

## **A Vision and Strategy for a Universal School Food Program in Toronto**

Date: June 3, 2025

To: Executive Committee

From: City Manager

Wards: All

### **SUMMARY**

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In October 2024, Council directed City staff to report back by the second quarter of 2025 with a vision and strategy for achieving a universal student food program consistent with Toronto's Cool Food commitments, where a universal morning meal is provided in all Toronto school communities<sup>1</sup> by the 2026/2027 school year and a strategic path to achieving a universal lunch program no later than 2030.

This work resulted in the development of two key strategies:

- A phased implementation plan for a universal morning meal program, targeted for full rollout by the 2026/2027 school year.
- A strategic blueprint for establishing a universal lunch program by 2030.

This report:

- Summarizes best practices and a jurisdictional scan that informed the development of these strategies.
- Provides an overview of the current state of student nutrition programs in Toronto.
- Presents a vision and strategy to guide the development of a universal student nutrition program, including key capital and operating investment requirements.
- Provides an overview of program governance, administration, and ongoing funding.
- Outlines the framework for ongoing program measurement and evaluation.

The development of the strategy has made it clear that sustained advocacy is essential to closing ongoing funding gaps. While both the Province of Ontario and the Government of Canada currently provide funding, their contributions remain insufficient to meet the growing need. To ensure all children in Toronto have access to nutritious

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<sup>1</sup> The report uses the term school communities to describe programs delivered in schools, as these programs are not implemented by the schools themselves but by the surrounding community, including parents/guardians, volunteers, and community groups. In some cases, the number of programs exceeds the number of school communities, as some offer multiple student nutrition programs, such as both a morning meal and a lunch program.

food at school, both levels of government must build on their existing commitments with increased, sustained, and equitable investment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The City Manager recommends that:

1. City Council request the Province of Ontario increase its annual grant funding for the Student Nutrition Program to match the City of Toronto's current and future investments.
2. City Council request the Province of Ontario provide annual adjustments to provincial Student Nutrition Program funding in consideration of the impact of food cost inflation.
3. City Council [reiterate its request](#) to the Government of Canada for increased funding through the National School Food Program to support new and existing student nutrition programs, including dedicated support for infrastructure.
4. City Council amend the Toronto Public Health 2025 Capital Budget and 2026-2034 Plan to create a new capital project called "Universal Morning Meal Program", with a project cost of \$7.492 million and cash flow commitments of \$3.800 million in 2025 and \$3.692 million in 2026, fully funded by Capital from Current, to administer and support one-time costs related to the accelerated rollout of Phase 3 (Winter 2026) and Phase 4 (Fall 2026) of the Student Nutrition Program, for the implementation of a universal morning meal program.
5. City Council authorize the Medical Officer of Health to enter into agreements and other suitable arrangements with Toronto Foundation for Student Success and Angel Foundation for Learning on behalf of the City of Toronto, for the transfer and administration of the approved 2025 "Universal Morning Meal Program" municipal capital funding to eligible Toronto student nutrition programs on terms satisfactory to the Acting Medical Officer of Health and in a form satisfactory to the City Solicitor.

## FINANCIAL IMPACT

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The Student Nutrition Program (SNP) is a shared initiative supported by all three levels of government, alongside contributions from parents/guardians, the community and corporate fundraising. The City of Toronto provides a significant share of funding. The 2025 approved Operating Budget includes a notable increase to support the program's expansion and the continued delivery of existing programs to students across the city.

Included in the 2025 Operating Budget for Toronto Public Health is \$31.1 million gross and \$26.1 million net for the Student Nutrition Program. This represents an increase of \$9.3 million gross and \$6.9 million net from 2024 to strengthen existing programs and enable 50 new school communities in public schools to start a morning meal program. Total municipal investment, including the expansion of Phase 1 and Phase 2, is estimated to support 686 school communities during the 2025/2026 school year, once the Phase 2 expansion is complete.

