

Student Nutrition Program: Funding and Considerations for Expansion

Date: October 22, 2024

To: Executive Committee

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

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.

On October 9, 2024, City Council adopted *HL16.9, Critical Need For Universal Student Nutrition*, which provided an overview of student nutrition programs in Toronto and presented a phased-in plan to implement a universal school food program in Toronto. On October 9, 2024, City Council also adopted *EX17.1 Building a Universal Student Food Program in Toronto* and requested staff to report back to Executive Committee on the financial and operational requirements to deliver student nutrition programs by January 2025 in the school communities that applied for the 2023-2024 or 2024-2025 school years, were deemed eligible, but were denied due to funding constraints.

In response to City Council direction, this report provides the estimated funding requirements and operational considerations to deliver new student nutrition programs by school communities that applied for the 2023-2024 or 2024-2025 school years, were deemed eligible, but were denied due to funding constraints.

Funding these additional programs for the remainder of the 2024-2025 school year is an estimated \$2.2 million, and funding for an entire school year on an ongoing basis is an estimated \$3.9 million, excluding start-up costs and annual inflation adjustments.

The City Manager's Office was consulted in the development of this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. Executive Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

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

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the information as presented in the Financial Impact Section.

DECISION HISTORY

On October 9, 2024, City Council adopted Item HL16.9, Critical Need For Universal Student Nutrition, and received the report, Realizing A Universal Student Nutrition Program in Toronto, from the Medical Officer of Health for information. The report requested by the Board of Health provided an overview of student nutrition programs in Toronto and presented a phased-in plan to implement a universal school food program in Toronto.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.HL 16.9>

On October 9, 2024, City Council adopted, with amendments, 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 including intergovernmental contributions and operational considerations required to deliver student food programs by January 2025 in schools that applied for the 2023/24 or 2024/25 school years, were deemed eligible, but were denied due to funding constraints, and make a presentation to the October 21, 2024, meeting of the City-School Boards Advisory Committee.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.EX 17.1>

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.EX 13.1>

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

Funding for Student Nutrition Programs in Toronto

For the 2024-2025 school year, there are 819 student nutrition programs receiving municipal funding towards the cost of nutritious food located in 620 school communities. Approximately 73 per cent of the public schools in Toronto have a community-based student nutrition program run locally by students, parents, and volunteers.

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. For the 2024-2025 school year, the City of Toronto is investing \$19.1 million and the Province of Ontario is investing \$8.5 million; this funding goes toward the cost of nutritious food.

Federal Funding

In 2024, the federal government budgeted \$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 will be delivered as a complement to the National School Food Program.

Given that these are new investments from the federal government, details on how the funding will flow are yet to be ascertained.

Student Nutrition Ontario-Toronto provides program direction

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. SNO-Toronto is comprised of:

- Toronto Public Health
- Toronto District School Board

- Toronto Catholic District School Board
- Toronto Foundation for Student Success (TFSS)
- The Angel Foundation for Learning (AFL)

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. As part of the partnership, Toronto Public Health:

- Chairs SNO-Toronto
- Has the lead role for nutrition and food safety expertise; and
- Coordinates the annual government grant application processes.

Unfunded Applications from 2023 and 2024 Grant Cycles

The [annual renewal, application, and review process](#) for municipal and provincial student nutrition program funding is led by Toronto Public Health, as a member of SNO-Toronto. Funding priority is given to student nutrition programs that have received municipal and/or provincial funding within the last three years and continue to meet eligibility requirements.

During the 2023 and 2024 grant cycles, in addition to the schools that already have a student nutrition program, there were 70 applications received from school communities not previously funded for student nutrition programs. Some applicants applied in 2023 only, while others applied in both 2023 and 2024. These applications were declined due to insufficient funding. Of the 70 applications received, 21 were from unique public school communities that met the needs-based criteria at the time of assessment. The number of applications received in 2023 and 2024 from school communities not previously funded for student nutrition programs are shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

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

Grant Cycle	Number of Applications	Number of Students
2023	38	15,326
2024 ¹	32	13,194

Table 2: Applications received from school communities not receiving student nutrition program funding, who meet the needs-based eligibility criteria

Grant Cycle	Number of Applications	Number of Students
2023	16	6,248

¹ Interim figures as the Fall Applications and Appeals process concludes December 2024.

