

This is a draft chapter from the forthcoming edited book “Transforming School Food Politics”, edited by Jennifer Gaddis and Sarah Robert.

## **Centring Children, Health and Justice at the Core of Canadian School Food Programs**

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## **Abstract**

Canada remains one of very few affluent countries without a national school food program (SFP), and the federal government recently expressed support for developing such a program. In doing so, the government was responding to growing calls for state funding to support a national program coming from the Coalition for Healthy School Food (CHSF). Despite years of multi-stakeholder advocacy for and strong international evidence extolling the benefits of universal SFPs, there remain seemingly intractable debates about for what and whom Canadian SFPs should be designed to serve. To move forward, we propose a clearer articulation and shared understanding of the core goals of a robust Canada-wide SFP. This chapter brings together reflections from the literature and first hand perspectives of people on the front lines of SFP design and implementation with data from a recent case study that draws on the voices of students, parents and staff from a suburban Canadian school district as it transitioned to a new lunch program model. From these insights, we collectively argue that to transcend current deadlocks around designing a future national SFP, Canadian policy makers must actively centre the voices and needs of children, and pursue comprehensive notions of wellbeing and justice at the heart of school food programming.

## **Introduction**

According to UNICEF’s 2020 report on the state of children and youth, compared to other affluent countries, Canada spends among the lowest proportion of its gross domestic product on services supporting children’s wellbeing (1). There is now ample evidence that both the dietary quality of Canadian children and available supports related to food, warrant major improvements to reduce nutritional inequities, bolster wellbeing and lower chronic disease risk into adulthood (2, 3). UNICEF Canada’s 2020 report recommended that Canada should “ensure that every child gets a healthy meal at school” (1), echoing calls for federal-level support for a national school meal program heralded by several groups including the Coalition for Healthy School Food (CHSF), Canada’s largest school food-focussed advocacy organization. In 2021, CHSF membership included 154 organizations from every province and territory (4).

While Canadian health policy documents frequently reference social justice and equity (5), Canada remains one of the few affluent countries with no nationally-funded school lunch program (SFP) (6, 7). In 2019, the federal government expressed support for developing a nationwide approach (8), but as of this writing, no funding has been committed. Moreover, no consensus exists affirming the essential goals around which to build a future Canadian SFP. Public health scholars argue that inadequate articulation of core values and goals may mask the social forces that underlie health promotion efforts (9). We argue that this gap in vision and mission leaves well-intended advocates unmoored and trapped debating finer details of SFP design, lacking agreement about the purpose or full societal potential of what a national program could accomplish. In this chapter, we take a step back to delve into core goals and guiding principles that we believe will drive progress and unite disparate stakeholders aiming to transform Canadian school food programming.

## **Background and Method**

Canadian SFPs exist through a combination of programs run by local school districts, individual schools, non-profit organizations or local initiatives spearheaded by parents or parent associations (10, 11). Unfortunately, no comprehensive data exists describing the prevalence or variation in SFP models and there are few reliable estimates documenting how many children

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receive a meal regularly at school, be it purchased at full price (for school fundraising purposes or run by for-profit or in-house catering services), partially subsidized or offered at no cost (funded variably through combinations of charitable donations, grant funding from governmental or non-governmental sources or through cost-sharing models). Many elementary schools offer no food programs or sales at all. A 2009/2010 national survey of administrators from 407 schools suggested that 47% of schools had no cafeteria, though the majority of schools offered some onsite food retailing (75%) or a vending machine selling pop, juice or milk (70%) (12).

Nationally representative dietary surveys suggest that few Canadian students venture home or off campus for lunch; fewer than 1/10 students ate lunch provided by their school and the majority of students (73%) rely on a home packed lunch (13).

Canada’s current ad hoc system operates through a patchwork of funders and heavy reliance on charitable donors. No single level of government or specific ministry is charged with planning or overseeing SFPs, and little systematic evaluation or knowledge of children’s needs, values or experiences currently informs policy-making. Without a clear guiding framework confirming the goals of meal programs and evaluating whether programs achieve them, future programs will be susceptible to undue influence from partisan powers and biases driven by funders and their mandates, rather than being guided by a holistic and evidence-based vision of what SFPs could and should achieve. Recent examples point to pressures on Ministries of Education to focus narrowly on the educational benefits of school food, whereas Ministries of Health are pressured to focus on disease-prevention. Meanwhile charitable funders are beholden to organizational missions and donors. We fear that with programs developed with only narrow, siloed goals in mind, emerging models will become locked into approaches that limit the transformative potential that school meals have been shown to offer in other countries (14).

