



**ONTARIO PUBLIC  
SCHOOL BOARDS'  
ASSOCIATION**

**Leading Education's Advocates**

**Ontario Public School Boards' Association**  
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The Honourable Karina Gould, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development  
The Honourable Marie-Claude Bibeau, Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food

Dear Ministers:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide further commentary to the federal government's consultation regarding a National School Food Policy. The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) and its members greatly appreciated the invitation to participate with other partners in the recently convened virtual roundtable discussion. The concept ties in directly with two of our five multi-year strategic priorities – Advocating for the Whole Child and Student Well-Being and Advancing Reconciliation: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education.

OPSBA fully supports the concept of a universal national school food policy/program for all public schools with certain requirements. This type of program could provide a variety of benefits, including:

- Improving access to nutritious food for students, allowing all students to focus on learning in school
- Addressing food insecurity and the resulting anxiety and mental health challenges that affect students
- Improving the social determinants of health for marginalized communities
- Promoting healthy eating habits, choices, and lifestyles
- Increasing food literacy
- Supporting local agriculture and traditions; and
- Supporting a healthier and more sustainable food system.

It would also help ensure that all children have the nourishment they need to learn and grow, and improve their health and well-being. Additionally, it can also contribute to the development of a more sustainable food system by supporting local and sustainable food production.

We suggest that any federally supported policy/program to provide food (breakfasts, meals, snacks) must have the following minimum requirements:

- Be present at **every publicly funded school**
- Accessible
- At no cost to the student (or their care provider), school or board
- Offered in a manner that is stigma-free, and
- Support culturally appropriate local food producers.

It should have these minimum requirements but also allow for operational flexibility. To ensure successful and equitable implementation of the program, funding must cover all additional costs, including administrative supports, and must be sustained throughout the life of the program. An equitable, universal, fully funded program would resolve inequities and inconsistencies, and offer a solid foundation for all students. We agree with the concept that meals must be culturally adapted and appropriate for each community.

Our members noted that funding allocations need to consider related capital costs. This could include new, or upgrades to, food preparation and handling areas, equipment, etc. Trustees also remarked that many schools, including their kitchens and other programming spaces, are used by community partners outside of the regular school day. Additionally, a National School Food Policy should consider how students may need year-round access including during winter and spring breaks and the summer.

### **The Ontario Landscape**

We all can agree that poverty is a real and growing issue for many families who cannot regularly afford to make and eat daily meals and snacks that align with Canada's Food Guide.

*Opportunity for All – Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy* recognizes that food insecurity, low numeracy and literacy and low youth engagement are benchmarks of the Canadian poverty crisis and directly impact a child's dignity, inclusion opportunities and health outcomes. It is also important to note food insecurity, poor eating habits, and other food-related challenges can impact children from all socioeconomic demographics in a variety of different ways. However, we can recognize the direct relationship between healthy nutrition and academic achievement and well-being. **Children who are not hungry are more prepared to learn and participate in our classrooms and extra-curricular activities.**

Presently in Ontario, there are a great number of nutrition programs operating in our schools. However, these programs are a patchwork offering various and inconsistent levels of service and assistance. Some are supported by our Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services, and Ministry of Health and its local Public Health Units, while others are funded privately or through local non-profit agencies. Some "programs" are not really programs, but rely on the generosity of one-off donations or with funds received in contests to operate. These are not equitable, nor are they sustainable. Ontario also has a fundraising initiative called Fresh from Farm that partners classrooms with local farmers.

It is a fact that some schools have better access to resources, charitable programs, and parental support than others, in terms of both time and funding, than others. Boards that have established charitable programs have them set up as arms length groups with dedicated and paid staff to coordinate and operationalize nutrition programs at a board-wide level.

At the individual school level, different programs are in place that make sense for local communities. Many schools have developed breakfast, snack, and lunch program partnerships with local businesses, agencies and clubs to ensure the provision, preparation and serving of nutritious food. These are initiatives that, while essential to student health and well-being, are not always possible for schools to manage within their existing resources.

Since the schools know their students best, they are also able to customize their programs to reflect the diversity of the school population in the type of food offered and community involvement. Some examples are accessible bins/baskets with free snacks near main doors and in cafeterias, as well as in all classrooms.

### **Smart Partnerships**

The government should consider the many successful partnerships already in place. A leader in this advocacy work is the Coalition for Healthy School Food, who support “the creation of a universal cost-shared school food program for Canada, that would see all K-12 students having daily access to healthy food at school.” The coalition has a presence in every province and territory and has already established connections and alliances with credible partners.

In Ontario, a potential area for stronger links is between school boards and their local public health units. These two entities already connect on many relevant issues and the nutritional education component could be enhanced. (In Ontario, public health units have had their budgets drastically reduced and this funding would need to be restored.)

Partnerships should also consider efficient and cost-saving procurement of nutritious food and snacks. Our members noted that buying individually wrapped or single use products is much more expensive than buying larger quantities that are then split into more appropriate serving sizes and re-packaged locally.

OPSBA is a willing partner and a member of the Canadian School Boards' Association (CSBA), who are also part of the stakeholder discussion. Our national association has a Committee on Comprehensive School Health that provides, “a national voice in responding to the health and wellness challenges of students across Canada” and makes for a natural partner in communicating and supporting this proposed policy.

### **Next Steps**

Given the widespread need across Ontario, and indeed Canada, and the extraordinary diversity of approaches school boards/districts take in forming partnerships to support those in need, there is a strong need for the federal government, in partnership with provincial ministries and school boards/districts, to commit to a National School Food Policy.

**A national policy would set a standard both for securing food for schools as a fundamental human right and ensuring that right is delivered consistently, sustainably,**

**and within a context of transformative action to end poverty, improve students' health and achievement outcomes and build cultural and economic success.**

The federal government should provide an update to all stakeholders on their proposed timelines so that information can continue to be shared about this important initiative.

We look forward to continued engagement with you on this critical initiative for children and youth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cathy Abraham". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Cathy Abraham  
President

cc:

Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education, Ontario

Merrilee Fullerton, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services

Sylvia Jones, Minister of Health

Nancy Naylor, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Education

Dasha Androusenkov, Director, Stakeholder Relations, Ministry of Education  
Loretta Ryan, Executive Director, The Association of Local Public Health Agencies (aLPHa)

Dr. Eileen de Villa, Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health Chair, Representative, Toronto, aLPHa

Mike Roberts, Interim Executive Director, Canadian School Boards' Association

*Our Association represents English public district school boards and public school authorities across Ontario, which together serve more than 1.3 million public elementary and secondary students. The Association advocates on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario. OPSBA is seen as the expert voice of public education in Ontario and is routinely called on by the provincial government for input and advice on legislation and the impact of government policy directions.*