



Commentary

Urgency to secure funding for the promised national school food program amidst the rise of food costs and chronic disease

Flora Zhang^{a*}, Amberley T. Ruetz^b and Eric Ng^c

^a University of Toronto ORCID: [0000-0003-4792-4078](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4792-4078)

^b University of Saskatchewan; ORCID: [0000-0001-9058-6794](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9058-6794)

^c University of Toronto; ORCID: [0000-0002-8243-5264](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8243-5264)

Abstract

An overwhelming number of Canadians believe that a national school food program (SFP) would benefit children, but concerns around limited funding are frequently raised. SFPs across Canada are struggling to meet increasing demands due to rising food costs, meaning that food quality and quantity within existing SFPs are suffering. This paper discusses the urgency to implement a cost-shared and federally funded SFP

amidst the current economic context and lack of clear direction from the federal government. The paper also explores ways in which federal funding for school meals can help to reduce the rate of chronic diseases and actualize many proven physical and mental health benefits for Canadians, all of which have positive and long-term downstream effects on the country's economy.

Keywords: Public health; population health; child health; access to healthy foods; nutrition policy; school food; chronic disease

*Corresponding author: flo.zhang@mail.utoronto.ca

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Résumé

Un nombre considérable de Canadiens et Canadiennes pensent qu'un programme national d'alimentation scolaire (PAS) serait bénéfique pour les enfants, mais des préoccupations sont fréquemment soulevées à propos des limites du financement. Partout au Canada, les PAS s'efforcent de répondre à une demande croissante en raison de l'augmentation du coût des aliments, ce qui signifie que la qualité et la quantité des denrées alimentaires offertes par ces programmes en pâtissent. Cet article traite de l'urgence, dans le contexte

économique actuel et en l'absence d'une orientation claire de la part du gouvernement fédéral, de mettre en œuvre un PAS à coûts partagés et financé par le gouvernement fédéral. Il explore également les moyens par lesquels le financement fédéral des repas scolaires peut contribuer à réduire le taux de maladies chroniques et à faire advenir de nombreux bienfaits reconnus pour la santé physique et mentale des Canadiens et Canadiennes, le tout ayant des effets positifs à long terme sur l'économie du pays.

Introduction

In 2019, the management of chronic diseases made up over 67% of healthcare costs in Canada, and the economic cost is growing (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2019; Maximova et al., 2022). School food programs (SFPs) give rise to benefits across many sectors, with some of the most prominent related to nutrition and health (Cohen et al., 2021; Stern et al., 2022). Nutrition has direct implications for reducing the incidence and prevalence of chronic diseases and, by extension, the costs of these diseases. SFPs also provide relief to families' household budgets in the short- and mid-term, which is of relevance given the current climate of soaring food costs (Ruetz et al., 2023).

Due to the challenges of insufficient federal funding and rising food costs, SFPs across Canada will face

ongoing difficulties in meeting growing demands and providing children access to nutritious foods. The myriad benefits of SFPs indicate that these programs are a cost-effective federal investment to be prioritized immediately, such that a National School Food Policy and program can be established in 2024. Persistent delays will hinder efforts to improve the health and futures of Canadians. The following commentary discusses the ways in which SFPs support children's and families' overall wellbeing through short- and long-term means and emphasizes the urgency for timely development of a national SFP.

Canada lags behind

Canada remains the only G7 country without a national SFP. Municipal and provincial/territorial governments, few federal government departments, and non-governmental organizations support an

inconsistent patchwork of programs across Canada (Godin et al., 2017; Ruetz & McKenna, 2021). In 2021, the government promised Canadians a "national school nutritious meal program" (Liberal Party of Canada,

2021a); in 2022, they held a consultation with stakeholders to share their experiences with school meals and perspectives on objectives for a school food policy (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022).