Despite recent investments, the program is still not reaching all students in Toronto. To address this gap, a funding strategy for a universal morning meal program has been developed and is being implemented in four phases:

- Phase 1: Funded in 2024, supporting 23 new programs.
- Phase 2: Funded in 2025, supporting 50 new programs.

### **Ongoing Costs for Phase 2:**

Sustained funding for these programs will need to be requested through the 2026 budget process.

- Phase 3 – Winter 2026: Expansion to 77 additional school communities.
- Phase 4 – 2026/2027 School Year: Final phase of implementation, reaching the remaining 78 school communities

### **Additional challenges include:**

- 155 school communities in Toronto remain unfunded and do not yet have access to the program due to limited available resources, capacity or interest from the school communities.
- These remaining school communities will be addressed in Phase 3 and Phase 4, pending future funding.

The table below outlines the estimated cost of expanding to a universal morning meal program to all public school communities in the city that do not currently offer one. The cost for this expansion for 155 new programs (Phase 3 and 4) is projected to be a total of \$21.721 million, which includes \$7.492 million for one-time capital costs, \$0.775 million for one-time start-up expenses, and \$13.454 million in annual operating costs, which includes food costs.

Funding for the capital costs of \$7.492 million will be added to the 2025 Capital Budget and 2026-2034 Capital Plan for Toronto Public Health, funded by Capital from Current. Any financial impact identified for the 2026 Budget will be treated as a new investment or enhancement to an existing program during the 2026 Budget process.

**Table 1: Funding Phases 3 & 4**

Phase (school year)	# of new programs	Cost (In \$ millions)	2025 Budget	2026 Budget	2027 Incremental Outlook	Total Cost
Phase 3: January 2026 (2025/2026 school year)	77	One-Time Capital	\$3.800			\$10.989
		One-time Start-up		\$0.385		
		Operating		\$6.804		
Phase 4: September 2026 (2026/2027 school year)	78	One-Time Capital		\$3.692		\$10.732
		One-time Start-up			\$0.390	
		Operating			\$6.650	

# of Unfunded Programs	155	Total Capital	\$7.492
		Total One-time Start-up	\$0.775
		Total Operating Costs	\$13.454
		Total Cost for Phase 3 and 4	\$21.721

This estimate assumes the City fully funds one-time capital, one-time start-up costs and maintains a contribution which is approximately 20% toward operating costs, which includes food costs.

The universal lunch program has not yet been costed as significant research and analysis are needed to determine a feasible operating model. This includes inventory of physical capital and school capacity, stakeholder engagement, and the exploration of sustainable delivery and funding models.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial implications as contained in the Financial Impact Section.

## DECISION HISTORY

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On March 26, 2025, City Council adopted a motion to increase the 2025 Operating Budget for the City Manager's Office by \$5,000,000 gross, \$0 net, to expand the school food program to new school communities and enhance existing programs, with funding offset by underspending in 2024. Council also directed the City Manager, in consultation with the Medical Officer of Health, to ensure the new funds align with the City's Economic Action Plan and its trade war response by prioritizing bulk purchasing from local food producers, distributors, and suppliers—maximizing cost efficiency while supporting Toronto's local economy, workers, and businesses.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.EX21.8>

On March 26, 2025, City Council adopted EX21.8 – Building a Universal Student Food Program in Toronto. As part of this decision, Council formally requested that the Federal Government reallocate unspent 2025 Budget funding under the National Student Food Program from jurisdictions without secured agreements to those with established agreements, including Ontario, to support Toronto's School Food Programs.

