

2024 Student Nutrition Program Service Subsidies

Date: May 13, 2024

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

Student nutrition programs are meal and snack programs offered primarily in school settings. These programs help to ensure that children and youth, especially those at risk for poor nutritional intake, have access to safe and culturally appropriate nutritious food. Research continues to demonstrate 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, such as reduced diet-related chronic disease.^{1,2}

Toronto's Student Nutrition Program has two streams: the Public Schools Stream, which includes public schools and some grandfathered independent schools and community sites, and the Independent Schools Stream. Student nutrition programs depend on funding from the City of Toronto (the City), the Government of Ontario, student and parent contributions, community and school board fundraising, and corporate donations. Additional funding and support from the federal and provincial governments is needed to meet student needs and ensure sustainable programs.

This report makes recommendations for the 2024 Student Nutrition Program service subsidy allocations, which includes an 8.5 per cent cost of food inflationary increase of \$1,495.9 thousand from the approved 2023 budget. The proposed combined allocations to the Angel Foundation for Learning and the Toronto Foundation for Student Success are for the purpose of administering the 2024 approved municipal funding to eligible student nutrition programs across the City of Toronto and total \$19,134.2 thousand which includes \$280.1 thousand held in reserve for appeals and Fall applications.

¹ Colley et al., 2018. The impact of Canadian School Food Programs on Children's Nutrition and Health. <https://dcjournal.ca/doi/10.3148/cjdpr-2018-037>

² Haines & Reutz, 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

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. City Council authorize the Medical Officer of Health to enter into agreements and other suitable arrangements, on behalf of the City of Toronto, for the transfer of funds to the Angel Foundation for Learning (\$4,919.3 thousand) and the Toronto Foundation for Student Success (\$14,214.9 thousand) for the purpose of administering the 2024 approved municipal funding (totalling \$19,134.2 thousand) to eligible student nutrition programs across the City of Toronto on terms satisfactory to the Medical Officer of Health and in a form satisfactory to the City Solicitor.
2. The Board of Health request the Government of Canada to expand the National School Food Program to provide funding for a universal program which would provide nutritious meals for every school-aged child.
3. The Board of Health request the provincial Minister of Children, Community and Social Services to encourage the Government of Ontario to reach an agreement with the federal government as soon as possible so that the National School Food Program can be rolled out in the 2024-2025 school year.
4. The Board of Health forward this report to the federal Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, the federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, the federal Minister of Health, the federal Minister of Employment and Social Development Canada, the provincial Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, the provincial Minister of Health, the provincial Minister of Education, the Toronto District School Board, the Toronto Catholic District School Board, le Conseil scolaire Viamonde, le Conseil scolaire catholique MonAvenir, the Toronto Foundation for Student Success, the Angel Foundation for Learning, the Daily Bread Food Bank, and United Way Greater Toronto.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The 2024 Approved Operating Budget for Toronto Public Health includes funding of \$19,164.3 thousand gross and net for municipally funded student nutrition programs, as follows:

- \$18,844.7 thousand toward the cost of nutritious food for the Public Schools Stream which will reach 613 school communities across Toronto.
- \$319.6 thousand toward the cost of nutritious food and capacity building for the Independent Schools Stream which will support seven eligible independent schools and assessment for eligibility of three independent schools in Toronto.

This report recommends an allocation of \$19,134.2 thousand: \$4,919.3 thousand to the Angel Foundation for Learning and \$14,214.9 thousand to the Toronto Foundation for Student Success, which includes all funds held in reserve as outlined in Tables 1 and 2.

The proposed combined allocations are for the purpose of administering the 2024 approved municipal funding to eligible student nutrition programs in Toronto.

There is no financial impact associated with this report beyond what has been approved in the 2024 Approved Operating Budget for Toronto Public Health.

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 April 17, 2024, City Council adopted, with amendments, Item EX13.1 - An Overview of Student Nutrition Program, which included requests to the Government of Ontario to take action to secure federal funding as soon as possible for the 2024-2025 school year, and to increase funding of Toronto's Student Nutrition Program including inflationary costs.