In this chapter, we seek to move beyond tensions regarding the role, form and shape of a national SFP by articulating three core goals that our research, practice, and advocacy have revealed as critical in designing an effective national SFP which include centring: 1) children, 2) wellbeing and 3) justice. A Canada-wide framework that explicitly affirms these goals can contribute to meaningful progress, making it easier to facilitate inter-ministerial and multi-sector collaboration.

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This chapter brings together insights from empirical studies on school food and interviews with and writing contributions from four school food practitioners, named as authors, from across Canada. All authors are school food researchers or practitioners. The community-based contributors reflect geographical and SFP organizational diversity. We have all participated in longstanding debates about what and who SFPs are for (10) and reflected on the varied arguments about why SFPs should focus on supporting vulnerable children, mitigating chronic disease risks, meeting sustainability targets, enhancing educational targets, reducing family burdens or a combination. Other contentions include which program models eliminate or reduce stigma, what universality means in practice, who should pay for SFPs, what aspects of programs are most critical, and how much local versus central control should be built into a national program.

We began the process of writing this chapter intending to examine these major areas of contention. The academic contributors invited the community-based contributors to be interviewed about their thoughts on these tensions. Rachel conducted an initial analysis of their responses and shared them with Jennifer and Sinikka. Through the process of analyzing the interviews, integrating findings with our own work and that of others, we identified three common strands related to conceptions of children, health, and wellbeing running throughout. Together with the chapter’s community-based collaborators, we developed the chapter’s argument that focusing on three core aims of school food programming would cut through these tensions and transform school food politics in Canada. Such an approach would ensure that program designers and evaluators listen to children and centre their perspectives in any programs designed for them, and also move towards models that can address our most pressing societal needs in terms of health and justice for all. In what follows, we develop a case for a clear articulation of the vision and values for how SFPs should address childhood, wellbeing and justice as we move towards expanding SFPs in Canada.

### **Centring a Vision for Childhood as a Core Goal**

Students are essential stakeholders in SFPs, yet Canadian students’ daily experiences and voices are typically overlooked in research on and advocacy around SFPs, even though successful programs rely on their participation. Drawing on insights from our previous research with children about school food programming(15), our aim here is to demonstrate the value of

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incorporating children’s perspectives through a vision of childhood that positions children as competent social actors.

The depiction of childhood underlying much research and activism around SFPs is one of vulnerable, at-risk children. In this view, SFPs protect children from hunger and set them up for good eating habits and a healthy future (16). While children should, of course, be afforded sufficient and nutritious foods, this construction emphasizes their risk and vulnerability as beings who are in formation towards becoming adults. This approach to childhood is used to garner support for SFPs: no one wants to be responsible for children going hungry. The notion of hungry children is highly evocative and suggests a moral failing on the part of adults to properly care for children. Alternatively, the idea that SFPs will cultivate well-fed children who will become productive, healthy adults appeals to policy makers with power to open purse strings. For example, The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in the U.S. was originally conceived in part as a program to help grow healthy soldiers fit for war (14).

Treating children like adults-in-the-making, “becomings” rather than (or along with) beings in their own right, however, encourages an “adults know best” stance that risks disregarding children’s social worlds and subjectivities. Framing children as becomings can also be stressful for children and adults alike when it comes to navigating eating relationships. Research with mothers who embrace the idea that children must be inculcated with good eating habits, for instance, finds this approach leads to stress and anxiety around food and meals for mothers and children (17-19). We argue that SFPs should not simply be seen as *for* children, based on a desire to ameliorate future health risks, but rather conceived, designed and run *with* meaningful input from children. Adults often assume they know best what children need and do not consult children when designing programs meant to serve them. Consequently these programs may not resonate with children who may exert their agency by opting out. We learn much by allying with children, so that they can meaningfully take part in and shape programs that affect them. Below we detail two insights that come from viewing children as competent social actors who actively navigate and give meaning to their social worlds.

First, taking children seriously as competent social actors means understanding that food, far from being just a form of sustenance, is layered with social and symbolic meanings (18, 20).