Grant Cycle	Number of Applications	Number of Students
2024 ²	14	5,336
2023 and 2024	21 unique applications	8,121 unique students

It is important to note that applications received for new programs may not be reflective of overall need in Toronto, as not all school communities without a student nutrition program applied for funding, even if they met the needs-based criteria. Also, school communities that do not meet the needs-based criteria at the overall student population level, may see a pocket of need in their student base.

Since current funding is insufficient to offer a truly universal program and funds for expansion in public school communities have not been available since 2018, current funding is focused to provide stable and reliable funding to existing programs. If incremental expansion funds were available, the funding application and review process could help direct funds where they are most needed in a phased approach.

Estimated Amount to Fund New Programs

Table 3 provides estimated program funding needed to operate 21 student nutrition programs, represented by the sample of 21 applicants from the 2023 and 2024 grant cycle which met needs-based eligibility criteria.

Table 3: Estimated Program Funding to Operate Student Nutrition Programs

Number of Programs	Number of students	January - June 2025 (2024-2025 school year) ³	Estimated ongoing costs for each school year (Sept. - June) ⁴
21	8,121	\$2.2 million	\$3.9 million

The funding estimates are for reference only. The estimates include:

- One student nutrition program (specifically a morning meal program that contains one vegetable or fruit, plus one protein, plus one whole grain food) offered to all students enrolled in the identified elementary or secondary public schools, based on school enrolment reported for the 2024-2025 school year, as of October 2024.

² Interim figures as the Fall Applications and Appeals process concludes December 2024.

³ Funding estimate for January-June 2025 is for the 2024-2025 school year and uses the 2024 meal cost.

⁴ Funding estimate based on numbers for the 2025-2026 school year and applies the 2025 meal cost, which includes a 2.5% cost of food increase from 2024. To be adjusted each subsequent school year based on participation levels and food cost inflationary increase.

The estimates exclude:

- Start-up costs such as special equipment purchases (small and large), supplies, space retrofit, volunteer honorarium, etc. These costs are unique to each location and can range considerably depending on the condition of the space available for program operation and can be substantial for brand new space. For example, a new program may receive permission or in-kind use of an existing kitchen space in a school with some equipment, storage, and preparation space to offer a modest program. In other situations, a program may need to consider a renovation or purchase equipment to ensure the space is suitable to safely store, prepare, and serve food. Start-up costs are not typically covered by municipal funding. School communities rely on parent and student contributions, community and school board fundraising, and corporate donations to cover these additional costs.

School readiness is needed for successful start-up and program delivery

Expansion to new school communities requires careful assessment and planning to ensure that the elements that are needed for a successful program launch and long-term program stability are in place. These elements include:

- school readiness, including school administration and parent community support, program design, infrastructure, securing equipment and supplies, recruiting and training volunteers on program operations and food safety, menu planning and food procurement, local fundraising, sustainability planning, and securing core government funding;
- engagement with community partners for decision-making on how best to deploy new funds and to support program start-up and operations; and
- administrative capacity of agencies contracted to administer funding.

To start-up a new program, the Toronto Foundation for Student Success and the Angel Foundation for Learning work with the appropriate school boards and individual schools to assess what is needed from an operational point of view (e.g., infrastructure and equipment, recruiting volunteers, training) and how to fund those needs. Toronto Public Health's primary roles in program start-up are to provide guidance on nutrition and menu planning as well as consultation on infrastructure needs to ensure safe food handling during program operation.

Conclusion

Student nutrition programs help to ensure that children and youth have access to safe, adequate, and culturally appropriate nutritious food. Evidence consistently demonstrates that healthy school meals support student mental and physical health, and positively impact food choices. Participating students develop greater nutrition knowledge and healthier eating habits, focus better, score higher marks in reading, math, and science, and are more likely to graduate high school. 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.^{5,6} The City of Toronto supports a universal student nutrition program where all children and youth have access to nutritious food at school.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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⁵ 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>

⁶ 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