

MIDDLESEX-LONDON BOARD OF HEALTH

REPORT NO. 48-24

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health
FROM: Dr. Alexander Summers, Medical Officer of Health
Emily Williams, Chief Executive Officer
DATE: 2024 July 18

PUBLIC HEALTH ACTION TO SUPPORT SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board of Health:

- 1) *Receive Report No. 48-24 re: “Public Health Action to Support School Food Programs”;*
and
 - 2) *Endorse the work and initiatives of [The Coalition for Healthy School Food](#).*
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Report Highlights

- As part of Budget 2024, the federal government announced a new [National School Food Program](#) advocated for by the [Coalition for Healthy School Food](#).
- Locally, schools participating in the [Ontario Student Nutrition Program](#) will benefit from this funding, as [program demands](#) have significantly outpaced provincial funding for years.
- The federal government released the [National School Food Policy](#) identifying the long-term vision for this policy, including a set of principles, core values, and key objectives outlining how the principles can be operationalized.

Background

Providing children access to food in the school environment contributes to optimal child development outcomes, school performance, and school attendance ([Global Child Nutrition Foundation, 2021](#)). Universal school nutrition programs (SNP) can have wide-reaching impacts on families, local communities, and the economy through the reduction of household food expenses, the creation of SNP jobs, and strengthening the agrifood sector ([Kleinman et al., 2002](#); [Ruetz et al., 2023](#)). Income-based policy solutions, such as the Canada Child Benefit and a basic income, are still needed to reduce household food insecurity ([Report No. 49-24](#), [Report No. 69-23](#)).

There is a great need for SNPs in London and Middlesex County. In 2022-2023, the highest number of requests for support from the Thames Valley Education Foundation’s Caring Fund were for hunger and food scarcity (61.88%) ([Thames Valley Education Foundation, 2024](#)). During the 2023-2024 school year, the Ontario Student Nutrition Program (OSNP) operated in

89 out of 182 schools in London-Middlesex, supporting a projected 23,000 students and serving nearly 4 million meals and snacks ([OSNP, 2024](#)). Insufficient funding, rising food costs, and increased participation rates have forced some schools to be waitlisted for funding, to end programming earlier than anticipated, reduce the quality and/or quantity of food provided, and even terminate programming.

As part of Budget 2024, the Office of the Prime Minister of Canada announced a new [National School Food Program](#) with an investment of \$1 billion over five years and a target of providing meals to 400,000 more children every year. Prior to this announcement, Canada was the only G7 country without a national school food program.

In follow-up to the funding announcement, the Government of Canada recently released the [National School Food Policy](#) to help support the federal government's long-term vision of every child having access to nutritious food in school. The Policy outlines a set of principles for the national school food program in Canada (i.e., accessible, health promoting, inclusive, flexible, sustainable, and accountable).

[The Coalition for Healthy School Food](#), a network of over 300 non-profit organizations, works with partners across Canada to: 1) advocate for a universal cost-shared healthy Canada-wide school food program; 2) strengthen commitments from provinces and territories, local governments, and school communities; and 3) support replication, networking, and sharing of best practices for the diverse school food programs across Canada. Organizations may become members or endorsers of the Coalition.

Public Health Action

- A Health Unit Public Health Dietitian participates in the Children's Nutrition Network, a local community partnership that works to enhance support for the ongoing development and sustainability of student nutrition programs in Middlesex-London.
- The MLHU School Health Team collaborates with local school boards to support board-level planning and implementation of school food programs. These partnerships aim to facilitate the implementation of school food programs that meet crucial criteria, such as:
 - Ensuring culturally inclusive and acceptable food offerings
 - Educating the school community to reduce the stigma associated with school food programs
 - Assisting schools in identifying and applying for additional funding
 - Ensuring that new school constructions and renovations include sufficient facilities to support school food programs
- The Board of Health recently endorsed the following items: 1) [Public Health Sudbury & Districts re: Support for a Funded Healthy School Food Program in Budget 2024 \(Federal\) \(Nov 2023 meeting\)](#), and 2) [Windsor-Essex County Health Unit re: Investing in a Sustainable Federal School Food Policy \(October 2023 meeting\)](#).
- Letters of support for a national school food program have been sent from the Middlesex-London Food Policy Council (forthcoming); Public Health Sudbury & Districts ([May 2024](#)); Association of Local Public Health Agencies (aLPHa) ([April 2024](#)); Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit ([March 2024](#)); Ontario Dietitians in Public Health ([2022, 2023](#)); and the Council of Ontario Directors of Education in collaboration with the Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health ([2021](#)).
- At its 2024 Annual General Meeting and Conference, aLPHa passed [Resolution A23-06: Advocating for a National School Food Program in Canada](#).

Next Steps

MLHU staff will continue to support local student nutrition programs through participation with the Children's Nutrition Network and collaboration with local school boards. Student nutrition program updates and action from the federal and provincial governments and [The Coalition for Healthy School Food](#) will continue to be monitored by Health Unit staff for potential future action. In addition, it is recommended that the Board of Health [endorse](#) The Coalition for Healthy School Food.

This report was written by the Municipal and Community Health Promotion Team and the School Health Team of the Family and Community Health Division.



Alexander Summers, MD, MPH, CCFP, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health



Emily Williams, BScN, RN, MBA, CHE
Chief Executive Officer

This report refers to the following principle(s) set out in Policy G-490, Appendix A:

- The Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being, Healthy Growth and Development, and School Health standards as outlined in the [Ontario Public Health Standards: Requirements for Programs, Services and Accountability](#).
- The following goal or direction from the [Middlesex-London Health Unit's Strategic Plan](#):
 - Facilitate meaningful and trusting relationships with prioritized equity-deserving groups, specifically Black and Indigenous communities
 - Our public health programs are effective, grounded in evidence and equity

This topic has been reviewed to be in alignment with goals under the Middlesex-London Health Unit's [Anti-Black Racism Plan](#) and [Taking Action for Reconciliation](#), specifically recommendations:

Anti-Black Racism Plan

Recommendation #37: Lead and/or actively participate in healthy public policy initiatives focused on mitigating and addressing, at an upstream level, the negative and inequitable impacts of the social determinants of health which are priority for local ACB communities and ensure the policy approaches take an anti-Black racism lens.

Taking Action for Reconciliation

Supportive Environments: Continue to provide adequate funding and resources for the development and maintenance of activities to support cultural safety and cultural humility.

Equitable Access and Service Delivery: Develop Indigenous-specific programs and/or services, using a co-creation process, with Indigenous-led organizations and First Nations communities, if and when such programming is desired and deemed appropriate by these organizations and/or Nations.