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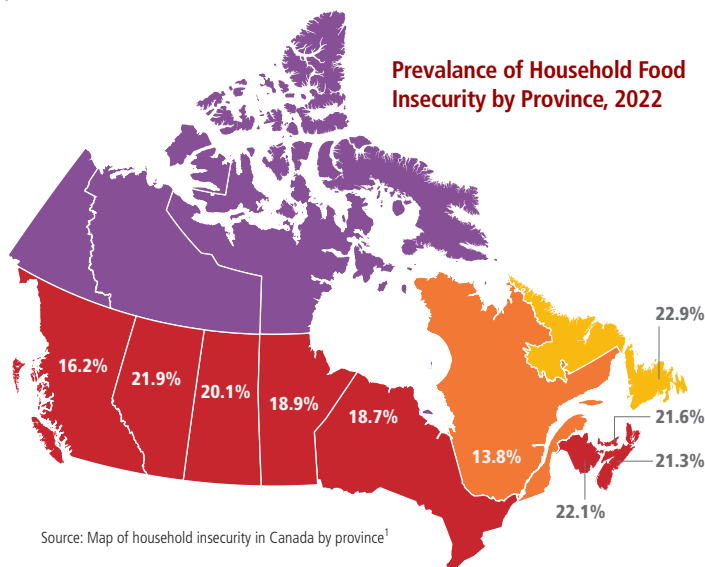
# SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS

## BEEF WATCH REPORT FOR DECEMBER 2023

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCHOOL FOOD POLICY IN CANADA

In Budget 2019, the Federal Government made the commitment to strengthen food systems and improve food security. In 2022, 1.8 million children — or one in four — under the age of 18 lived in a food-insecure household. Households with children also made up the majority of the increase in food insecurity from 2021 to 2022.<sup>1</sup>

In November 2022, Economic and Social Development Canada (ESDC) launched a consultation to build a Pan-Canadian School Food Policy with participation from provincial/territorial governments, Indigenous partners and stakeholders. The results of the consultation are summarized in the “What we heard” report released on October 31, 2023.<sup>2</sup> According to the ESDC: “Too many children at school are trying to learn on empty stomachs, and too many Canadian families are not able to reliably access healthy food.” Even though nutrition adequacy during childhood and adolescence is vital for optimal physical and cognitive development, and future health outcomes, in 2020 Statistics Canada reported that over half of Canadian children’s total energy intake comes from ultra-processed foods.<sup>3</sup>



On November 2, 2023, at the House of Commons, Julie Dabrusin, Member of Parliament for Toronto-Danforth, presented Petition e-4586<sup>4</sup> to the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. The petition, with almost 2,000 signatures, is a request to the Federal Government to provide \$1 billion over 5 years for school food with an immediate investment of \$200 million in Budget 2024. This significant investment would require coordination with provinces, territories and Indigenous leaders.

Despite the petition in favour, not everyone is supportive of this initiative. On Wednesday December 6, the Conservative caucus voted against the National School Food Program, suggesting it is not addressing “the pressing food price concerns” affecting Canadians today. Some MPs from the Liberal and NDP parties are publicly questioning that position.<sup>5</sup> More details about the bill are available at this link: [Bill C-322](#)

### Potential Benefits of a National School Food Program

In other countries, school meal programs have strong links to local farmers and deliver support to communities. For example, in France and Italy, the school meal program helps to educate children about food culture. Some researchers have suggested a similar approach that could be adapted to the Canadian context, where children from diverse cultural backgrounds who attend the same school might come together and share a culturally relevant healthy meals at lunch.<sup>6</sup>

The National School Lunch Program in the U.S. serves more than 30 million children every school day. The Food Research and Action Center reports that children participating in the program have shown improved academic performance (such as math and reading test scores), higher attendance rates and decreased tardiness.<sup>7</sup>

These results have been confirmed in other countries as well. A report from Sweden<sup>8</sup> explains how their universal school lunches, provided free of charge, and delivered to all pupils in primary schools between 1959 and 1969, had positive impacts on the economic, educational and health outcomes throughout the life of the recipients. The Swedish school food policy imposes nutritional standards on the meals served, with requirements to include specified amounts of protein, vitamins, calcium and iron, while providing a third of the daily caloric needs. In addition, the report emphasizes why the single most important nutrient for height growth is protein, and how a variation in the consumption of high-quality protein and wheat explains most of the variations in height across 45 European countries.

Going forward, Canada Beef will continue to monitor the development of the school food policy and the potential future implementation of the national program supported by the Federal Government.

### Additional Resources

1. Tarasuk, V., Li T., [Food insecurity in Canada is the worst it’s ever been — here’s how we can solve it](#), The Conversation, November 19, 2023.
2. ESDC, [National School Food Policy Engagements – What We Heard Report - Canada.ca](#), October 31, 2023
3. Polsky, J., et al., [Consumption of ultra-processed foods in Canada](#), Statistics Canada, November 18, 2020.
4. [Petition e-4586 - Petitions \(ourcommons.ca\)](#)
5. Aiello, R., [Conservatives vote against bill proposing school food program | CTV News](#), December 7, 2023.
6. Dacunha, C., Ng, E., & Elton S., [The school food solution | Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development \(foodsystemsjournal.org\)](#). Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 12(1), 157–169. 2022.
7. Food Research Action Center, [School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning](#), May 2021 Report.
8. Lundborg P., et al., [Long-Term Effects of Childhood Nutrition: Evidence from a School Lunch Reform](#), The Review of Economic Studies, Volume 89, Issue 2, March 2022, Pages 876–908., May 11, 2021.