



Federal Budget Still Silent on School Nutrition Funding G-7 and even G-20 Countries Lead the Pack, while Canada Lags

March 22, 2017 (OTTAWA): Bill Jeffery, LLB, Executive Director of the Centre for Health Science and Law (CHSL)¹, made the following statement about the 2017 federal budget:

Canada remains one of the only industrialized countries without a national school food program. Canadian children and youth are facing needlessly low health and educational outcomes that school meal programs could improve.

While the Government concedes that building physical infrastructure disproportionately benefits men “as men vastly outnumber women in the building trades,” three-quarters of its \$80 billion Long-term Infrastructure Plan is allocated to physical infrastructure.² By contrast, women predominate as volunteers and staff in current school meal programs and boys and girls would benefit equally in a universal school meals program. However, the budget’s ambitious plans to assess infrastructure needs in collaboration with provincial and municipal governments could help them better understand the needs and possibilities for retrofitting schools to better store and prepare food.

Most of the federal government’s \$83 billion in major transfers to individuals is heavily weighted to seniors, approximately \$46 billion per year. And, on average, federal transfers to other levels of government will rise approximately \$3 billion per year over the next five years to \$80 billion. The budget reaffirmed last year’s commitment to invest an additional \$500 million per year to support primary and secondary education of Indigenous children and youth living on reserves, though nothing is expressly earmarked for school meals.

Earmarking funds for a comprehensive school meals program is both prudent and consistent with the Minister’s stated aim to “ensure everyone has a real and fair chance at success. This means ensuring our most basic needs are met. And health and well-being are at the top of that list.” Canadian children face serious challenges related to their diets: studies show that only one-third eat enough fruits and vegetables, one-third of primary students and two-thirds of secondary students go to school without a nutritious breakfast, and one-quarter of calories consumed by children are from foods not recommended in Canada’s Food Guide. Conversely, young people that partake in healthy school food programs show a higher intake of fruits and vegetables, increased physical and mental health, and better educational outcomes.

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Publicly funded school meals is the norm internationally and gaining traction in Canada. Finland, Brazil, India, Belgium, the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, and dozens of other countries run comprehensive school meal programs. The U.N. [World Food Program reports](#) that school meal programs supported by donor assistance from countries like Canada are funded entirely by host governments once their average daily Gross Domestic Product exceeds \$10 per capita, small compared to Canada's.

Some provinces are taking a lead on this issue. The [Alberta government has committed to a substantial investment of \\$20 million per year](#) and Ontario Minister of Finance Charles Sousa has spoken glowingly about his province's more modest (per student) \$32 million investment in school meals at a [federal-provincial meeting of finance ministers](#). Earlier this month, 280,000 Canadians, including Minister of Finance Bill Morneau, Minister of Health Dr. Jane Philpott, Minister of Agriculture Lawrence MacAulay, students, parents, teachers, and volunteers in publicly celebrating the value of school meal programs by biting into apples and carrots at community events held across the country.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance recommended the creation of a [national school nutrition program](#) in 1997 and the Ontario Healthy Kids Panel renewed that advice in 2013. An extra tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (as implemented recently in the UK and Mexico) [could raise \\$1.8 billion per year in Canada](#), at least part of which could be allocated to a universal healthy school food program. Likewise, GST/HST rules that tax fresh fruit salad, but exempt Froot Loops, are ripe for reform and fodder for Minister Morneau's continuing commitment to rid the tax system of poorly targeted, inefficient, and unfair tax measures. There is no change in food tax policy in the 2017 budget, but Minister Morneau proposed to refine tobacco tax rules to prevent companies from avoiding tax and proposed to index alcohol taxes to inflation to stop a steady three-decade decline in the impact of these taxes (which are based on a fixed number of cents per volume of alcohol). These two measures will generate an extra \$200 million per year in revenue by the fifth year, even while smoking is declining. According to the Global Burden of Disease project, the 49,000 deaths attributed to dietary risks in 2015 rivals the number of deaths caused by tobacco and alcohol combined.

The Centre for Health Science and Law looks forward to working with federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous leaders to make school nutrition a priority in this and future budgets. We believe that investment in school meals is a wise use of public funds and could help lead to improvements in productivity and reduced long-term health care costs.

For further information, contact: Bill Jeffery, Centre for Health Science and Law (Ottawa) at 613-565-2140 or billjeffery@healthscienceandlaw.ca

Notes

¹ The Centre for Health Science and Law is a member of the [Coalition for Healthy School Food](#), a network of 32 non-profit groups from every province and the North that which seeks financial investment by the federal government in a cost-shared Universal Healthy School Food Program to serve a daily healthy meal or snack at little or no cost to students.

² The federal budget repeated 2016 promises to invest an average of \$700 million per year for the next decade in creating child-care spaces for children aged 0-6 (to support parents, mostly women, returning to work).