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

On February 14, 2024, City Council adopted Item MPB15.1 "2024 Operating and Capital Budgets" and approved the 2024 Operating Budget for Toronto Public Health which included 2024 municipal funding for student nutrition programs.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.MPB15.1>

COMMENTS

Student Nutrition Programs are run by students, parents, and volunteers

The Student Nutrition Program has two streams: the Public Schools Stream, which includes public schools and a small number of grandfathered independent schools and community sites, and the Independent Schools Stream. These are community-based meal programs that are run locally by students, parents, and volunteers. Most are breakfast and morning meal programs that provide students the energy and nutrients they need to support their learning and development during the school day.

School nutrition programs not only benefit program participants, but also positively impact families, the broader community, and the greater economy by reducing household food costs, fostering job opportunities, and strengthening the local Agri-food sector,^{1,2,3} These programs also create opportunities for community capacity building, volunteering, and job skills development, which align with City priorities in [Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy](#).

³ The Economic Rationale for Investing in School Meal Programs for Canada: multi-sectoral impacts from comparable high-income countries. The Arrell Family Foundation. Reutz et al., 2023.

https://amberleyruetz.ca/assets/uploads/ruetz-consulting_the-economic-rationale-for-investing-in-school-meal-programs-for-canada.pdf

Community partnership model supports for Student Nutrition Program

Student Nutrition Ontario Toronto (SNO-Toronto) is a community advisory partnership which collaborates to provide oversight to student nutrition programs in Toronto, recommends the allocation of municipal and provincial funding to Toronto's student nutrition programs, provides program support, and monitors program quality and accountability.

SNO-Toronto is comprised of representatives from Toronto Public Health, Toronto District School Board, Toronto Catholic District School Board, Angel Foundation for Learning, and Toronto Foundation for Student Success. Table 1 outlines the roles and responsibilities of the partners.

Table 1: SNO-Toronto Partner Roles and Responsibilities

Organization	Roles and responsibilities
Toronto Public Health	Stewards municipal funds, chairs partnership, administers annual grant application process, provides nutrition and food safety training/expertise, nutrition quality assurance, and food safety inspections
School boards	Integrates program into school day, supports program operations, provides space, maintains equipment, mobilizes parents and volunteers
Angel Foundation for Learning, and Toronto Foundation for Student Success (the "Foundations")	Fundraises, administers government grants and other donations, ensures program accountability, supports local fundraising, trains coordinators to operate programs, supports volunteer recruitment, coordinates in-kind donations.

Toronto Public Health also has a contractual relationship with the Foundations for the administration of municipal funds. The contract includes requirements that each foundation provide the City with consolidated financial reports detailing their administration of municipal funds to student nutrition programs, with associated performance measures, twice a year, as well as annual audited financial statements.⁴

2024 review of applications

The joint application process for municipal and provincial student nutrition program grants began in December 2023, when existing student nutrition programs in Toronto were notified of the grant opportunity. Staff from each SNO-Toronto partner agency, except for Toronto Public Health, assisted program applicants to complete grant applications.

Annually, applications are reviewed by a panel of staff from Toronto Public Health, Angel Foundation for Learning, and Toronto Foundation for Student Success using standardized review procedures and following conflict of interest guidelines. The SNO-

⁴ See Angel Foundation for Learning Audited Financial Statements and Annual Reports webpage (<https://angelfoundationforlearning.org/annual-reports/>) and Toronto Foundation for Student Success Annual and Financial Reports webpage (<https://tfss.ca/about/annual-financial-reports/>) to view publicly-available reports.

Toronto Allocations Sub-Committee recommends applications for funding, which are considered by the SNO-Toronto Committee for approval. Standardized meal costs per student are used to estimate program costs and are adjusted annually for food inflation, when applicable. The process satisfies the requirements laid out in the *City of Toronto Community Grants Policy*, approved by City Council in 2019 (Item [2019.EC6.19](#)).

Summary of 2024 allocations and recommendations

The SNO-Toronto Committee received and approved the following recommendations for the distribution of municipal funds as outlined in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Summary of Allocations and Recommendations: Public Schools Stream

Foundation	Funding Amount (\$ thousand)
Angel Foundation for Learning (166 school communities)	4,919.3
Toronto Foundation for Student Success (447 school communities)	13,786.0
Toronto Foundation for Student Success (held in reserve for fall applications and appeals)	139.4
Total (613 school communities reaching 234,300 participants)	18,844.7

Funds held in reserve for late applications and appeals will be used to adjust the allocations as required prior to December 31, 2024. The entire municipal grant for existing programs is distributed to programs and directed to the cost of nutritious food.

