



The mission of OPHA is to provide leadership on issues affecting the public's health and to strengthen the impact of people who are active in public and community health throughout Ontario.

Ontario Public Health Association
l'Association pour la santé publique de l'Ontario
Established/Établi 1949

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Alliance for Healthier Communities
(AHC)

Association of Public Health
Epidemiologists in Ontario (APHEO)

Association of Supervisors of
Public Health Inspectors of Ontario
(ASPHIO)

Canadian Institute of Public Health
Inspectors - Ontario Branch (CIPHI-O)

Community Health Nurses'
Initiatives Group (RNAO)

Health Promotion Ontario (HPO)

Ontario Association of Public
Health Dentistry (OAPHD)

Ontario Association of Public Health
Nursing Leaders (OAPHNL)

Ontario Dietitians in Public Health
(ODPH)

Ontario Public Health Libraries
Association (OPHLA)

Charitable Registration
Number 11924 8771 RR0001

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland, PC, MP
Minister of Finance
House of Commons, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A6

February 23, 2023.

Sent by email to: chrystia.freeland@fin.gc.ca

Re: The need to invest in a national school nutritious meal program as a critical element of a school food policy

Dear Deputy Prime Minister and Minister Freeland,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) including our board of directors and our members. We are a member of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, a Canada-wide, non-partisan network of more than 240 non-profit organizations and we are writing to urge the government to invest in a universal cost-shared nutritious school meal program with consistent standards. The coalition's vision is that 5.5 million elementary and secondary school-aged children across Canada will have daily access to a healthy meal at school.

For over 70 years, OPHA has provided leadership on issues affecting the public's health and strengthened the impact of people who are active in public health and community health. This mission is achieved through capacity building and knowledge mobilization, professional development, helping shape public policy, research and analysis on issues affecting community and public health, coordination of multi-disciplinary networks, and providing expertise to government.

The Government of Canada has a significant opportunity to advance the health and well-being of all Canadian children and lay the foundation for long-term health for all Canadians by including an investment in the national school food program in Budget 2023. We applaud the government's commitment to a healthy school food program in Budget 2022, as outlined in mandate letters, but urge you to act on those commitments with actual dollars in Budget 2023.

Specifically, OPHA and our fellow coalition members are asking your government to:

- 1) Allocate \$1 billion over five years in Budget 2023 to establish a national school nutritious meal program as a key element of the evolving Food Policy for

Canada, with \$200 million per year to contribute to provinces, territories and First Nation, Métis and Inuit partners to fund their school food programs.

- 2) Enter into immediate discussions with Indigenous leaders to negotiate agreements for the creation and/or enhancement of permanent, independent, distinctions-based First Nations, Métis and Inuit school meal programs.
- 3) Create a dedicated school food infrastructure fund to enhance food production and preparation equipment and facilities so they can reliably and efficiently serve healthy food in adequate volumes.

Our research (and that of others) on the state of healthy eating behaviours in children and youth, shows some disturbing trends. Many of Canada's young people are at risk for inadequate food or specific nutrient intakes, notably calcium, vitamin D, and magnesium. Often, they are also ingesting too little fibre and potassium and too much sodium and sugar. The most recent Canadian data reports that almost 80% of youth ages 12 to 19, are failing to consume adequate vegetables and fruits, putting them at an increased risk of developing chronic diseases.

Canadian research shows that school food programs increase consumption of healthy foods, reduce the risk of chronic disease, and improve mental health, positively influencing children's nutritional knowledge, dietary behaviours, and food intake. School food programs improve educational outcomes and increase graduation rates by reducing hunger in classrooms, a known barrier to concentration and learning. They help students feel connected and that they belong; feelings that have been eroded during COVID-19. A national school food program would have a positive impact on families, particularly women who invest significant time preparing food for school.

COVID-19 brought significant unemployment and rising food insecurity, and an increasing number of families had to turn to emergency food aid. Statistics Canada recently shared that 19.2% of Canadians living in a household with children reported experiencing food insecurity. We also know that Black households experience significantly more food insecurity than white households and this has almost certainly been exacerbated by COVID-19.

It is widely recognized that structural racism and systemic inequity have created the economic and social conditions for increased rates of high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes, which are among the biggest risk factors for sickness and mortality from COVID-19.

Now is the time to support a national school food program that will take pressure off the family budget and be a support for the millions of children and youth who are unable to access healthy food at this time. Investing in a national school food program that is universal and without means-testing can contribute to levelling the playing field and ensuring that all students are able to access a healthy meal or snack each day.

This is ultimately about our shared future, and the support we can provide so that every child, from coast to coast to coast, can learn and grow to their full potential.

Sincerely,



Executive Director

cc:

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P., Prime Minister of Canada

Honorable Jean-Yves Duclos, Minister of Health

Honorable Filomena Tassi, Minister responsible for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario

Debbie Field, Coordinator, Coalition for Healthy School Food

More about the Ontario Public Health Association

OPHA has established a strong record of success as the voice of public health in Ontario. We are a member-based, not-for-profit association that has been advancing the public health agenda since 1949. OPHA provides leadership on issues affecting the public's health and strengthens the impact of those who are active in public and community health throughout Ontario. OPHA does this through a variety of means including advocacy, capacity building, research and knowledge exchange. Our membership represents many disciplines from across multiple sectors.

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