In 2023, the Government of Canada released the *What We Heard* report, reflecting stakeholder opinions (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022). An astonishing 96% of participants supported a national SFP and believed it would benefit children, but concerns around limited funding were raised repeatedly. Limited funding was perceived to

prevent the efficacy of school food delivery, including insufficient paid staffing, development of safe infrastructure, universality, equipment, administration, and inability to address gas costs for rural communities. The federal government was never reported as a top source of funding for participating SFPs. Despite the Government of Canada's unfunded pledge in 2019, followed by the Liberal Party of Canada's re-election campaign commitment of one billion dollars toward a national SFP over five years, the 2023 federal budget did not mention school food (Government of Canada, 2019, 2023; Liberal Party of Canada, 2021b).

Urgency for a national program

SFPs across Canada are struggling to meet growing demands. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, reports of up to 40% increased demand is typical (Barghiel, 2023). SFPs receive funding from disparate sources, with volunteers working relentlessly to organize meals (CBC News, 2023; Haines & Ruetz, 2020). Yet organizers are finding it increasingly difficult to stretch finances, particularly in developing menus that accommodate allergies and dietary restrictions. The increasing demand for SFPs has been largely attributed to rising food costs, with prices persistently overrunning inflation in the preceding year (Barghiel, 2023). In 2022, one in four (1.8 million) Canadian children lived in a food-insecure household, increased from one in five (1.4 million) in

2021 (PROOF, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2023). In Ontario, SFP providers indicated that their food expenses increased by 40% to 80% since 2020 (Barghiel, 2023).

Budget restrictions cause food quality reductions within SFPs. Some programs have unwillingly reduced their provision of fruits and vegetables, substituting them for affordable grains. Other programs have reduced the number of meals, and some transitioned to providing only snacks (Barghiel, 2023). Poor diet quality in childhood has countless downstream effects that can compromise the health and wellbeing of populations.

Chronic diseases can be largely attributed to diet quality

The incidence and prevalence of chronic diseases in Canada are predicted to continually increase, along with their associated economic challenges (Maximova et al., 2022). According to the 2017 Global Burden of Disease study, low diet quality was responsible for the largest proportion of diseases and the most deaths

globally, implying that diet quality is a significant modifiable risk factor for disease (Maximova et al., 2022). Enhancing diet quality via SFPs can serve as a high-potential preventive measure against chronic diseases.

School food programs improve diet quality through nutrition standards

Nutrition standards for school meals promote the intake of a nutritious diet. School-provided meals have been shown to be more nutritious compared to home-packed meals in countries including the United Kingdom (Evans et al., 2012; Hur et al., 2011) and the United States (Caruso & Cullen, 2015; Hubbard et al., 2014). A nutritious diet during childhood has

important long-term health implications, including the prevention of chronic diseases. Implementing a national SFP today would guarantee the provision of quality foods and be an economically effective health-promotion measure that can reduce healthcare costs caused by preventable low diet quality.

A healthier tomorrow starts today

Low diet quality has strong negative effects on the health of our children, their future children, and the country's human capital (Baltag et al., 2022). In the United States, a community fund was introduced to provide schools in lower socioeconomic communities with additional funding to transition to universal free school meals. Within eligible schools, participation in meal programs increased, and students showed improved academic performance (Marcus & Yewell, 2022). Dietary patterns are established young and track into adulthood, often influencing adult health outcomes. This emphasizes the importance of early life interventions like SFPs to set children up for good health in later life (Lioret et al., 2020; Lundborg et al., 2022).

Low diet quality in childhood can compromise musculoskeletal growth, cardiorespiratory health, neurodevelopment, and immunity in children, collectively increasing the risk of developing chronic diseases (Baltag et al., 2022). In a systematic review examining associations between universal SFPs and student outcomes, SFPs with strong nutrition guidelines supported children in attaining adequate nutrition and improved physical health outcomes like BMI (Cohen et al., 2021). SFPs also help to improve mental health. The Hospital for Sick Children indicated that many youths experienced harm to their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cost et al., 2022). Negative impacts were greater for school-aged children, underscoring the importance of in-class interactions and shared activities for children (Cost et

al., 2022). Cultivating positive eating behaviors and a sense of social cohesion through SFPs can help children alleviate feelings of depression, boost mental wellbeing,

and minimize their risk of experiencing mental health difficulties as adults (Arvidsson et al., 2017; Chan et al., 2017).

