



Date: June 15, 2020

The Honourable Stephen McNeil

Re: Commitment to a National School Food Program and Nova Scotia Government's Role

Dear Premier Stephen McNeil,

As a result of the provincial closure of schools, access to healthy school food programs - **a mainstay for tens of thousands of children and youth in this province**, has effectively been suspended.

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed to Nova Scotians that food, and in particular school food, is an essential public good, like P-12 education and healthcare. Everyone needs access to nourishing food to be healthy and to achieve our potential. Strong and resilient food systems are the backbone needed to keep us safe and food secure. Nova Scotians feel this more acutely now, than ever before. Food insecurity is a significant challenge to families, especially those living in rural communities, and is strongly linked to poverty. Nova Scotia already has the [third-highest provincial child poverty rate in Canada, and the highest rate in Atlantic Canada](#). The COVID-19 crisis risks exacerbating an already dire situation for many Nova Scotians.

Even with the significant provincial and federal investments to support food access for vulnerable families, many across Nova Scotia are now doing without, because of delays in these vital social supports reaching those who need it most. In these unprecedented times, community has been stepping up and partnering in new ways to distribute meals, gift cards and boxes of healthy foods to children and youth who no longer have access to meals and snacks through school food programs. These community agencies are doing a great job, but they need your help to ensure they reach children and families, particularly given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to continue for many more months.

Since 2013, the Coalition for Healthy School Food (CHSF), a group of over [120 organizations](#) from across Canada, have been advocating for a national school food program. As long time members of the CHSF we have been seeking an investment by the federal government in a cost-shared Universal Healthy School Food Program that would enable all students in Canada to have access to healthy meals at school every day.

Canada is one of the only industrialized countries without a national school food program and was ranked 37th of 41 countries around providing healthy food for kids. A Universal Healthy School Food Program would support the health, wellbeing and education of all Canadian children. [Evidence suggests a \\$3-10 \(USD\) return for every dollar invested](#) in school food

programs. Simply put, healthy kids learn better and that is good for the economy, for communities, for everybody.

We were delighted to see in the 2019 federal budget, that the Liberal government committed to developing a National School Food Program for Canada in consultation with provinces, territories and civil society organizations. Unfortunately, development of this national program has had little movement since. Non-profits, grassroots organizations and citizens of Nova Scotia need your leadership and help. It is time for provincial and territorial governments to put forward the importance of this program, and hold the federal government accountable to take action with this important commitment.

We appreciate the increased investment our provincial government made in School Healthy Eating Programs (SHEP) in 2018. Today we are urging you to help build on the provincial infrastructure and advance this federal commitment to help strengthen the health and wellbeing of students and to build some resiliency into our existing food system.

As we deal with the immediate and long term effects of COVID 19, with an eye to economic recovery, schools are ideal settings for infrastructure stimulus spending projects. Schools provide geographic equity across Nova Scotia, and school food programs provide the impetus for retrofitting, new construction, local food procurement, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for cooks, chefs and food service workers, equipment purchases and the list goes on. In other words, [schools are a key setting to realise the goals of the One Nova Scotia Commission](#).

Please support healthy food access and food security by advocating to the Federal government today to advance the 2019 budget commitment and create a National School Food Program now.

We are ready and eager to help you. Please, for the love of Nova Scotia, join us on this journey.

Sincerely,



Margo Riebe-Butt, RD
Executive Director, Nourish Nova Scotia



Sara Kirk, PhD
UpLift Partnership co-lead
and Scientific Director,
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Cc: Dr. Robert Strang, Chief Public Health Officer
Honourable Zack Churchill, Minister of Education
Darren Fisher, MP Dartmouth-Cole Harbour, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health