



Commentary

Critical considerations for Canada's National School Food Program: School food labour, mental health, and inclusivity

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Abstract

School food programs (SFPs), which may include breakfast, lunch, and snacks, with or without curriculum integration, have tremendous potential to enhance the health and well-being of Canadian children, youth and communities. However, these programs are often politically undervalued, running on volunteer labour with limited space, equipment, and funding. In 2024, the Government of Canada announced a significant change to this status quo with a \$1 billion investment over five years and a new school food policy for the development of Canada's first National School Food Program (NSFP). With the passing of the *National School Food Program Act* in early 2026, permanent funding will be available starting in 2029-30. This new national-scale program will build on existing local,

regional, and provincial programs with the long-term goal of ensuring that every child has access to nutritious food in school, with objectives such as universal access, teaching healthful food-related behaviours and attitudes, and inclusiveness. However, for meaningful and equitable advancement of NSFP goals, we propose that the program must first address structural factors: developing the school food workforce, integrating mental health promotion, and culturally tailored programming. Doing so can serve to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, especially given growing concerns about youth mental health and the need for sensitivity when providing food and engaging youth in food-related discussions. As the NSFP expands, developing school cook training plans that engage local

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workers and meet the employment needs of equity-deserving women are critical to ensuring programs provide nutritious, healthy, and locally adapted menus. Action in these key areas will help identify and address

the social and historical experiences of workers, students, families, and communities, and support holistic and health-promoting programming.

Keywords: Canada; health equity; mental health; school food labour; school food programs; youth

Résumé

Les programmes d'alimentation scolaire (PAS), qui peuvent inclure le déjeuner, le dîner et les collations, qu'ils soient intégrés ou non dans les programmes d'études, ont l'immense potentiel d'améliorer la santé et le bien-être des enfants, des jeunes et des communautés du Canada. Pourtant, ces programmes sont souvent sous-estimés du point de vue politique ; ils reposent sur du travail bénévole ainsi que sur des espaces, des équipements et des ressources financières limités. En 2024, le gouvernement du Canada a annoncé un changement majeur dans cette situation au moyen d'un investissement d'un milliard de dollars sur cinq ans et d'une nouvelle politique concernant l'alimentation scolaire afin de concevoir le premier Programme national d'alimentation scolaire (PNAS) du pays. Avec l'adoption de la loi sur le Programme national d'alimentation scolaire au début de l'année 2026, le PNAS a été pérennisé, avec une promesse de financement de 216,6 millions de dollars par an à partir de 2029-2030. Ce nouveau programme d'envergure nationale sera conçu sur la base des programmes locaux, régionaux et provinciaux existants ; l'ambition à long terme est de garantir à chaque enfant l'accès à des repas nourrissants à l'école, avec des objectifs tels que l'accès universel, l'enseignement de comportements et d'attitudes favorables à la santé en matière

d'alimentation, l'inclusion. Cependant, pour que les objectifs du PNAS soient véritablement significatifs et équitables, nous proposons que le programme s'attaque avant tout à des facteurs structurels : il faut augmenter les ressources humaines dans les services d'alimentation scolaire, intégrer la promotion de la santé mentale et être adapté aux spécificités culturelles. Cela peut contribuer aux efforts en faveur de la diversité, de l'équité et de l'inclusion, surtout dans un contexte de préoccupations croissantes concernant la santé mentale des jeunes et devant la nécessité de faire preuve de sensibilité lorsqu'on offre de la nourriture et qu'on ouvre avec les jeunes des discussions sur l'alimentation. Alors que l'on met progressivement en place le PNAS, il est crucial d'élaborer des formations pour le personnel cuisinier des écoles qui fassent intervenir la main-d'œuvre locale et de répondre aux besoins professionnels des femmes en situation de vulnérabilité pour garantir que les programmes offrent des menus nutritifs, sains et adaptés localement. Les actions menées dans ces domaines importants aideront à prendre en compte les réalités sociales et historiques des travailleurs, des élèves, des familles et des communautés, et ainsi à mettre en œuvre un programme holistique favorisant la santé.

Introduction

With the launch of a National School Food Program (NSFP) and Policy in Canada, which includes \$1 billion in federal funding over its first five years and permanent funding commencing in 2029, school food programs (SFPs) are rapidly expanding across the country. As of March 2025, all provinces and territories, as well as many First Nations, have signed on to this historic initiative (Employment & Social Development Canada, 2025). The NSFP envisions a country where every child can access nutritious food at school, underpinned by five objectives (Table 1) (Employment & Social Development Canada, 2024a). While these objectives are

important and compelling, presenting them as a fixed policy list leaves critical gaps for school food leaders working in diverse and dynamic schools and communities. Increasingly, public health scholars recognize that the unintended consequences of public policies may ultimately make them ineffective and potentially harmful (Oliver et al., 2019), highlighting the need to account for and respond to complex structural and community factors before policy implementation (Bonell et al., 2015).

