The Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

May 21, 2024

Re: Private Member's Bill C-322 – An Act to develop a national framework for a school food program

Dear Committee Members,

We are writing to you today in strong support of MP Serge Cormier's Private Member's Bill C-322, An Act to develop a national framework for a school food program.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food is a network of nearly 450 member organizations and endorsers from coast to coast to coast that include nonprofit school food providers, national health, education and Indigenous organizations, school boards, cities, municipal health boards, and many others. Together we are thousands of supporters including educators from across Canada who have been advocating for the development of a universal national school food program that is cost-shared with the provinces and territories.

The passing of Bill C-322 is even more important now than when it was first tabled in March 2023. The federal government's recent investment of $1 billion over five years for school food programs in Budget 2024 will mean that many more children will be able to access a healthy meal at school. The government's investment will increase children's consumption of healthy foods, help more students be ready to learn and succeed at school and reduce those children's risk of chronic disease. This investment will also help families save on their grocery bills, support working families, especially working mothers, and benefit local food producers. The federal government's announcement will have a lasting impact. It is not an exaggeration to say that the National School Food Program will change Canada for the better and will be remembered, along with the childcare accords and the CCB (Canada's Child Benefit), as an important Canadian federal initiative.

To ensure that the National School Food Program will thrive and grow, an Act of Parliament is needed. **Bill C-322 – An Act to develop a national framework for a school food program,** will entrench in law the importance of the involvement of the federal government when it comes to

supporting school food programs. It will provide a framework for how the federal government can work with the provinces, territories, and Indigenous communities in partnership to ensure the health and well-being of the next generations of all Canadian children.

It is essential that Indigenous leaders, organizations, and families play key roles in designing, implementing, and evaluating nutritious school food programs in their own communities as well as other locations where First Nations, Métis or Inuit children comprise a significant portion of the student population. We encourage the Framework for a school food program to ensure that focused consultations and collaboration on the development of independent, Indigenous-led distinctions-based school meal programs for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit school children.

Passing Bill C-322 will align Canada with other countries. The Federal Government is a member of the global School Meals Coalition, 90+ countries who have pledged to provide "A healthy meal for every child, every day by 2030" (the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals). It will also align with the 2013 United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 15 to all governments, stressing that: "School feeding is desirable to ensure all pupils have access to a full meal every day, which can also enhance children's attention for learning and increase school enrolment. The Committee recommends that this be combined with nutrition and health education, including setting up school gardens and training teachers to improve children's nutrition and healthy eating habits". Passing Bill 322 will go a long way toward delivering on these international commitments and aspirations.

Canadian research shows that school food programs increase children's consumption of healthy foods (e.g., fresh vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and plant-based proteins), build food literacy, and positively influence children's lifelong eating patterns, regardless of income, social background, or family circumstances. These programs reduce students' risks of chronic disease and improve their physical development and mental health. They also provide excellent opportunities for schools to model and bring to life the revised Canada's Food Guide and would be a natural extension of the federal Healthy Eating Strategy and Food Policy for Canada. A national Program along the lines proposed would address serious nutrition deficiencies among many Canadian school children:

- Research shows that the diet quality of Canadian children across the entire socio-economic spectrum during school hours is poor.
- Less than one-third of children under 12 years of age eat five or more servings of vegetables and fruit daily, and at least 1/3 of school-aged children in Canada report eating vegetables and fruits less than once daily.

- In 2012 and 2013 only a small proportion of Canadian children met the 2007 Canada's Food Guide recommendations; low vegetable and fruit consumption are of particular concern.
- Over 50% of the total energy intake of children aged 4-18 is from ultra-processed foods, and many families struggle to introduce minimally processed healthy foods for a variety of reasons.
- One-third of students in elementary schools and two-thirds of students in secondary schools do not eat a nutritious breakfast before school.
- The majority of school children lack an understanding of how food is produced and why healthy eating habits are part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.
- 16% of calories consumed in Nunavut are derived from country foods yet this has been steadily decreasing for decades.

School food programs provide a variety of benefits for students and beyond, including:

- Improving access and consumption of nutritious foods at school, helping all students to focus on learning;
- Supporting families by relieving some pressure from household grocery budgets,
- Helping to address anxiety and mental health challenges;
- Improving the social determinants of health for all children;
- Promoting healthy eating habits and setting students up for positive life-long patterns;
- Increasing food literacy;
- Providing relief to household budgets and supporting women and families;
- Supporting resilient and more sustainable food systems; and
- Supporting local economies through job creation and growth.