Additionally, Council urged the newly elected Government of Ontario to increase its per-student financial contribution for Student Nutrition Programs in Toronto to match or exceed the City's contributions.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.EX21.8>

On November 12, 2024 City Council adopted EX18.1 - Student Nutrition Program: Funding and Considerations for Expansion. This decision requested the City Manager to ensure that in the forthcoming report on implementation of a universal student nutrition program, the City include exploration of pursuing partnerships with existing child and youth nutrition programs outside of the school year.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.EX18.1>

On December 17 and 18, 2024, City Council increase the 2024 Operating Budget for Toronto Public Health by \$2,600,246 gross, \$0 net, fully funded by the Public Health Reserve Fund (XR1108) for the purpose of providing one-time funding to new school communities who applied for and met the eligibility criteria for Student Nutrition Programs but did not receive funding as the 2024 Student Nutrition Program budget was fully committed to pre-existing programs; this one-time funding will allow the new school communities to deliver a Student Nutrition Program from January to June 2025. <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.EX19.13>

On December 17 and 18, 2024, City Council declared food insecurity an emergency in the City of Toronto and directed the City Manager to consider this emergency declaration in ongoing and future work related to food insecurity such as the City of Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy, Food Charter, and School Food Program. City Council also requested the Provincial Government to immediately increase its base funding to existing school food programs and increase its financial commitment to enable the expansion of school food programs to additional schools to build a universal school food program. <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.MM24.42>

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 the summer of 2024. In addition, the Board of Health and the Medical Officer of Health were directed to review the report on governance models for student nutrition that was previously initiated by Toronto Public Health. <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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### SECTION 1: The Case for a Universal Student Nutrition Program

Student nutrition programs are community-based initiatives that provide meals or snacks to school-aged elementary and secondary students during the school day. These programs are important in supporting children's health, well-being, and academic success, as research indicates that access to nutritious food at school, especially in the morning, helps students concentrate, perform better academically, and develop healthier long-term habits. The benefits extend to children from all socioeconomic backgrounds, promoting equity, enhancing nutrition knowledge, and contributing to improved health outcomes well into adulthood<sup>2</sup>. An in-depth Toronto District School Board (TDSB) evaluation of select student nutrition programs in Toronto<sup>3</sup> revealed that school administrators, teachers and program staff noticed improvements in student attendance, behaviour or attitude, and reduced incidence of disciplinary problems as a result of the program.

While all students benefit from nutrition programs, they are particularly impactful for those who face inconsistent access to healthy food. In Toronto, child and family poverty has sharply increased, rising to 25.3%, up 8.5 percentage points since 2020, with some areas seeing rates as high as 40–60%<sup>4</sup>. As these trends worsen, school food programs that include a morning meal and lunch can help ease financial strain by saving families \$129 to \$189 per child each month, or \$1,290 to \$1,890 annually, with potential annual savings of \$2,580 to \$3,780 for families with two children. According to the [National School Food Program](#) analysis, one school meal a day is expected to save the average participating family with two children as much as \$800 a year, or \$88 a month in grocery costs. They also offer broader benefits by supporting local economies, creating jobs, and promoting sustainable food systems<sup>5</sup> amid ongoing global trade disruptions.

### SECTION 2: Current State of Student Nutrition Programs in Toronto

In the 2024/2025 school year, about 243,000 Toronto students have access to student nutrition programs. As of January 2025, over 840 student nutrition programs are operating in 643 school communities across Toronto, available in approximately 75% of all public schools. Some school communities offer multiple programs, which accounts for the higher number of programs compared to the number of locations. Program models vary based on community needs, preferences, available space, and resources. Recent municipal investments are expected to increase program coverage to 81% of all

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2 Ruetz, A. T., & Edwards, G. (2024, February 12). The Economic Rationale for Investing in School Meal Programs for Canada: multi-sectoral impacts from comparable high-income countries. Retrieved from <https://amberleyruetz.ca/>: [https://amberleyruetz.ca/assets/uploads/ruetz-consulting\\_the-economic-rationale-for-investing-in-school-meal-programs-for-canada.pdf](https://amberleyruetz.ca/assets/uploads/ruetz-consulting_the-economic-rationale-for-investing-in-school-meal-programs-for-canada.pdf)

3 City of Toronto. (2012, June 8). *Nourishing young minds: A review of the Student Nutrition Program in Toronto* (Appendix 2). <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2012/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-48313.pdf>