Table 3: Summary of Allocations and Recommendations: Independent School Stream

Foundation	Funding Amount (\$ thousand)
Toronto Foundation for Student Success (7 independent schools reaching 1,410 participants)	108.9
Toronto Foundation for Student Success (held in reserve for fall applications, appeals, and new independent schools pending needs assessment results)	140.7
Toronto Foundation for Student Success (for community capacity building)	40.0
Subtotal	289.6
Administered by Toronto Public Health to support the assessment process	30.0

Foundation	Funding Amount (\$ thousand)
Total	319.6

Statistics Canada has been contracted to complete the needs-assessment analysis of student postal codes submitted by three (3) new independent schools. Pending the results from Statistics Canada, funds held in reserve will be used to support schools that are eligible for funding.

The municipal expansion for independent schools will continue through to December 31, 2024, and, similar to the Public Schools Stream, funds held in reserve may be used for fall applications and appeals. Funds held in reserve may also be allocated towards programs offered by independent schools under the Public Schools Stream as a measure to alleviate some of the funding pressure experienced by all municipally-funded programs.

The municipal grant in the Independent Schools Stream, except for the portion allocated to community capacity building and assessment, is distributed to programs and directed towards the cost of nutritious food. The funds for community capacity building are allocated to align with the current capacity and program coordination model used by the SNO-Toronto partnership with a focus on supporting the operational needs of new programs in independent schools.

All student nutrition programs approved for funding will receive municipal funding in three instalments. They must meet program requirements, including financial reporting to their respective foundation, to receive subsequent instalment cheques.

Use of the 2024 municipal budget enhancement

The 2024 allocation of the municipal investment continues to support the vision endorsed by the City of Toronto in 2012 to strengthen and grow student nutrition programs in Toronto, by:

- Focusing investment on breakfast/morning meal programs;
- Strengthening existing programs; and
- Strengthening the partnership funding model.

Toronto Public Health's 2024 Operating Budget increased by \$1,495.9 thousand to reflect an 8.5 per cent cost of food inflationary increase from the approved 2023 budget, which resulted in \$18,844.7 thousand allocated for the Public Schools Stream and \$319.6 thousand allocated for the Independent School Stream. The increase in funding will help programs offset some of the increased food costs.

The Independent Schools Stream is an initiative that began in 2019. From 2019 to 2024, of the 49 independent schools which expressed interest in offering a student nutrition program, eleven independent schools met the needs-based eligibility criteria outlined in the funding stream and seven of those applied for funding. The fall

application and appeal process, which will conclude by December 31, 2024, may change these numbers.

The City of Toronto contributes a portion of the total funds student nutrition programs need to operate. This contribution, or municipal funding level, when taken as a percentage of the total budget programs needed to run a fully funded program, will decrease from 17.4 per cent in 2023-2024 to 16.7 per cent for the 2024-2025-school year. The decrease in municipal funding level is largely due to increased participation reported by existing programs in their 2024 funding application, as outlined in Table 3.

In addition to municipal funding, student nutrition programs depend on funding from the Government of Ontario, student and parent contributions, community and school board fundraising, and corporate donations. Often programs do not receive or are challenged in generating funds from other sources which can result in funding pressures in programs.

Increased operating pressures

The main operating pressures facing student nutrition programs are the increased cost of food and increased program participation.

When food inflation is gradual, student nutrition programs are better able to manage fluctuations in food prices. The steep increase in food prices in recent years, coupled with the increase in participation rates (see Table 4), has posed a significant financial challenge for student nutrition programs. Programs have revisited their operating plans and often took measures such as reducing the number of operating days and/or reducing the nutritional quality and quantity of foods served.

Inflation is not limited to the cost of food, but also extends to other costs of living items such as housing, utilities, and health care. Student nutrition programs are seeing the far-reaching impact of inflation in increased demand for more students to access student nutrition program, as households seek to manage other increasing costs. Table 4 demonstrates this pressure, showing that the number of participants has increased year over year for existing student nutrition programs from 2021 to 2024.

