



**Written Submission for the Pre-Budget
Consultations in Advance of the 2025 Budget**

**Submitted by the
Coalition for Healthy School Food**

The Coalition for Healthy School Food recommends that the Government of Canada:

Recommendation 1: Fast-track negotiations and signing agreements with the provinces, territories, and Indigenous leaders based on the National School Food Policy so that Budget 2024's allocation of \$79 million as the first-year investment of the National School Food Program can support students in the 2024-25 fiscal and school year.

Recommendation 2: Follow up on the government's commitment in Budget 2024 to spend \$201 million in 2025-26, \$218 million in 2026-27, \$241 million in 2027-28 and \$261 million in 2028-29.

Recommendation 3: Continue to hold discussions with Indigenous leaders to negotiate agreements for the creation and/or enhancement of independent distinctions-based First Nation, Métis, and Inuit school meal programs, with long-term and sustainable funding.

Following up on the launch of the National School Food Program in Budget 2024

Dear Mr. Fonseca and Committee Members:

The Coalition for Healthy School Food, Canada's largest school food network, welcomed with great enthusiasm the announcement by the Government of Canada of \$1 billion over 5 years for a National School Food Program in the April 2024 Budget. This investment will make a significant positive difference in the lives of children and families throughout the country for generations to come.

"Budget 2024 announced the creation of a National School Food Program, which will provide \$1 billion over five years... starting in 2024-25, to work with provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners to expand access to school food programs." ¹

The government's commitment is critically important. Canadian families are struggling. Food inflation pressures and affordability are top of mind as grocery costs continue to strain household budgets. Access to nutritious food is out of reach for more and more families. Concerns about the diets of children and youth across socio-economic backgrounds continue to grow as evidence mounts that our children and youth are not receiving adequate nutrition. Only one-third of children aged 4-8 eat five or more servings of fruit and vegetables, while just one-fifth of youth aged 12-17 meet the recommended daily fruit and vegetable intake.² There is significant concern about the long-term health impacts of poor nutrition on children, including increased rates of diet-related illnesses such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

The Coalition also welcomed the National School Food Policy, released on June 20, 2024. Canada's National School Food Policy provides an excellent framework for agreements between the provinces, territories, and Indigenous leaders and the long-term expansion of the National School Food Program

The Coalition is pleased to see the emphasis on all children and youth as well as the focus on non-stigmatizing, health-promoting practices, and support for local food systems, the environment, and culture in line with our guiding principles and statements.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food recommends that the Government of Canada:

- ***Investment:***
 - Fast-track negotiations and signing agreements with the provinces, territories, and Indigenous leaders based on the National School Food Policy so that Budget 2024's

¹ Government of Canada, [Budget 2024](#)

² [Polsky & Garriguet. 2020](#) (Table 5); [Statistics Canada. 2023](#)

allocation of \$79 million as the first-year investment of the National School Food Program can support students in the 2024-25 fiscal and school year.

- Follow up on the government's commitment in Budget 2024 to spend \$201 million in 2025-26, \$218 million in 2026-27, \$241 million in 2027-28 and \$261 million in 2028-29.
- **Indigenous-led programs:** Continue to hold discussions with Indigenous leaders to negotiate agreements for the creation and/or enhancement of independent distinctions-based First Nation, Métis, and Inuit school meal programs, with long-term and sustainable funding.

The Coalition, a non-partisan network of over 450 organizational members and endorsers Canada-wide, advocates for public investment in a universal cost-shared nutritious school meal program with consistent standards. Our vision is that the approximately five and a half million children aged 3-18 enrolled in elementary and secondary schools across Canada will eventually have daily access to a healthy meal at school.

The Coalition has consulted widely with its members, supporters, and stakeholders across Canada to develop these recommendations and supporting rationale in this submission. We present them with our strong support of the Government's creation of the National School Food Program in Budget 2024 and the National School Food Policy in June 2024.

We urge you to continue the important momentum you have started.

Yours sincerely,



Debbie Field, Coordinator
Coalition for Healthy School Food



Wade Thorhaug, Co-Executive Director
Food Secure Canada

National School Food announcement in Budget 2024 investment:

The investment of \$1 billion over five years in Budget 2024 will support the delivery of important elements and objectives:

1. **Delivery of healthy school meals:** support to provinces, territories, and Indigenous communities to augment their investments in school meal programs, delivered through appropriate local partnerships in line with the National School Food Policy's vision.
2. **Addressing the cost of living crisis:** Research shows that universal free school meals (breakfasts and lunches) can provide immediate relief to household budgets and save families between \$130 to \$190 per child per month on groceries, or between \$2,600 to \$3,800 annually for two children.³
3. **Improving educational outcomes:** When children have access to nutritious food at school, research shows they have improved ability to pay attention, be alert, perform well on math, reading, and other standardized tests⁴ as well as take initiative, participate in class, resolve conflicts, and problem solve.
4. **Strengthening of food literacy and lifelong dietary habits:** influence of children's food awareness, knowledge, and habits through a combination of leading-by-example in the sourcing, preparation, and delivery of school meals, and support for development and sharing of knowledge, information, and skills in initiatives aligned with the school meal Program.
5. **Supporting economic growth, job creation, and local food systems:** Building on examples in BC, PEI, and countries worldwide, the National School Food Program will support local food procurement. Doing so will create predictable markets for food producers, generate employment opportunities for farmers, food service and distribution workers, and strengthen local food systems and the agri-food sector.
6. **Promotion of responsible and supportive school food policies and practices:** advocacy and action to promote school-based access to healthy foods and prevent marketing of unhealthy foods to students.
7. **Development of local, environmentally sustainable, and culturally appropriate food sourcing and production:** production and sourcing of appropriate foods for school meal programs and that support the establishment and viability of local, sustainable producers, suppliers and food preparers, including traditional and country foods.

