronto students have access to safe, culturally appropriate, and nutritious food during the school day.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. City Council receive this report for information.

## FINANCIAL IMPACT

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There is no financial impact resulting from the adoption of the recommendation in this report.

## DECISION HISTORY

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On October 1, 2024, Executive Committee adopted Item EX17.1 - Building a Universal Student Food Program in Toronto and requested the City Manager, in coordination with the Medical Officer of Health, to report to the November 5, 2024 meeting of the Executive Committee on funding required to deliver student food programs by January 2025 to eligible schools that have previously applied for funding but were denied due to funding constraints. The City Manager, in coordination with the Medical Officer of Health, was also requested to report back by the second quarter of 2025 on a vision and strategy for achieving a universal student food program in Toronto.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.EX17.1>

On September 9, 2024, the Board of Health adopted Item HL16.9, Critical Need For Universal Student Nutrition, and directed the Medical Officer of Health to report directly to the October 9, 2024 meeting of City Council with a phased-in plan to implement a universal school food program in Toronto in January 2025, if federal funds flowed by November 2024, including prioritization of the more than forty school communities that recently applied for a program and were denied due to lack of funding.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.HL16.9>

In April 2024, City Council adopted, with amendments, Item EX13.1, An Overview of Student Nutrition Program. The City Manager was directed to write to the Government of Canada to express support for the Federal National School Food Program and to the Government of Ontario to request that federal funds be received and disbursed as quickly as possible. Letters to federal and provincial counterparts were sent in summer 2024.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.EX13.1>

In October 2023, City Council adopted Item CC11.1, Support for a Canada-Wide Universal Student Nutrition Program, and, in doing so, called on the Government of Canada to establish a National School Food Program and endorsed a universal school food model.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.CC11.1>

## COMMENTS

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### **Student Nutrition Programs in Toronto**

Student nutrition programs are community-based meal and snack programs that operate primarily in school settings and are run locally by students, parents, and volunteers. These programs provide students energy and nutrients necessary for learning and development during the school day.

For the 2024-2025 school year, there are 819 programs receiving municipal funding located in 620 school communities. This represents approximately 73 per cent of public schools in Toronto. Individual school communities take the lead on planning and delivering their programs and selecting meal types and delivery models, which reflect the unique needs and diversity of the school population. The meal type options include breakfast (before school hours), morning meal (full meal during morning school hours), morning snack, lunch, and afternoon snack. Most schools offer morning meal programs (62 per cent), followed by breakfast programs (19 per cent).

### **Scientific evidence links eating breakfast with better student health**

Scientific evidence consistently demonstrates that healthy school meals support student mental and physical health, and positively impact food choices. Participating students focus better, achieve academic success, develop greater nutrition knowledge and healthier eating habits. These positive impacts are shown to continue into adulthood resulting in long-term positive health behaviours and outcomes, such as reduced diet-related chronic disease.<sup>1,2</sup> A universal and comprehensive student nutrition program helps ensure that all children and youth receive these benefits.

### **Student nutrition programs in Toronto are funded from multiple sources**

Funding for student nutrition programs comes from the City of Toronto, the Province of Ontario, parent and student contributions, community and school board fundraising, and corporate donations.

Funding from non-government sources and donations vary year-over-year. Funding from these sources is often not sufficient to cover expenses. This results in programs operating with a funding shortfall. A fully funded program assumes that school communities are able to operate a nutritious meal or snack program for each student, five days a week, for the entire school year (188 days). In reality, some programs may operate less than 5 days per week or offer smaller or fewer portions per student.

In the 2022-2023 school year (the most recent school year with full data available), funds from all government and non-government funding sources allocated to Toronto's

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<sup>1</sup> Colley P., et. al. (1998). The Impact of Canadian School Food Programs on Children's Nutrition and Health: A Systematic Review. Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research. <https://dcjournal.ca/doi/10.3148/cjdpr-2018-037>

<sup>2</sup> Haines J, Ruetz A. (2020). Comprehensive, Integrated Food and Nutrition Programs in Canadian Schools: A Healthy and Sustainable Approach. The Arrell Food Institute, The University of Guelph. [https://arrellfoodinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/SchoolFoodNutrition\\_Final\\_RS.pdf](https://arrellfoodinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/SchoolFoodNutrition_Final_RS.pdf)

student nutrition programs totaled \$35 million. The 2022-2023 school year projected total operating cost was \$85 million, which meant that programs were operating with a significant funding shortfall.

