



Media Statement

Parliament Passes First Vote, 204-110, on Law to Establish National School Food Program!

Ottawa (December 6, 2023)—This afternoon, Parliament decided to establish a national school food program with provinces and Indigenous communities in a 204-110 vote. Bill Jeffery, Executive Director and General Legal Counsel of the non-profit Centre for Health Science and Law, made the following statement:

[Bill C-322, National Framework for a School Food Program Act](#) proposes to set standards for school meal programs in anticipation of joint funding by other levels of government, much like the Canada Health Act does for Medicare services.

Liberal, NDP, Bloc Québécois, and Independent MPs supporting the motion did a good service for Canadian children by helping to safeguard their physical and cognitive futures. Well-nourished children feel respected, learn better, and become healthier adults.

Opposition to school food programs, exclusively from Conservative MPs, could have hurt children had they not been outnumbered. Conservative MPs' claims in last week's debate that killing climate-change policies will cure food price inflation is disingenuous. In September, the [Governor of the Bank of Canada repeated the bank's estimate that the carbon tax inflated food prices by no more than 0.15% \(1/7th of 1%\)](#), a puny amount that is corroborated by Statistics Canada, and consistent with my April [2023 brief to the House Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-food](#).

Kids shouldn't have to go hungry or eat junk food often sold in school cafeterias or shelf-stable bagged lunches to help politicians balance the \$500 billion federal budget. If MPs feel they must cut, they should pick on someone their own size. Children can't vote or exercise the kind of political muscle that big-food, big-pharma, big-alcohol, or big-oil can. It is a terrible shame that some MPs use their talents, time, power, and energy to deprive children. All MPs should be self-appointed champions of children's fundamental rights to good nutrition and health.

The Centre for Health Science and Law urges all MPs and Senators to quickly pass [Bill C-322, National Framework for a School Food Program Act](#) (and unanimously support it at subsequent votes), support appropriation of the first tranche of funding in the spring budget talks, and back a time-delimited plan to make school meals as universally accessible as K-12 education and healthcare.

BACKGROUND

Federal Government commitments to date: The federal government announced in its [2019 federal budget \(at page 163\)](#):

"intentions to work with provinces and territories toward the creation of a National School Food Program"

Then the [2021 Liberal election platform promised \(at pages 7 and 76\) to:](#)

“Work with our provincial, territorial, municipal, Indigenous partners, and stakeholders to develop a National School Food Policy and work towards a national school nutritious meal program with a \$1 billion dollar investment over five years.”

Then [2021 mandate letters for two ministers](#), primarily, the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development urged:

“Work with the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and with provinces, territories, municipalities, Indigenous partners and stakeholders to develop a National School Food Policy and to work toward a national school nutritious meal program.”

The Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food’s mandate letter states:

“In support of A Food Policy for Canada, continue to strengthen Canada’s food system by:

- *Working with the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development and with provinces, territories, municipalities, Indigenous partners and stakeholders to develop a National School Food Policy and to work toward a national school nutritious meal program;”*

Status of school food programs internationally and provincially: At a recent meeting of national governments and school food advocates in Paris, France, more than a dozen countries made new commitments to ensure that their school meals programs are universal or to embed school food program commitments in national legislation, including countries as diverse as the United Arab Emirates, Japan, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Armenia, Tajikistan, Ghana, Burundi, Luxembourg, Brazil, Benin, Finland, and the United States. (No Canadian official attended. See: [CHSL media statement](#).)

Canada is one of the few rich countries that still does not run a publicly funded school food program, even nearly five years after the federal minister of finance committed to publicly fund nutritious meals for school children. Funds have not yet been appropriated. Nutrition standards and governance criteria to access funds have not yet been developed. Many schools require retrofits to prepare and store food safely.

According to the United Nations World Food Program’s [State of School Feeding Worldwide 2022](#) report, national governments operating school food programs generally pay for them from national government budgets when a country’s Gross National Income exceeds the equivalent of US\$3 per day, per capita. (Canada’s GNI per capita is approximately US\$160 per day.)

All provinces and territories and a handful of cities partially fund school food programs, typically run by provincial and local non-profit organizations. However, those programs are severely underfunded (especially outside of Toronto), leaving the great majority of students dependent on brown-bag lunches or commercial food service that appeal to the palates of students rather than following good nutrition. A federal program would complement under-funded provincial programs, though governments of [British Columbia](#), [Ontario \(\\$5 million\)](#), [New Brunswick \(\\$2 million\)](#), [Newfoundland and Labrador \(\\$10 million\)](#), [PEI \(\\$2.19 million\)](#) and [Manitoba \(universality\)](#) recently boosted funds.

Nutritional standards are notoriously weak with flimsy oversight, according to provincial auditors-general reports in [Ontario](#) in 2015, [British Columbia](#) in 2018, [Newfoundland](#) in 2019 Nova Scotia, and [Nova Scotia](#) in 2022, various media reports, and [civil society reports](#), especially since 2007.

Conflicts of interest: Journalists should be mindful of efforts by food companies to influence school food programs when selecting news sources. Even in Canada, one of the original champions of a national school meal program, [Breakfast for Learning, a project of the women’s magazine, Canadian Living](#), was later taken over by the [Loblaw grocer’s subsidiary, Presidents Choice Children’s Charity](#). Likewise, [Breakfast Club of Canada has been led by the CEO of McDonald’s Canada](#) for several years. Neither is a member of the Coalition

for Healthy School Food. In CHSL's opinion, news viewers and readers are entitled to be apprised of such conflicts of interest in news coverage and many would be surprised to know that such information was either not known to journalists or withheld during reporting. The Coalition for Healthy School Food urges [8 guiding principles, including conflict of interest safeguards](#)

About the Centre for Health Science and Law: CHSL is an Ottawa-based health advocacy organization focussed on food issues. Bill Jeffery, BA, LLB, is its Executive Director and General Legal Counsel. Since 2002, he has advocated the creation of a national, universal, publicly funded school food program with strong nutrition standards and conflict-of-interest safeguards to prevent food companies from steering spending, program, and policy decisions to favour their commercial ambitions. CHSL is a founding member of the Coalition for Healthy School Food and a member of its Steering Committee since its inception. CHSL is one of 100 partner organization of the World Food Program's global School Meal Coalition. He can be reached in Ottawa at BillJeffery@HealthScienceAndLaw.ca mobile/WhatsApp 1-613-565-2140.

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