4 Social Planning Toronto (2024). *Fighting for Our Future: Child and Family Poverty Report Card*, Toronto 2024.

5 Ruetz, A. T., & Edwards, G. (2024, February 12). The Economic Rationale for Investing in School Meal Programs for Canada: multi-sectoral impacts from comparable high-income countries. Retrieved from <https://amberleyruetz.ca/>: [https://amberleyruetz.ca/assets/uploads/ruetz-consulting\\_the-economic-rationale-for-investing-in-school-meal-programs-for-canada.pdf](https://amberleyruetz.ca/assets/uploads/ruetz-consulting_the-economic-rationale-for-investing-in-school-meal-programs-for-canada.pdf)

public schools starting in the 2025/2026 school year. While significant progress has been achieved, as of this report, 155 public school communities in Toronto remain without funding for a student nutrition program.

Student nutrition programs also serve 11 independent schools meeting needs-based criteria, reaching over 4,300 students. Additionally, more than 1,800 children benefit from snacks and meals offered through nine community-based programs run by local non-profits outside school hours.

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) oversees student nutrition programs in Ontario by providing grant funding and setting program and nutrition guidelines. It also manages Student Nutrition Ontario (SNO), a network of 14 regional agencies that administer provincial grants. The Toronto Foundation for Student Success (TFSS) serves as the lead funding agency in Toronto. TFSS receives funding from the Government of Canada, the Province of Ontario and the City of Toronto.

Student nutrition programs in Toronto are coordinated by Student Nutrition Ontario-Toronto (SNO-Toronto), a multi-stakeholder partnership including school boards (TDSB and Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB)) and their foundations (TFSS and the Angel Foundation for Learning (AFL), respectively), chaired by Toronto Public Health. SNO-Toronto allocates funding, provides operational support, and ensures program quality and accountability.

The City does not receive provincial or federal funding directly; these funds are routed through the TFSS to be administered. SNO-Toronto allocates municipal and provincial funding to programs, while individual school communities and foundations raise donations and fundraise, which vary yearly and often include food, supplies, and volunteer time.

As student nutrition programs are not mandated or governed by the Ministry of Education, their delivery varies widely and depends heavily on the capacity of the individual schools, boards, and community partners. As schools are typically focused on core educational demands, they are often challenged to support these programs, making the delivery of them inconsistent and implementation more difficult.

In 2012, the Toronto Board of Health endorsed a diversified funding model with equal 20%<sup>6</sup> contributions from municipal, provincial, federal governments, corporate donors, and parents/guardians to ensure financial stability and shared responsibility. However, since it was never formally adopted by any order of government, no clear commitments exist from these sectors.

Despite clear benefits, Canada has lagged behind other high-income countries in school food programs, ranking 37th out of 41 in food security until 2024<sup>7</sup>. Ontario has not increased its base funding since 2015, including in its most recent 2025/2026 budget providing \$17 per student annually (\$0.09 per day), which is significantly less than other provinces (Table 2).