Table 4: Change in Participant Numbers in Funded Applications

School Year	Number of Participants	Change from Prior Year
2021-2022	216,342	0.8% ⁵
2022-2023	219,378	1.4%
2023-2024	227,285	3.6%
2024-2025	235,710	3.7%

⁵ Number of participants in 2020 was 214,586, as reported in the 2020 Student Nutrition Program Service Subsidies Report

Efforts to reach more children in need, in addition to increased demand for the program, have contributed to increases in student participation rates, including: an influx of refugees attending schools, housing/apartment development in the community resulting in higher enrolment, expansion to school-wide program delivery, and change in program type offered reach more students (such as a change from a before-school breakfast program which reaches a subset of students to a universal morning meal program offered mid-morning).

During the 2024 grant application cycle, there were 32 applications received from school communities not previously funded for student nutrition programs. These new applicants requested funds to reach over 13,000 additional students not currently reached by the municipal grant. In addition, four sites currently funded for at least one student nutrition program requested funds to offer an additional program and collectively provide 1,800 more meals per school day to meet the growing need within their student population. However, these funding applications for new programs may not be reflective of overall community need.

Of the approximately 855 public schools in Toronto across the four public school boards, 235 do not have a student nutrition program. Of those, 68 public schools meet the needs-based eligibility threshold for municipal student nutrition program funding. The priority of current municipal funding for the Public Schools Stream is to provide stable and reliable funding to existing programs.

SNO-Toronto could not recommend expanding the student nutrition program to the request for additional or new programs as doing so would have reduced the funding provided to existing programs.

Government of Ontario funding

Ontario Student Nutrition Program, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), is administered by 14 lead agencies across Ontario. Toronto Foundation for Student Success is the lead agency in Toronto and is accountable to ensure provincial program criteria are met. The Toronto Foundation for Student Success subcontracts with the Angel Foundation for Learning to administer the provincial funding for programs located in Toronto Catholic District School Board sites and support program-level community development. Programs will receive their provincial funding at the same time as their municipal funding.

The Government of Ontario's 2024 investment for Toronto's student nutrition programs has yet to be confirmed; however, the base funding is not expected to change from the current base funding for 2023. Table 5 outlines the Government of Ontario's investment in Toronto's student nutrition programs in 2023-2024, which includes one-time funding.

In October 2023, the Government of Ontario announced a one-time \$5 million investment for the Ontario Student Nutrition Program and First Nations Student Nutrition Program. To leverage its investment, the Government of Ontario partnered with student nutrition program stakeholders to launch the *Healthy Students Brighter Ontario* campaign, a province-wide fundraising partnership with a goal to raise an additional \$5 million.

While the Government of Ontario has provided one-time funding enhancements over the years to support program implementation, a cost of food increase has not been applied to the provincial base funding since 2016. Given the significant increases to the cost of food, additional provincial support is needed for student nutrition programs.

Table 5: Summary of 2023 Government of Ontario Funding

Funding Use	Funding Amount (\$ thousand)
Base funding for existing programs towards food cost	6,340.2
One-time funding for existing programs towards food costs	1,575.0
Community development and administration funding	2,147.6
Total	10,062.8

An independent provincial review of the Ontario Student Nutrition Program and First Nations Student Nutrition Program was initiated in 2023. The results will inform policy decisions in the areas of program delivery models, cost drivers, partnerships, and opportunities to expand reach and support sustainability. Toronto Public Health has participated in these stakeholder engagement sessions.

Government of Canada support for national school food program

The Board of Health and City Council have long advocated to the federal government for a national student nutrition program, along with many stakeholders and community voices from across Canada. The 2022 Federal Budget included a commitment to develop a National School Food Policy, which was followed by a series of stakeholder consultations in 2023.

On April 16, 2024, the federal government confirmed the creation of a National School Food Program in its 2024 Federal Budget. The federal investment of one billion dollars over five years aims to provide meals to 400,000 more students each year in addition to those served by existing student nutrition programs.

Starting with the 2024-2025 school year, funds are expected to flow to Employment and Social Development Canada, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, and Indigenous Services Canada, which will work with provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners to expand access to school food programs. The 2024 Federal Budget also includes a Local Food Infrastructure Fund with \$62.9 million over three years to support community agencies invest in local food infrastructure for school food programs. Details regarding the funding criteria, distribution of funds, and the amount that will be allocated to Toronto's student nutrition programs are unknown at this time.

The 2024 Federal Budget is a welcome first step to address need; however, the National School Food Program as announced is not a universal program. Additional

support is needed from the federal government to provide a universal program where all school-aged children have access to a nutritious meal daily.

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