



FoodShare Toronto Submission to  
UN Special Rapporteur (SR) on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter  
Children and Food Meeting, May 9, 2012

## **The Case for a National Student Nutrition Policy and Program**

### **Summary**

Canada needs a National Student Nutrition Policy and the federal government's engagement in a cost-shared Student Nutrition Program to make student nutrition programs available universally across Canada and to all students. The engagement and leadership of the federal government toward this end is consistent with its role in the health of our nation.

Although student nutrition programs already exist in a variety of models in many jurisdictions across the country, and some of these programs access funding from a province, territory, or municipality, there is no underlying policy or standard that supports them at a national level, and these programs – which deliver key health and community benefits – are not universally available across the country or to all children. Despite the country's commitment to the good health of all, Canada remains one of the only G8 nations that does not have a National Student Nutrition Policy and Program.

### **Recommendations**

- 1) A cost-shared model should be developed for Student Nutrition programs in Canada through negotiations between the federal government, provinces and territories, municipal governments, parents and students.
- 2) The federal government should work with the provinces and territories to provide universal access to healthy snacks and lunches for all school-aged children across Canada.
- 3) Once this model and comprehensive framework have been established, strategic implementation will be key. Various models for implementation should be considered, including
  - a. A National Student Nutrition Policy and Program funded by the federal government but implemented by each province or territory in accordance with its own views on the most effective delivery model, similar to childcare.
  - or
  - b. A National Student Nutrition Policy and Program funded through the federal government with funds flowing through Health Canada to community-based programs across the Country, similar to Health Canada's Better Beginnings program.

### **Background**

In a country that prides itself in its commitment to the good health of all, a key component in helping to assure that this goal is achieved universally each day for Canadian children and youth is missing. Although student nutrition programs already exist in a variety of models in many jurisdictions across the country, there is no underlying policy that supports all of them.

An independent national survey conducted for FoodShare by opinion research firm Strategic Communications in early 2010, showed almost three fifths of respondents endorsed the creation of a National Student Nutrition Program. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of 85% of Canadians supported the following statement: "The federal government should work with the provinces to provide universal access to healthy snacks and lunches for all school aged children across Canada." These results are not surprising in light of the widespread acknowledgement that Type 2 diabetes and obesity among Canada's young people are becoming a national health crisis, and childhood poverty rates are on the rise.

Nutrition programs offered in the morning hours ensure an adequate intake of appropriate nutrients and vitamins early enough in the day to prepare the body and mind to be alert and ready for learning and active participation in the classroom. Recent studies of selected programs within one of the high priority neighbourhoods in Toronto indicated a notable increase in academic standing (10-13%) in test results in participants that ate a healthy meal before the start of the testing. In addition, improved general health, attention to school, improved behaviour, and less absenteeism and tardiness were noted. Similar outcomes have been documented in studies elsewhere in North America.

Student nutrition programs also have some less concrete but equally important benefits for participants and communities. They are a vehicle to provide food skills training, overall Food Literacy and socialization of participants and volunteers alike. Children and youth attending these programs exhibit healthier eating habits. They learn what healthy food is, where it comes from and how to prepare it – the foundation for life-long healthy choices. New supply-chain innovations also indicate that these programs can provide new markets and fair prices in support of national and provincial farming communities. Student nutrition programs help to build healthy, engaged and socialized communities.

Although some jurisdictions already access funding from a province or territory and more rarely from municipal sources, financial support, like program standards, is not consistent across Canada and in some jurisdictions, is negligible. In 2010, for example, the Ontario government invested \$17.9 million yearly in the Student Nutrition Program, in which an estimated 600,000 students were helped. But the need exists to serve all.

Even where there is a provincial or municipal commitment to funding, challenges exist in generating the additional funding (often up to 90% of the total costs) required to run these programs. A recent overview of student nutrition programs in the Province of Ontario indicates that in spite of dedicated funding for these programs, the over-riding challenge for long-term sustainability of these programs is funding. It found that parental donations and local fundraising produced low to insignificant amounts of funds to support even the most basic food items. Moreover, the review recognized that increased sustained core funding is necessary for long-term sustainability of the programs. As these programs are community driven, there is also a need for support of community development staff at the local level to help programs achieve best practices for long-term program sustainability.

## **Conclusion**

While there is recognition that there cannot be a 'cookie cutter' approach to student nutrition programs as each community is different and unique, common standards around universality, nutrition standards, frequency of program delivery, safe food handling and accountability should be in place to ensure long term sustainability of these programs. A National Student Nutrition Policy would ensure the same high standards for all programs across Canada and, recognizing that these programs are community driven, would work in partnership with current programming already in place in numerous jurisdictions to embrace and honour local and regional variances and needs.

Investment in today's children and youth through a national Student Nutrition Policy and Program is an investment in healthy, educated and engaged adult communities across Canada in the future.

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