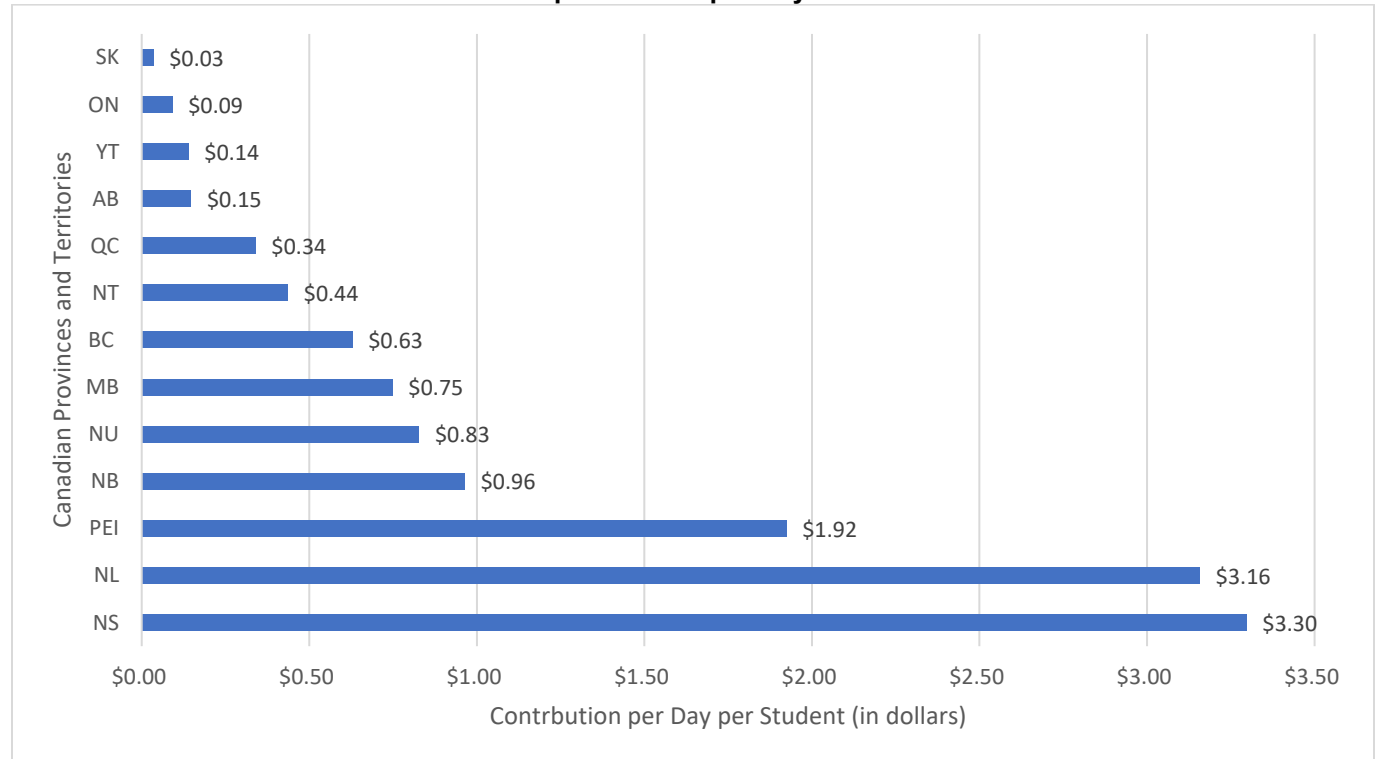
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6 Toronto Board of Health (September 2012). Item - 2012.HL16.5: Student Nutrition Program 2013 Operating Budget Request and Proposed Five Year Plan. Retrieved from <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2012.HL16.5>

7 UNICEF. (2017). UNICEF Report Card 14: Canadian Companion, Oh Canada! Our kids deserve better. Toronto.



**Table 2: Provincial/Territorial Contribution per Student per Day<sup>8</sup>**



### **National School Food Program**

As of March 2025, all provinces and territories have joined [Canada's National School Food Program](#), which plans to spend \$1 billion over five years and create up to 207,700 jobs over 10 years<sup>9</sup>. While a key step, this funding covers less than 4% of elementary and 2.5% of secondary meal costs, underscoring the need for more investment to ensure universal access.

Ontario's share, \$108.5 million over three years, equates to approximately \$16 per student annually, which is far below Toronto's estimated costs of \$412 per elementary student and \$649 per secondary student annually.

### **SECTION 3: Vision and Strategy for a Universal Student Nutrition Program**

In October 2024, City Council directed staff to develop a vision and strategy for a universal student food program to be presented by Q2 2025. In response, staff conducted a thorough analysis that included a literature review of school food programs and best practices from Canada and other G7 countries (Appendix 1), as well as stakeholder mapping and extensive consultations with internal and external partners (Appendix 2).

