



Media Statement

Prime Minister Trudeau's and Ministers Sudds and Fraser announce terms for apportioning provincial and First Nations shares of \$200 million/year school food top-up funding

Ottawa/Montreal (June 20, 2024)—This afternoon, Prime Minister Justine Trudeau, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Jenna Sudds, and Minister of Housing Infrastructure, and Communities Sean Fraser announce the terms of the national school food policy at Northumberland Regional High School in Nova Scotia. The policy will serve as the basis for negotiating allocation of \$1 billion in founding with provincial and First Nations leaders to expand their patchwork of school food programs. Bill Jeffery, Executive Director of for the non-profit Centre for Health Science and Law and long-time member of the Steering Committee of the Coalition for Healthy School Food—which coordinates relevant advocacy efforts of more than [460 member and supporting organizations and local government agencies](#)—made this statement on behalf of the Centre for Health Science and Law, a Coalition member organization:

Universal school food programs are sensible and efficient ways to improve children's health, school performance, attendance, graduation, and promote feelings of community that studies show improve student behaviour and mental health. Kids are required by law to be at school all day, so schools should feed them while they are there, as freely as providing public education itself. The stated policy vision is: "[That all children and youth in Canada have access to nutritious food at school, in an inclusive, non-stigmatizing environment that fosters healthy practices, while strengthening connections with local food systems, the environment and culture.](#)"

All provincial, territorial, and First Nations government leaders should sign-up for federal top-up funding, re-double their own funding efforts, and make plans to ensure that all children can eat healthy meals at school—as Manitoba, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island have already promised and as the federal policy proposes to “Work progressively towards the long-term goal of universal access.” Taxpayers, especially parents, are entitled to reassurance that government funds will not be used to subsidize school food programs that distribute junk food¹ or let food-industry-funded or controlled organizations exploit captive and impressionable children to flog their wares.

The debate in the House of Commons about proposed legislation to enshrine into law [Bill C-322, National Framework for a School Food Program Act](#)—analogous to the Canada Health Act—was rife with tangents and misinformation from the vocal minority of detractors in the Official Opposition. Supporters argued that well-nourished children feel respected, learn better, and become healthier adults. Conservative MPs speculated that \$200 million per year would only swell the federal bureaucracy and characterized carbon taxes as food-price inflationary. Widely available fact-checking resources indicate that both assertions are false. Like the federal carbon taxes, school meal programs have been operated for years by provincial governments of all political stripes. It seems silly and bitter to speculate that the government would use funds to hire 2,000 bureaucrats rather than feed children. Likewise, food prices remain stubbornly high and, according to multiple experts, “axing the carbon tax” would make nearly zero dent in grocery bills² and would unravel the rebates that preserve the carbon-reducing incentives without hurting consumers' pocketbooks.

Like carbon prices, school food programs are efficient ways to help Canadians achieve several UN Sustainable Development Goals that improve human healthy and equity, and cool the planet.

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](#).)

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 \(universality\)](#).

Conflicts of interest: Journalists should be mindful of efforts by food companies to influence school food programs when selecting news sources. 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. 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 Bill has been a member of its Steering Committee since its inception. CHSL is also one of more than 100 partner organizations 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.

Endnotes

¹ Current school nutritional standards are notoriously weak with flimsy oversight, according to provincial auditors-general reports in [ON](#) in 2015, [BC](#) in 2018, [NL](#) in 2019 Nova Scotia, and [NS](#) in 2022, various media reports, and [NGOs](#), especially since 2007.

² 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% \(1/7th of 1%\)](#), which is consistent with [CHSL’s April 2023 brief to the House Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-food](#). An April 2024 study of provincial carbon pricing schemes in Canada by a University of Alberta economist noted that empirical economic analysis of some of the 39 countries implementing carbon pricing systems found “little evidence for the inflationary effects,” noting that “studies generally disagree with the opinion that carbon pricing causes affordability issues.” Furthermore, an analysis of a decade of data from provincial carbon pricing systems in BC, Alberta, and Quebec found a slight *deflationary* impact on food prices “mainly attributable to reductions in consumption while farm production costs are not sensitive to these policies.” Xu J. The Role of Carbon Pricing in Food Inflation: Evidence from Canadian Provinces. 2024 April 15. Available at: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2404.09467>