



Media Statement

Federal Budget Delivers on First Big Step Toward a National School Food in Partnership with Provinces/Territories

OTTAWA (April 8, 2024)—Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland tabled the federal budget in Parliament this afternoon confirming the availability of \$1 billion over five years to support provincial, territorial, and Indigenous school food programs with \$200 million per year for five years, beginning with the upcoming school year. This follows a December 204-110 vote in the House of Commons on [Bill C-322, School Food Program Act](#), analogous to the federal *Canada Health Act* and spending that ensures comparable access to provincial healthcare. Bill Jeffery is Executive Director and General Legal Counsel for the non-profit Centre for Health Science and Law and a long-time member of the Steering Committee of the [Coalition for Healthy School Food, which coordinates the efforts of approximately 340 member and supporting organizations and local government agencies](#). He made the following statement:

Today's budget is a tuning point for the health, scholastic achievement, and sense social cohesion in Canadian K-12 schools. Feeding the future in this way is good public policy especially at a time when grocery prices are at an all-time high, 28% higher than in the fall of 2020. Families reached by the programs in the upcoming school year, would get a benefit of approximately \$500 per student at the approx. \$2.75 daily rate the government intends.

It performs exactly the kind of service that governments in a fair and equitable society should. Provincial law requires children to attend school until they are at least 16 (18 in Ontario, Manitoba, and New Brunswick), but makes no provision to feed them while they are there. Canada has been a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child since 1991. In a recent Canadian compliance review, the UN Human Rights Council's Committee on the Rights of the Child called on Canadian provinces to "remove the need for user fees" in primary and secondary schools. In 2013, that Committee advised all countries that: "School feeding is desirable to ensure all pupils have access to a full meal every day."

Last December, MPs supported [Bill C-322, National Framework for a School Food Program Act](#) in a 204-110 vote. Supporters argued that well-nourished children feel respected, learn better, and become healthier adults. Recasting school food funding a "bureaucracy" and carbon taxes as food-price inflationary is completely unsupported by the evidence. It is disingenuous to say so and disparages thousands of existing programs that meagre provincial government funding has supported for decades in a patchwork of programs that reach one-in-five students across the country. Such vacuous slogans and misrepresented data would be unlawful if they were used to sell commercial goods, services, or investments.

Children (and all Canadians) need and deserve governments that carefully weigh the evidence and design sensible public policies. Scoffing at government spending generally—especially, spending on food and shelter—and reflexively attacking any policies championed by political opponents risks too much collateral damage. Canadians need political leaders they can count on to do enough math to distinguish mountains from molehills. Eliminating the climate-change-fighting carbon tax would be bad for the environment and a hopeless method for reducing grocery prices.¹ Solid evidence, common sense, and dedication to human rights beget sound public policy and prudent public spending.

Federal and provincial legislators should enter into formal agreements, ensure that public funds are only spent on programs with strong nutrition standards and conflict-of-interest safeguards, and work together to ensure that school meals are as universally available as Medicare and K-12 education, itself."

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.

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.)

Most other countries have some kind of national school food program and commitments to make them fully universal have come from places as diverse as Kenya, Finland, and the United States. Vigilance about science-based nutrition standards, environmental sustainability, and avoiding conflicts of interest in program governance are key ingredients in the recipe for sensible school food programs.

Over the years, every province and territory governed by parties of every political stripe have implemented a free or subsidized school food program, usually run by non-profit organizations, but the current patchwork

has been anemically funded (especially outside of Toronto). That is starting to change with commitments to universal programs coming from governments of [Prince Edward Island](#), [New Brunswick \(though a unanimous non-binding motion in the legislature\)](#), and [Manitoba](#) recently, and the single largest investment in school food in Canadian history from the government in [British Columbia](#). A federal program would complement provincial programs, several of which have announced annual funding boosts recently, such as in [British Columbia \(\\$71 million\)](#), [Ontario \(\\$5 million\)](#), [New Brunswick \(\\$2 million\)](#), [Newfoundland and Labrador \(\\$10 million\)](#), [PEI \(\\$2.19 million\)](#) and [Manitoba \(universality\)](#).

School 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. Canada is not immune to the kind of meddling in dietary guidance that the Washington Post exposed earlier this month. 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 \(#8\)](#).

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 also one of more than 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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ⁱ **FACT CHECK:** 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 CHSL's April [2023 brief to the House Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-food](#).