A national school food program would help ensure that all children have the nourishment they need to learn and grow and improve their health and well-being. It would help strengthen food systems and communities, and support women and families who have been struggling with the affordability crisis. A national school food program is also an excellent economic investment, with research showing a 2.5 to 7x return on investment in human health and economic benefits.

We suggest that any federally supported program providing food (breakfasts, meals, snacks) must meet the following minimum requirements:

- Follow nutrition standards and offer culturally appropriate food options
- Provide meals and snacks to children and youth without stigma
- Ensure no marketing to kids

- Establish a monitoring and evaluation framework for consistent reporting

Given the widespread need across Canada and the extraordinary diversity of approaches to school food programs, there is a strong need for the federal government, in partnership with provincial and territorial ministries and school boards/districts, to work together to build a consensus framework for a National Framework for a School Food Program. This framework would set a standard both for securing food for schools and ensuring it is delivered consistently and sustainably, in order to improve students' health and academic achievement outcomes and build cultural and economic success. There is widespread support for school food as evidenced by the Employment and Social Development Canada National School Food Policy Engagements – What We Heard Report

In developing a National Framework for a school food program. The coalition offers our eight Guiding Principles, which are grounded in research[1] and can be considered best practices for a National School Food Program. These principles state that programs supported by federal, provincial, or territorial funding should be:

1. **Health-promoting**, serving tasty, nourishing, and culturally appropriate foods to all children in line with *Canada's Food Guide*, fostering a healthy food environment, and promoting mental health and wellbeing.
2. **Universal**, ensuring that ALL children in a school can access the program in a non-stigmatizing manner with the goal that, over time, all children in Canada will be able to participate in a SFP.
3. **Cost-shared**, with federal funding expanding on current provincial, territorial, city, parental, and community funding and initiating new programs in a cost-shared model.
4. **Flexible and locally adapted**, reflecting the local context of the school and region, connected to and informed by students and their parents or caregivers, and building on existing programs, local knowledge, skills, and relationships.
5. **Committed to Indigenous control over programs for Indigenous students**, embedding Indigenous Food Sovereignty in a school food program for Canada, and negotiating funding for SFPs with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit leaders.
6. **A Driver of Community Economic Development**, encouraging SFPs to set local and sustainably produced food purchasing targets, creating jobs for Canadian farmers and local food producers.
7. **Promoting of Food Literacy,** being integrated into the curriculum, and enabling food literacy and experiential food skills education.
8. **Supported by guidance and accountability measures**, building on provincial and territorial school food programs and policies, putting strong public accountability measures in place and ensuring that they are guided by Canada-wide nutritional standards, conflict of interest safeguards that prevent programs from marketing unhealthy food and specific products, as well as a framework for consistent Canada-wide program evaluation.

[1] These principles have been largely informed by the article "*The case for a Canadian national School Food Program*" in the Canadian Food Studies Journal Vol 5 No 3 (2018).

We were pleased to see that Bill C-322 includes:

- Whereas a healthy diet in childhood is important to maintaining good health and well-being and fostering socio-economic success;
- Provide for measures to avoid stigmatizing pupils who use the program;

We believe that Bill C-322 would be strengthened if it explicitly

- made a commitment to a universal program for all children.
- added a commitment to no marketing to kids
- added consistent Canada-wide program evaluation.

On behalf of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, we look forward to continued engagement on this critical issue for children and youth. We encourage your committee to unanimously support Bill C-322. We encourage you and all the political parties in Parliament to vote to pass Bill C-322 as soon as possible.

We have been pleased to welcome the government of Canada as a partner in this movement for healthy school food, joining thousands of non-profit organizations and individuals, the provinces, territories, indigenous leaders, and many cities who know how important school food is Our Coalition and the broader movement look forward to working with the federal government and MPs of all political parties on this journey to build a strong national school food program for Canada, delivered in partnership with provinces, territories, indigenous leaders and community groups and leaders across Canada. You can count on us and our members to work in each province and territory to both encourage more provincial, territorial, and municipal support for school food programs and urge all the provinces and territories to sign agreements with the federal government so that money allocated in Budget 2024 can flow to provinces, territories and indigenous communities as soon as possible. We will also be encouraging provinces, territories, and Indigenous leaders to support Bill C-322 and participate in the process it will initiate to develop a consensus framework.

Please do not hesitate to contact me, should you wish to discuss the importance of this legislation. I can be reached at debbie@healthyschoolfood.ca or (416) 537-6856.

Sincerely,

Debbie Field

Debbie Field, Coordinator, Coalition for Healthy School Food