



Media Statement

Prime Minister Trudeau and Treasury President Anand make good on election promise to support provincial school meal programs with \$1 billion over five years.

OTTAWA (April 1, 2024)—Today, Prime Minister Trudeau and Treasury Board President Dr. Anita Anand announced budget plans to financially 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 House of Commons vote to advance a proposed law to establish a national school food program in partnership 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:

Today's funding announcement signifies an important federal commitment to the health of Canadian children and, ultimately, leveraging a healthier future for Canada.

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 United Nations 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 called on Canadian provinces to:

'Take immediate measures to remove the need for user fees at the level of compulsory education...'

In 2013, that Committee issued General Comment No. 15 to all governments stressing that:

'School feeding is desirable to ensure all pupils have access to a full meal every day, which can also enhance children's attention for learning and increase school enrolment. The Committee recommends that this be combined with nutrition and health education, including setting up school gardens and training teachers to improve children's nutrition and healthy eating habits.'

Last December, MPs supported [Bill C-322, National Framework for a School Food Program Act](#) in a 204-110 vote. 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.

Conservative MPs have been publicly silent on the merits of the school food proposal. In the debate preceding December's vote, they frittered away time talking about a host of collateral matters except to imply that even beginning to invest in feeding a fraction of 5 million school children one meal per school day would somehow inflate grocery prices for 40 million Canadians. They also repeatedly claimed that the carbon tax on fossil fuels inflates food prices. The carbon tax is a small part of the price of fuel, and the

price of fuel is a small part of the price of food. Anyway, school meals help off-set grocery prices for families with school-aged children.

*Canadians need to be able to count on political leaders and journalists doing the math to check when mountains are being made out of molehills. The Bank of Canada, Statistics Canada, and CHSL have.**

If public opinion leaders ignore evidence in making decisions and characterizing policy debates, infective law, policy and public spending choices are sure to follow.

Much of the sorry state of school food offerings followed provincial cutbacks to public education in the 1990s that schools desperately sought to offset with profits from vending machines, candy sales, and commercial cafeterias that pandered to students' whims and pocketbooks without regard to nutrition.

More federal and provincial MPs and cabinet ministers should champion child protection laws and policies, not treat kids as podiums for attacking political adversaries or cultivating captive markets for commercial profit. 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.

Some politicians exploit weak public knowledge about the finer points of constitutional law governing the division of federal-provincial law-making and spending powers to excuse doing nothing to protect children. The same fatuous thinking could be used to compel provincial governments to return hundreds of billions of federal dollars sent to prop-up provincial Medicare to meet federal Canada Health Act standards.

School food programs make sense for health protection, children's rights, future workforce productivity, and easing the pressure of accumulated food price inflation (rising 28% since the fall of 2020). Better nourished school children can normalize good nutrition at home and as they grow into adulthood.

*Over the years, every province and territory governed by parties of every political stripe have implemented a free or subsidized school food program, but the current patchwork has been anemically funded. 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](#). The promise of funding from the federal government and the growth of the non-profit Coalition for Health School—with [298 member organizations, plus 140 endorsing local governments, agencies, and organizations](#)—doubtless were instrumental in driving those commitments.*

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. Auditors' General reports in Ontario, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland detail traps for the unwary.

* **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](#).

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.)

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 services that pander 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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