

October 8, 2024

Re: EX17.1 - Building a Universal Student Food Program in Toronto

Dear Mayor and Members of Toronto City Council,

Social Planning Toronto is a non-profit, charitable community organization that works to improve equity, social and economic justice. In our efforts to address policy and systems change, we collaborate with over 150 community-based and grassroots organizations that collectively represent tens of thousands of economically and socially marginalized residents across the city. In September, Social Planning Toronto deputed at the Board of Health meeting to voice our support for the Board of Health Budget Committee recommendations to increase student nutrition program funding. We are very pleased to see that the Mayor is taking concrete steps to make a universal student lunch program a reality.

For many years, Social Planning Toronto has tracked, reported and organized to advance solutions and investments that will address the root causes and reduce the impacts of poverty in our City. We know from the most recently available data on child and family poverty that there are almost 97,000 children in Toronto living in low-income households. That means a child and family poverty rate of more than 20%; an increase of almost 4% between 2020 and 2021. The 2022 statistics were recently released and reveal that this rising trend in child poverty is continuing. Children in Toronto need universal access to food at school now, more than ever.

In the past year, we have been working with a group of community partners to identify policy solutions that could help those who are struggling to respond to the rapidly increasing rates of food insecurity. The number one recommendation was to increase long-term and flexible funding for food security, including increases to the Student Nutrition program to cover rising food costs and demand, and making breakfast and lunch programs universally available in all publicly funded schools in Toronto.

Toronto is a long-way from having universally available student nutrition programming, in the midst of growing need. For existing programs, the ongoing reliance on school communities, parents and volunteers to fundraise and deliver these programs is unsustainable and inequitable. As a parent with school-aged children, I've seen the disparity between school communities who are able to subsidize and fundraise for their student nutrition programs and schools who don't have this capacity. Not surprisingly, schools in higher-need communities often end up with programs that run out of funding during the

school year, while some programs are forced to reduce the amount of food that's offered to children, or the number of days they run their programs. More often than not, these are communities with higher racialized populations, including Black, Indigenous, and newcomer populations. I applaud the steps being taken to create a universal lunch program across our City so that all children can have equal access.

Recently, I joined an event hosted by the Daily Bread Food Bank to recognize organizations, individuals and corporations who have supported the Food Bank's mission. The generosity and care was remarkable. However, I was struck by the thousands of volunteer hours and millions of dollars that are being donated to address hunger that shouldn't exist. We need our governments to step up with sustainable solutions to the root causes of poverty.

Every year, Toronto City Council has approved increased funding for the Student Nutrition Program, but as inflation rapidly increases and program demand grows, this funding should continue to be boosted to meet the rising demand of our school communities. Ontario has provided one-time funding increases and the Federal Government has announced a National School Food Program, but the current plan won't be enough to keep up and feed our children. Our governments are failing in their efforts to address rising poverty levels. That's why Social Planning Toronto has launched a call to City Council to move forward with its next Poverty Reduction Action Plan. A universal student food program is an important step in this process and we hope that City Council will move forward with this plan and bring the other levels of government to the table to ensure Toronto students can be fed.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Warm regards,

Melissa Wong
Director, Engagement & Strategic Initiatives
Social Planning Toronto