For the 2024-2025 school year, the funding from government sources is:

- City of Toronto: \$19.1 million
- Province of Ontario: \$8.5 million

While the Government of Ontario has provided one-time funding enhancements over the years to support program implementation, an annual adjustment to the provincial base funding to account for inflation in food prices has not been provided since 2015. Given the significant increases to the cost of food, provincial support is needed to provide stable base funding for student nutrition programs.

**School communities and student nutrition programs face increased pressures**

The main operating pressures facing existing student nutrition programs are the increased cost of food and increased program participation. From 2021 to 2024, there was a 9 per cent increase in participation rates in existing programs, which represents a change of almost 20,000 more meals served per school day. Existing school food programs do not have sufficient funds to operate at the level of a fully funded program; thus, they often make decisions to reduce operating days or reduce the quantity or quality of food.

School communities, which do not have student nutrition programs have reported seeing a growing need in their school population. This demand is reflected in data received through the annual student nutrition program municipal grant application process. The number of applications received from school communities not previously funded for student nutrition programs increased from 2021 to 2024, as seen in Table 1. Some applicants applied only once, while others applied in multiple years. These applications were declined due to insufficient funding because the priority of current municipal and provincial funding is to provide stable and reliable funding to existing programs.

*Table 1: Applications received from school communities not receiving municipal student nutrition program funding*

Grant Cycle	Number of Applications	Number of Students
2020	14	5,279
2021	7	3,418
2022	17	6,959
2023	38	15,326
2024 <sup>3</sup>	32	13,194

<sup>3</sup> Interim figures as the Fall Applications and Appeals process concludes December 2024.

**Program guidelines are established by the province**

The Ontario Student Nutrition Program is established by the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), which sets program operating and nutrition guidelines. Provincial funds flow through 14 Lead Agencies across the province contracted to administer the provincial funding. The Lead Agencies collaborate as members of the Student Nutrition Ontario (SNO) network. In Toronto, the provincial Lead Agency is the Toronto Foundation for Student Success (TFSS).

**Student Nutrition Ontario-Toronto allocates funding and provides program oversight**

While individual school communities operate their student nutrition programs at the community level, there is a partnership of organizations that work together to guide and support local programming. In Toronto, Student Nutrition Ontario-Toronto (SNO-Toronto) is the community advisory partnership with oversight for Toronto’s student nutrition programs. This partnership collaborates to recommend the allocation of municipal and provincial funding to Toronto’s student nutrition programs according to established funding criteria, provide program support, monitor program quality and accountability, and review policy and funding priorities to help manage community demands for limited government funding.

SNO-Toronto is comprised of representatives from Toronto Public Health, Toronto District School Board (TDSB), Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB), TFSS, and the Angel Foundation for Learning. Role and responsibilities of each organization are provided in Table 2.

*Table 2: Student Nutrition Ontario-Toronto Partner Roles and Responsibilities*

<b>Toronto Public Health</b>	Stewards municipal funds, chairs partnership, administers annual grant application process, provides nutrition and food safety training and expertise, nutrition quality assurance, and food safety inspections.
<b>School Boards</b>	In collaboration with school principals and administrators, integrates program into school day, supports program operations, provides space, maintains equipment, mobilizes parents and volunteers.
<b>Foundations</b>	Fundraises, administers government grants and other donations, ensures program financial accountability, supports local fundraising, trains coordinators to operate programs, supports volunteer recruitment, coordinates in-kind donations.

**National School Food Program**

The Board of Health and City Council have long advocated to the federal government for a national student nutrition program.

In 2024, the federal government pledged \$1 billion over five years as part of its launch of a National School Food Program (April 2024) and a National School Food Policy (June 2024) for Canada. The funding also includes investments for First Nations, Inuit,

and Métis communities. For the 2024-2025 fiscal year, approximately \$79 million has been allocated nationally, with a planned increase to \$201 million in 2025-2026. The budget is set to further increase in subsequent years, reaching \$261 million by 2028-2029.

On September 6, 2024, the federal government also announced the launch of the new School Food Infrastructure Fund (SFIF), which will help not-for-profit organizations invest in infrastructure and equipment to support school food programming across Canada. The \$20.2-million SFIF is delivered as a complement to the [National School Food Program](#).

The \$1 billion announcement specifies that funds would reach 400,000 more students nationally each year, in addition to those served by existing student nutrition programs. Details about funding criteria, distribution of funds, and the amount that will be allocated to support student nutrition programs in Toronto are unknown at the time of the writing of this report.