³ [The Economic Rationale for Investing in School Meal Programs for Canada](#)

⁴ [Anderson et al, 2017; Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015](#)

8. **Addressing gender equity:** A study from Sweden showed that access to free lunch programs increased mothers' labour market participation by 5%, while parents and working women in particular benefit from reduced stress and time spent on packing school meals.
9. **Improved health outcomes:** Children consume one-third of their daily food at school, making school food programs an ideal way to support nutritious eating for all kids. School food programs will help reduce the \$13 billion in annual costs of nutrition-related diseases in Canada by supporting children's physical and mental health, and by fostering healthy eating behaviours that can last a lifetime.
10. **Alignment with other government objectives:** The National School Food Program joins universal child care and the Canada Child Benefit as crucial family supports. It will have a lasting impact on Canadian society just as universal healthcare and publicly-funded K-12 education have transformed Canadian lives over the past several decades.

Investing in school food is an excellent economic policy that will help advance multiple federal priorities. Overall, school food programs provide a return on investment between 2.5 to 7x for every dollar put in in terms of the economic and health benefits they provide.

National School Food Policy Principles

- **Accessible:** Children and youth can participate in school food programs without stigma or barriers.
- **Health-promoting:** Food served is consistent with healthy eating recommendations in Canada's Food Guide, and children and youth are supported in developing healthful food-related behaviours and attitudes, as well as food and nutrition knowledge and skills.
- **Inclusive:** Children and youth have access to culturally appropriate, relevant, and inclusive school food programs that engage students and the broader community.
- **Flexible:** Food is locally sourced where possible and reflective of local and regional circumstances.
- **Sustainable:** Programs are designed to be environmentally sustainable, and adequately resourced
- **Accountable:** Consistent and transparent monitoring and evaluation to ensure that programs are achieving policy objectives.

The Coalition was very pleased to see these principles, which are very much in line with the Coalition's [8 Guiding Principles](#).

We also welcome the **National School Food Policy Objectives:**

Work progressively towards the long-term goal of universal access

This Objective speaks of working to continuously build on and expand programs to communities, particularly where they are underserved or where communities and populations face barriers to accessing nutritious food, as well as offering meals "in an environment designed to minimize or eliminate stigma".

Expand investment in school food so that programs can operate sustainably

This Objective speaks of enhancing and expanding funding and exploring how different funding models could be implemented, the need to support investments in infrastructure and staffing, and “taking action to encourage sustainable practices”.

Help children meet their nutritional and health needs, develop healthful food-related behaviours and attitudes, as well as food and nutrition knowledge and skills

This Objective speaks about “aligning meals, snacks, experiences, and education with Canada’s Food Guide and provincial or territorial nutrition guidelines”, supporting age-appropriate and hands-on learning opportunities “related to food, nutrition, and/or food systems” and the development of food skills, and “safeguarding against marketing food and beverage brands and highly processed foods and beverages to children and increasing awareness of the impacts of food marketing on food choice”.

Promote programming that is culturally appropriate, relevant, and inclusive

This Objective speaks about supporting programming that enables children to learn about other cultures, ensuring that programs are culturally appropriate, involving students in menu planning and food preparation where possible, and involving students, parents and the community.

Create opportunities for local economies and reflect on local and regional circumstances

This Objective speaks to “Maximizing opportunities to source food locally and foster connections with local food producers, hunters and harvesters, processors, and suppliers”, supporting local economies, ensuring supportive partnerships, and supporting “the participation of under-represented groups in the Canadian agriculture and food sector”.

With regards to next steps, the Policy states that it will continue to collaborate with partners from across Canada, including close collaboration with provinces and territories as well as First Nations, Inuit, and Métis partners, to advance the Policy’s vision. In closing the Policy states that **“The Government of Canada will work with other orders of government, partners, and stakeholders to explore ways to improve access to information on school food programming, report on progress, and share best practices.”**

We look forward to working in every province and territory to help ensure that agreements with the provinces and territories are negotiated and signed as quickly as possible so that programs across the country can immediately get to the work of helping more children and youth access nutritious food during their school day.

The Coalition is proud to have been part of the movement for school food in Canada that has informed this Policy, and we are pleased to be able to work with the Government of Canada, provinces and territories, and Indigenous leadership in the months and years ahead to advance the Policy.

About the Coalition for Healthy School Food

The Coalition for Healthy School Food's 330+ non-profit member organizations and 140+ endorsers include non-profit organizations, government agencies, and thousands of supporters from across Canada, advocate for the creation of a universal cost-shared school food program that would see all K-12 students having daily access to healthy food at school. Building on existing programs across the country, the Coalition envisions that all schools will eventually serve a healthy meal or snack at little or no cost to students. These programs will include food education and serve culturally appropriate, local, sustainable food to the fullest extent possible.