Table 1: Policy objectives for Canada's National School Food Program

1. Work progressively towards the long-term goal of universal access
2. Help children meet their nutritional and health needs, develop healthful food-related behaviours and attitudes, as well as food and nutrition knowledge and skills
3. Promote programming that is culturally appropriate, relevant, and inclusive
4. Expand investment in school food so that programs can operate sustainably
5. Create opportunities for local economies and reflect of local and regional circumstances

Note: Objectives adapted from Government of Canada (2025)

Others have outlined broad considerations for investment and accountability in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the NSFP (Blais et al., 2025), but concerns regarding the school food workforce, student mental health, and culturally tailored programs remain largely unaddressed. For decades, existing SFPs in Canada have operated despite insufficient staffing, space, equipment, and funding (McKenna et al., 2026), and have rarely acknowledged the need for a workforce behind the meals. While evidence shows that SFPs can promote health and well-being, including improved student food literacy, diet

quality, academic achievement, sense of cultural identity, and community cohesion, these benefits have not been distributed equally across school communities and, at times, have been entirely neglected (ibid.). Furthermore, young people face barriers to developing holistic, healthful food-related behaviours and attitudes that support mental health within school food curricula that often inadvertently reinforce diet culture. Advancing the NSFP requires that policymakers at all levels of government and school food leaders and partners (i.e., principals, health professionals, community organizations, researchers, families,

teachers) recognize past failings and consider these aspects as foundational before planning a new path forward.

Developing the school food workforce: The “who” behind the meals

The expansion of SFPs in Canada toward universal accessibility (Table 1, Objective 1) is inextricably tied to the “who” behind the meals. Meal planning, cooking, cleaning, and serving food have long been undervalued and politically disregarded as work when carried out at home, and inadequately remunerated in the workforce (Duffy, 2011). Recruitment and retention within the school food workforce is difficult, particularly in rural areas (Cohen et al., 2021). In the U.S., school cafeterias are largely staffed by women who live at or near the poverty line and earn lower wages compared to those in other food service sectors (Gaddis, 2019; Billings et al., 2022). In addition, school cafeteria work is disproportionately performed by Black and Hispanic women when compared to the larger U.S. workforce (Billings et al., 2022). While Canadian research on the SFP workforce is limited, it highlights the lack of full-time hours and training for school cooks. Worse yet, in many cases, schools lack paid cooks, leaving educational staff to prepare often ready-to-make, processed foods. For example, a survey of over half of school divisions in Saskatchewan in 2024-25 revealed that 69% of schools did not have paid cooks (Michnik, 2025b). In addition, Canada’s most comprehensive SFP study to date, *Good Food for Learning* (Engler-Stringer et al., 2021), demonstrated the foundational role of school cook training, competitive salaries, and full-time positions in the successful delivery of universal SFPs (Michnik, 2025a).

Research is needed to understand the school food workforce in Canada, including who makes up the workforce, job satisfaction, workplace structure, employment sustainability, and more. However, ensuring sufficient, well-paid school food positions and training for school food workers can start now. School food worker training programs can leverage the knowledge and skills of current school cooks and staff to ensure that local factors, like culture, climate, and community, are central to program design and operation. In addition, the Canadian NSFP can adapt and improve training and staffing practices from long-standing programs around the globe (see Hoyer et al., n.d.; Chef Ann Foundation, 2025; Lewis & Lartey, 2018). Training, alongside adequate kitchen equipment, infrastructure, and competitive wages, will go a long way toward supporting children’s and youth’s diets, as staff are empowered to prepare healthy, fresh, and culturally appropriate foods to meet *Canadian Food Guide* guidelines (Health Canada, 2019) and the NSFP’s goals. We encourage ongoing, hands-on training programs that include mentorship and paid training opportunities. Wages for school cooks can pay a living wage (Living Wage Canada, 2026) or higher and offer full-time positions with options for summer employment. Without local, skilled, and well-cared-for workers in place, the NSFP will struggle to meet its ambitions and objectives.

Integrating mental health promotion: Implications for weight stigma and disordered eating

When promoting healthful food-related behaviours, attitudes, and skills (Table 1, Objective 2), the NSFP must consider implications for mental health, including weight stigma and disordered eating. Weight stigma encompasses negative attitudes and biases toward individuals with higher weights. In childhood and adolescence, experiencing weight discrimination is associated with a higher risk of depression, anxiety, poor sleep, as well as disordered eating and eating disorders (Puhl & Lessard, 2020). Disordered eating includes maladaptive and harmful thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours related to body weight, shape, and appearance, affecting an estimated one-fifth of children and adolescents globally (López-Gil et al., 2023).

Both weight stigma and disordered eating can significantly affect youths' food-related behaviours and attitudes. Individuals who engage in disordered eating endorse high levels of weight-stigmatizing beliefs, even without experiencing direct weight discrimination (Levinson et al., 2024; Jendryca & Warschburger, 2016), which underscores the role that weight stigma can play in upholding and reinforcing poor mental health. Further, experiencing weight discrimination is associated with engagement in disordered eating and weight-control behaviours (e.g., binge eating, restriction) (Puhl & Lessard, 2020) that can severely impact overall diet quality.