### A Phased Plan Towards a Universal Model

The federal funding is a significant step to realizing a sustainable universal student nutrition program in Toronto. Table 3 outlines high-level priorities to expand Toronto's student nutrition programs in the context of unknown information about the total amount that will be allocated to Toronto programs. A phased plan can focus and prioritize federal funding where it will have the most immediate and greatest impact. Since student nutrition programs in Toronto are operated through the SNO-Toronto partnership, decision-making on how best to deploy new funds will need to be done collaboratively with partner agencies.

*Table 3: A phased approach to expanding Toronto's student nutrition programs*

Timeline	Priority
Short-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>For the 2024-2025 school year, use core federal funding for existing student nutrition programs to increase stability for the full school year (819 programs in 620 school communities).</li><li>To ensure all current participants (approximately 234,000 students) have a nutritious meal or snack for the entire school year, the estimated cost is \$111 million.</li></ul>
Medium-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Invite additional schools to apply for federal funding, starting with those with greatest need.</li><li>Invest in infrastructure and capacity-building to support schools with start-up costs.</li><li>Encourage use of funds for morning meals because they have the greatest impact where no prior program exists in a school.</li></ul>

Timeline	Priority
Longer-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To achieve universal coverage, expand the student nutrition program to all Toronto elementary and secondary schools.</li> <li>To reach all students enrolled in Toronto elementary and secondary schools (approximately 358,000) with one morning meal, the estimated cost is \$174 million.</li> </ul>

In the short-term, within the 2024-2025 school year, it is anticipated that the addition of federal funds can reduce the funding shortfall faced by the 819 programs already operating in Toronto. If additional funding develops from provincial sources, this could increase program stability for school communities. Examples of program enhancements for existing programs include an annual adjustment for the inflation of food prices and for growth in participant numbers.

In the medium-term, gradual expansion of student nutrition programs using a needs-based assessment approach could prioritize schools that reach higher needs students. Expansion could also include funding for food costs and start-up costs. Program expansion to one morning-time student nutrition program (breakfast, morning meal or morning snack) per new school community would align with evidence of where there is greatest health benefit and would increase access to the limited incremental government funding.

Over the longer-term, expansion could continue the efforts in the medium-term approach until all schools are offering at least one student nutrition program. During each school year of program expansion, outreach and consultation with community partners would be vital to validate school community need and support school readiness to start and sustain a student nutrition program. To maximize the success and stability, all new programs would require federal, provincial, and municipal funding.

## Key Considerations for Expansion

- **School readiness for successful start-up and program delivery:** Many student nutrition programs operate in spaces that were not originally designed to offer meal programs. Menus and operations are strongly influenced by available funding, school infrastructure (food preparation, storage and delivery space, equipment, volunteer capacity), parent community commitment, and school priorities.
- **Consultation with community partners:** Toronto Public Health does not deliver student nutrition programs but works closely with community partners in the SNO-Toronto partnership to provide program oversight, expertise, and support. Consultation and coordination with partners and other stakeholders to discuss opportunities, challenges, solutions, and implementation plans is critical to ensure there is capacity to manage and sustain program growth.
- **Direct limited funding through a needs-based approach:** When new funding for expansion is limited, a funding process that includes a needs assessment will direct funds to where they are most needed.

- **Support administrative capacity of agencies contracted to administer funding:**  
There is administrative infrastructure and operational costs required to support the delivery, administration, and monitoring of the Student Nutrition Program. Administration requires systems and staffing to perform functions such as tracking and distribution of funds; review and reconciliation of monthly financial reports submitted by student nutrition programs; and compilation, analysis, and reporting of data.
- **Stable government funding is key to the success of student nutrition programs:** Even with the addition of federal funding anticipated in 2024-2025, the combined government funds are not sufficient to ensure that every school has at least one student nutrition program. Reliable and sufficient core funding from all levels of government is essential to ensure the stability of existing programs and to expand to a universal, comprehensive program. For program stability that delivers optimal impact for children, expansion funding must include funds for food purchase, start-up costs, capacity-building, and administration.

## Next Steps

The Federal National School Food Program is a significant investment in the health, education, and well-being of Toronto's children. It is an important first step towards a national universal program where all school-aged children have daily access to nutritious food at school. To reach that goal, key components to support and expand student nutrition programs include school readiness, stakeholder collaboration, and enhanced support and funding for start-up and capacity building. Stable and ongoing funding is needed from all levels of government to ensure all children and youth have access to the health, educational, and social benefits of a universal and comprehensive school food program.

## CONTACT

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## SIGNATURE

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