8 Coalition for Healthy School Food. (2024, April 3). Provinces, territories, municipalities invest \$280M+ annually in school food. <https://www.healthyschoolfood.ca/post/provinces-territories-municipalities-invest-400m-annually-in-school-food>

9 Ruetz, A. T., & Edwards, G. (2024, February 12). The Economic Rationale for Investing in School Meal Programs for Canada: multi-sectoral impacts from comparable high-income countries. Retrieved from <https://amberleyruetz.ca/>: [https://amberleyruetz.ca/assets/uploads/ruetz-consulting\\_the-economic-rationale-for-investing-in-school-meal-programs-for-canada.pdf](https://amberleyruetz.ca/assets/uploads/ruetz-consulting_the-economic-rationale-for-investing-in-school-meal-programs-for-canada.pdf)



This work resulted in the development of two strategies:

- A phased implementation plan for a universal morning meal program.
- A strategic blueprint for establishing a universal lunch program by 2030.

Throughout the process, City staff collaborated with Parks and Recreation to explore opportunities for aligning with existing child and youth programs that operate outside of the school year, including CampTO. Staff will continue to seek opportunities for alignment across all areas of strategy development to seek ways to leverage cost savings through centralized purchasing.

### **Critical Path to a Universal Morning Meal Program**

The implementation of the universal morning meal program is organized into four defined phases:

- Phase 1 – Winter 2025: Programs were launched in 23 new school communities, funded through the City's 2024 investment.
- Phase 2 – Fall 2025: Planning is underway to expand to an additional 50 school communities, supported by the City's 2025 investment.
- Phase 3 – Winter 2026: Expansion to 77 additional school communities.
- Phase 4 – 2026/2027 School Year: Final phase of implementation, reaching the remaining 78 school communities.

### **Key Considerations to Support Morning Meal Program Implementation**

#### **Key Capital and Operational Investments:**

To enable the expansion of the student nutrition program, a \$7.5 million capital investment is proposed for Phase 3 and Phase 4 focused on essential equipment such as refrigerators, freezers, and other food storage and safe food handling infrastructure within program sites.

Operational funding requirements, including food and capacity building funds, will be addressed through the 2026 City budget process. The City is hopeful that further operating funds will be made available through the Government of Canada's Fall Economic Statement in relation to the National School Food Program.

#### **Maintain Trusted Delivery Partnerships:**

School board leaders, directors, and superintendents emphasized the value of the TFSS and the AFL. TFSS and AFL joined the former SNO-Toronto partnership (called Toronto Partners for Student Nutrition) upon amalgamation in 1998. As a result, the foundations have immense historical expertise and knowledge of Toronto's student nutrition programs. These organizations are deeply embedded within school communities and are trusted to deliver high-quality and responsive programs. They provide invaluable support to existing and new programs with respect to operations, volunteer recruitment, fundraising, financial accountability and other key areas. The City will continue to collaborate with TFSS and AFL to maintain program stability and leverage their existing operational expertise in delivering student nutrition programs.

#### **Respect Local Flexibility in Program Delivery:**

Recognizing the diversity of school environments, the City will uphold a flexible implementation approach. School boards have indicated that program success depends

on respecting local autonomy. Some schools deliver meals directly to classrooms; others use food carts or stations. This flexibility will be protected and supported, not replaced by a one-size-fits-all model.

### **Expand Centralized Food Procurement:**

In March 2025, the [City committed a \\$5 million one-time investment](#) to expand the morning meal program to 25 additional schools and advance bulk food purchasing initiatives.

This investment enables TFSS to extend its centralized food purchasing and logistics model through the 2025/2026 school year, helping to address funding gaps in the broader student nutrition program.

While centralized procurement does not yet reduce total program costs, it enhances efficiency, quality, and reach. Early indicators suggest it could reduce costs by up to one-third, allowing more students to be served.