School food programs leverage health equity

The *What We Heard* report states that a government priority is “to ensure that every child gets the best possible start in life” (Government of Canada, 2023). The universal provision of school food through federal funding can help reduce inequities in diet quality and create a more equitable society that prioritizes the cultivation of every child’s highest potential (Dacunha et al., 2022). Through guaranteed nutritious school food, more children will have more equal opportunities for improved educational, physical, mental, and

employment outcomes (Illøkken et al., 2021; Marmot, 2020; Vik et al., 2019). As today’s children grow into future leaders, prioritizing their health will benefit society’s collective wellbeing in the long run. In a time where household financial challenges are increasing, the implementation of a national SFP can provide young Canadians across the socioeconomic spectrum the key nourishment, food knowledge, and social skills needed to live a healthier life.

Household financial relief in the short- and mid-term

Significant increases in food costs have made life more difficult for many, with more Canadians managing multiple jobs to stay afloat (Mullin & Antle, 2024). Universal free school meals could save families up to \$189 per child on grocery bills every month, and families with two children could save up to \$3,780 per school year (Ruetz et al., 2023). School meals have the potential to put money back into the pockets of Canadians. This extra money can help families better keep up with increased costs of living and enable them

to afford healthy meals for their children outside of school (Ruetz et al., 2023).

In Sweden, families saw a household income increase of 2.6% after participation in a universal free school lunch program (Lundborg et al., 2022). This increase was unrelated to reduced food expenditures, suggesting that school meals not only generate financial benefits in the short-term, but also in the mid-term (Ruetz et al., 2023). In today’s challenging economic climate, the cost-saving potential of a national SFP should be recognized and realized/enacted.

Return on investment of school food programs

SFPs are cost-effective investments that deliver significant long-term gains. A one-dollar investment in chronic disease prevention through SFPs can result in

four to five dollars in cost savings due to reduced healthcare expenditures (Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention, 2016). In 2022, a return

on investment study about SFPs found a \$40 billion USD return per year in human health and economic benefits through decreases in diet-related diseases, poverty, and food insecurity, in exchange for an annual \$19 billion investment. The study found that the

transition to universal free school meal policies could lead to an additional \$7.5 billion annual return on investment (The Rockefeller Foundation, 2021).

Conclusion

The development of a National School Food Policy continues to be framed as important by the Government of Canada, yet it is not known when the establishment of such policy is expected, despite heightening pressures felt by SFPs and families. While the federal government has promoted the value of a National School Food Policy and program, they have not provided a clear plan moving forward, despite a short window remaining for its implementation. Overall, federal funding can improve long-term physical and mental health, as well as provide household budget relief to families in the short- and

mid-term. A national SFP is the primary vehicle through which the objectives of the imminent National School Food Policy will be met, and it will help stabilize funding amidst rising food costs. More must be done to expand access to SFPs in Canada amid growing urgency to provide support. Acknowledging the substantial returns on investment provided by a national SFP, such an investment stands as a fiscally-responsible policy choice. A federal investment in SFPs today means that more children, our leaders of tomorrow, will be able to reach their fullest potential.

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Flora Zhang is Master of Public Health graduate at the University of Toronto, with a professional background spanning outpatient clinical settings, academia, non-profit organizations, to the federal government. Flora is on the path to becoming a Registered Dietitian who will advocate for health equity through culturally sensitive, inclusive, and evidence-informed approaches to improve the quality of life of equity-deserving populations.

Amberley T. Ruetz is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Community Health and Epidemiology at the University of Saskatchewan and Co-Chair of Canadian Association for Food Studies' School Food Working Group. She led the first systematic survey of school food programs in Canada and is a regular op-ed contributor. In 2019, she was invited by the Federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development to Canada's first roundtable consultation on developing a National School Food Program. She continues to support the federal, provincial and territorial governments on school food programs and policies across Canada.

Eric Ng (he/him) is an Assistant Professor, Teaching Stream at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto. He's also a PhD Candidate in Policy Studies Toronto Metropolitan University. His teaching and research focus on neoliberalism in social policy and how health professions can advance social justice in their everyday practice.

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