It is possible that SFPs may aggravate weight stigma and disordered eating among children and adolescents (Ireland et al., 2023; Leme et al., 2020; Tingle et al., 2023), though few empirical investigations have been carried out. One hypothesized pathway is a myopic focus on obesity prevention, in which SFPs and associated curricula emphasize weight loss, body size and shape rather than engagement in healthful food-related behaviours (Ireland et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2024; Aydın et al., 2022). A second hypothesized pathway is through a weight-stigmatizing “diet culture,” an environment that promotes conflicting messages and myths about food within a moral hierarchy (e.g., “fat is bad,” “thin is good”) (Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022). In SFPs, messages about body weight and the moral value of “good” and “bad” foods can harm food-related attitudes (Ireland et al., 2023). Both pathways have the potential to diminish healthful food-related behaviours among young people, particularly among those with higher body weight. To ensure that the NSFP does not worsen mental health, particularly among youth with higher weights, we encourage the creation of educational materials for staff and students that de-emphasize associations between food and body weight, shape, and/or appearance and endorse healthful food-related attitudes and behaviours through a weight-neutral lens.

Culturally tailored programming: Meaningful engagement and repairing past harms

The NSFP outlines culturally appropriate, relevant, and inclusive programs (Table 1, Objective 3). Between 2001 and 2021, Canada's racialized population increased by 130 percent, from 3.85 million to 8.87 million. Two-thirds of this increase is attributed to

immigration from non-European countries (Statistics Canada, 2023b). In 2021, Indigenous Peoples made up five percent (1.8 million) of Canada's total population. Indigenous Peoples are the fastest-growing and youngest demographic group in the country (Statistics

Canada, 2023a). It is vital that the NSFP addresses the needs of an increasingly diverse nation.

Given that racialized communities often experience poorer diet quality and health outcomes than their White counterparts, integrating elements of cultural safety into the NSFP is a matter of health equity (Andreo & Andrade, 2020). A review of nutrition intervention strategies and their impacts on nutrition knowledge, dietary adherence, and health outcomes among Indigenous youth found that programs using a participatory, culturally safe approach to nutrition education improved knowledge and/or dietary adherence (ibid.).

A second potential benefit of more culturally tailored SFPs is that they may help increase knowledge and acceptance of diverse racial and ethnic cuisines (Yan, 2024). This is particularly important in Canada, where SFPs have historically been exploited to exert colonial force over Indigenous communities within the residential school system (Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The 2015 Truth and Reconciliation report highlighted the cultural loss of

traditional foods and diet at residential schools, noting that this loss “added to the students’ sense of disorientation” (ibid., Executive Summary, p. 88). One survivor shared, “I can’t cut up caribou meat; I can’t cut up moose meat; work with fish and speak my language. So I was starting to become alienated from my parents and my grandparents; everything.” (ibid.).

Although nutrition and food programs have been used historically as tools of oppression (Mosby, 2014), they can also uplift the diverse identities of Canadian youth. It is important that we acknowledge the harmful impacts of historical practices of forced assimilation within Canadian SFPs and continually work to promote cultural diversity through exposure to diverse cultural cuisines and inclusive nutrition education. Promoting a diverse array of cultural cuisines within SFPs that reflect and celebrate Canada’s diversity is needed. Meals and snacks should be served alongside culturally tailored nutrition education curricula co-created with Indigenous and racialized community partners that complement the NSFP.

Conclusion

With the launching of Canada’s NSFP across the country, some school divisions and boards, provinces, and community partners will, for the first time, address questions about hiring and training a school food workforce, integrating nutrition and food education into meal programs and curricula, and designing culturally relevant menus and activities. Ensuring that the benefits of the NSFP are distributed equitably and implemented meaningfully for all students, families, workers, and communities requires elevating the status and value of school food workers while also addressing social complexities, with a view of unravelling past

harms. By providing training for school food workers and adequate compensation, we can ensure that food is prepared and served in ways that engage and respect students’ mental, cultural, and spiritual well-being and needs. When student identity is centred, and a sense of belonging and care is created in programs, students’ well-being (Black et al., 2022; Michnik & Engler-Stringer, 2025) and staff satisfaction, can improve (Michnik, 2025a).

Given the historic under-recognition of women working in kitchens, the lack of funding and inclusivity in food policy, and the rhetoric of control and

colonization over food systems and bodies, moving toward more just and equitable programming will require not only focusing on expected impacts but also on how we can seize this momentum for change to identify harmful patterns and steward new paths forward. Doing so will ensure that investment in the NSFP has the potential not only to improve student nutrition but also to reinforce public policy goals in Canada for improved mental health among youth (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2025; Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health, 2025), gender equality (Employment & Social Development Canada, 2024b), reconciliation (Truth & Reconciliation

Commission of Canada, 2015), and diversity and inclusion (Zhong et al., 2023). Ensuring that participating school communities maintain control over program aspects such as training, staffing, educational resources, menus, and ongoing funding from all levels of government will help achieve NSFP goals. Critical considerations for the NSFP require a mindful approach to policy goals, cognizant of the lived realities and historical experiences of young people, families, and workers in our school communities, and the wise investment of resources not only to create a program that feeds students but also that deeply nourishes entire communities.

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