### **Leverage Citywide Food Systems and Social Procurement:**

The City will explore opportunities to align food purchasing across other municipal programs, such as childcare, camps, and recreation and explore procurement opportunities that drive local economic benefits. This alignment could improve overall procurement efficiency and support demand for locally sourced food. This is also an opportunity to apply the City's Coolfood Pledge commitments, further supporting climate-friendly food options in student nutrition programs.

### **Ongoing Engagement:**

City staff will continue to collaborate with the interdivisional task force and the external steering committee established in preparation of this report. Ongoing engagement will also include close coordination with SNO-Toronto, parent/guardian roundtables, school boards, Indigenous communities, and student nutrition program volunteers and coordinators.

## **Strategic Blueprint for a Universal Lunch Program**

Delivering a universal lunch program in Toronto by 2030 requires a deliberate and strategic approach. While the implementation of a lunch program is contingent on significant new investments, City staff are proactively undertaking essential planning, analysis, and foundational work. This approach reflects a commitment to sound stewardship and due diligence, ensuring that progress continues toward the 2030 goal.

### **Next Steps in Building a Universal Lunch Program**

#### **Assess School Readiness**

A system-wide assessment of school infrastructure and staffing capacity will identify logistical, operational, and workforce-related needs. This includes evaluating kitchen facilities, equipment, storage, and food preparation and delivery capacity across elementary and secondary schools.

#### **Evaluate Delivery Models**

City staff will analyze a range of delivery models, including vendor-led, in-house preparation, and hybrid systems, to identify the most cost-effective and scalable

options. A particular focus will be placed on understanding the operational viability of these models in diverse school settings and where the City can leverage citywide food systems for greater impact.

### **Identify Pilot Schools Through Community Engagement and Needs Assessment**

Conduct a data-driven scoping process to identify needs and engage local stakeholders for inclusive program design. Use this model to select schools for pilot lunch programs, prioritizing those facing the greatest barriers to food security.

### **Pilot Innovative Approaches**

Pilot programs will test a variety of models in different school environments. Pilots may include high school-based food preparation programs integrated with curriculum and vocational training, with a focus on schools in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas and emerging neighbourhoods. Pilots will assess student uptake, operational logistics, and workforce development potential.

### **Engage in Impactful Multi-Sector Partnerships**

Collaboration is essential across key partners, including school boards to align staffing, curriculum, and operations; post-secondary institutions to support culinary education and research; labour representatives to address staffing models, job quality, and equity; and Indigenous leaders to ensure integration of Indigenous foodways and cultural practices. Engagement with local farmers, suppliers, and urban agriculture networks will strengthen regional food systems, while chefs and restaurateurs can contribute to menu development, training, and student engagement. Equity-focused and food security organizations will help ensure accessibility and inclusion, and all orders of government must align efforts and secure core funding for successful implementation.

## **SECTION 4: Governance, Administration and Funding of the Student Nutrition Program**

### **Governance and Administration**

In April 2024, City Council directed the City Manager to review the current governance of the Student Nutrition Program related to the City's financial contribution.

In Ontario, the provincial government, through the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, is the primary allocator of funds for student nutrition programs, providing most of the financial resources and setting program standards. These funds are distributed to 14 regional Lead Agencies that manage and support local school and community programs. The federal government also began contributing funding through the National School Food Program, which launched in 2024.

However, despite these commitments, there is no formal agreement that specifies the percentage of funding each level of government provides, nor clear definitions of oversight or responsibility. Nothing publicly available clearly outlines these arrangements, so aspects of the funding and governance remain implied rather than explicitly defined.

While provincial funding has remained consistent over the years, it has not kept pace with inflation, rising student participation, increased food prices and higher transportation and distribution costs. Consequently, the City of Toronto has taken on a

significant role in supporting the program, directing municipal funds through the lead Toronto agencies to coordinate efforts and ensure that Toronto's students have access to nutritious food at school.

Since December 2024, the City's base financial contribution to the Student Nutrition Program has increased by \$7 million. With the launch of the National School Food Program, the City is optimistic about the development of a funding model that more effectively supports program growth and accounts for rising operational costs. Looking ahead, the program's impact is expected to extend beyond student well-being and academic achievement to include broader benefits such as urban agriculture, local economic development, workforce development, and inclusive economic growth, reflecting its evolving mandate. In response to this expanding scope, City staff will align existing resources and expertise to effectively support and manage the program's continued growth.

### **Ongoing Funding to Support Full Implementation**

Despite support from multiple sources, Toronto's Student Nutrition Programs receive government funding for only 37% of their total food costs on average, \$0.83 per elementary student and \$1.30 per secondary student daily, compared to the actual costs of \$2.23 and \$3.51, respectively. This shortfall forces many programs to reduce service days, close early, or offer smaller portions. Additional funding is required to support key areas, including program administration, stipends or other forms of remuneration for volunteers, and continued bulk procurement from local suppliers.

Once student nutrition programs have been expanded to all school communities, the estimated ongoing annual cost to fully implement a universal morning meal program is projected to range from \$20 million to \$60 million. This range reflects the need for further decisions regarding the level of ongoing municipal support provided to programs and will be influenced by the amount of funding secured at all levels of government. If funding is limited, an equity-based, targeted approach will be required to prioritize support for school communities with the greatest need.

## **SECTION 5: Ongoing Program Measurement and Evaluation**

The continued evolution of Toronto's Student Nutrition Program presents key opportunities for research, monitoring, and continuous improvement. These efforts will not only strengthen local programming but also contribute to the broader development of the National School Food Program.

Currently, the Student Nutrition Program's Accountability Framework ensures oversight of municipal investments through financial reporting, site visits, and program support. Foundations monitor program compliance and provide consolidated financial and performance reports to the City. Toronto Public Health provides legislated food premise inspections and additional supports including nutrition training and policy oversight. Annual reviews and ongoing research help guide continuous improvement.

As student nutrition programs expand, existing monitoring, compliance and evaluation activities performed under the Student Nutrition Program Accountability Framework may need to be reviewed.

City staff plan to explore and implement the following measurement and evaluation strategies:

**Baseline Data:**

Use existing grant application data to establish a pre-expansion baseline and inform future improvements.

**Unified Evaluation:**

Develop a coordinated monitoring plan across SNO-Toronto partners to address current data gaps and inconsistencies.

**Academic Collaboration:**

Leverage local university researchers to strengthen evaluation and inform strategy.

**Pilot Testing:**

Use pilots to refine program models before wider rollout, improving efficiency and scalability.

**Coolfood Pledge:**

As a signatory of the World Resources Institute's Coolfood Pledge, Toronto is committed to ensuring the Student Nutrition Program supports the Pledge goals by promoting climate-friendly food options. With enhanced contributions to support centralized purchasing, staff will explore opportunities to assess and reduce GHG emissions in partnership with relevant City divisions.

**Conclusion**

The strategy highlights the urgent need for sustained advocacy and increased intergovernmental funding to address existing gaps. To realize a universal student nutrition program, sustained support from the Province of Ontario and the Government of Canada is essential, through consistent, predictable, and equitable investments that keep pace with rising food, labour, and operational costs. Aligning implementation with the federal Fall Economic Statement and the City's 2026 budget process is to advance this goal.

Through a phased rollout, local flexibility, and strong partnerships, Toronto is well-positioned to lead in developing a world-class model. By advancing universal access to both a morning meal and lunch, the City is making a strategic investment in children's health, academic success, community resilience, and equity.

**CONTACT**

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Jill Cheyne, Project Director (A), City Manager's Office, 437-236-1558,  
jill.cheyne@toronto.ca

**SIGNATURE**

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Paul Johnson  
City Manager

## **ATTACHMENTS**

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Appendix 1: Jurisdictional Scan Summary Table

Appendix 2: Summary of Consultations