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Children are not immune to or separate from wider meanings of food in a society, but they do not simply adopt adult perspectives and food cultures. Children have their “own cultural imperatives” (21) which they create “in concert with their peers, as they collectively experience the world” (22) p. 206. Children form ideas about food through relations with others, including peers, family members, and authority figures (20, 23). What it means to eat well, be hungry, or receive school food can take on vastly different meanings in different contexts, as children, together with peers, but also parents, communities and schools, collaboratively form these meanings. Thus, to understand SFPs, we need to look at food itself but also beyond the food to the meanings students assign to school food experiences.

In a 2019 study of one school district’s effort to transition to a new meal program model, researchers, including Sinikka and Jennifer, documented what happened during lunch through ethnographic fieldwork during 26 lunchtime visits at two elementary and one middle school (15). These visits, which included informal interviews with children, underscored how profoundly students’ eating was informed by their peers, including ideas about what constituted a good lunch and how they actually ate their food. Students knew a lot about what and how their classmates ate, often telling fieldworkers what their classmates liked to eat and who typically ate what, including whether a classmate participated in the SFP. Students also marked out their identities vis-à-vis food by, for example, declaring foods they liked and disliked, describing their eating styles, and displaying knowledge about food. They offered individual accounts but also collaborated with their peers to develop shared meanings around food. Students participated in peer food culture by knowing about the latest food craze and bringing food from home or buying food that others deemed desirable (24). During a visit to an elementary class, when Sinikka confessed she was not familiar with a snack that was popular in several classrooms, a flurry of excitement ensued as the students extolled its virtues. As Allison Pugh (2009, p.7) observes, “Children collect or confer dignity among themselves, according to their (shifting) consensus about what sorts of objects or experiences are supposed to count for it (21).” The meanings children give to food should not be overlooked because those meanings are central to how children approach and feel about food at lunchtime. Collective meanings around food also shape interpersonal dynamics at lunch. In line with other research (20, 24, 25), we observed that children experienced and actively tried to avoid bullying and stigma for what they ate.

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Students in classes together often shared similar sentiments about the school’s lunch program, revealing how their perceptions were informed by interactions with peers. In one class, despite being asked for their individual impressions, students described food from the new program as “airplane food,” meaning it was made by an anonymous for-profit company that churned out identical, portable meals. (The SFP was run by an outside catering company, which delivered food that families ordered online to the schools at lunchtime each day.) Yet students in another classroom in the same school did not use the term “airplane food” at all. That children in different classes can form very different opinions of the same food points to their creativity and the social and shifting meanings of food. It also indicates that providing nutritious meals is a necessary, but not sufficient role for SFPs. SFPs must collaborate with children to imbue food with meanings that resonate with children and support their enthusiasm and participation.

The meanings of food were also inextricably wrapped up with children’s narratives about care. Students’ perceptions of school meals were shaped by ideas about the caring labor that went into the meals (26). For example, a student said now that the school district had “replaced the cook. It’s [the new catered food] less homemade.” Yet the catered meals involved more scratch cooking and fewer prepackaged foods than the food made by the lunch staff in the old program. In viewing the catered food as “less homemade”, the student was responding less to what was on the menu and more to the relationships behind the food. The lunch worker who used to make their brownbag lunches was widely known and liked by students. The meaning of food changed for them when they didn’t view it as part of the school’s caring web of support and instead saw it as coming from an unknown company.

A second major lesson learned from listening to children is that children’s lives are bound up in interdependent care relations. Children’s dependence on the care and protection of others for safe and secure childhoods is a powerful discourse used to justify the need to intervene in childhood in order to defend and nurture children. Yet, while children may lack social and economic power in North American society, they are not unique in depending on the care of others for survival. Adults, too, rely on reciprocal webs of caring relations for sustenance and support (17). Moreover, research finds that children actively participate in care through food (20, 23, 27), and view food as a source of care and support(20). Thus while children’s perspectives



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reveal the importance of care in SFPs, this should not be seen as something unique to childhood, but a general aspect of our common condition.

In their research, Jennifer and Sinikka found that children placed much value on knowing who made lunch and appreciated the work that went into preparing and serving school lunch when they could connect it with a caring adult. During classroom visits, students routinely noted who prepared their lunches and considered their food needs. When a fieldworker commented on how thin and uniform the apple slices were in one elementary school student’s lunch, she said her dad had cut them the way she liked them done. Another told us, “My stepmom got me this thermos, so now I get hot lunch with bread.” The caring work of lunch mattered to students, and some also expressed not feeling cared for because their food preferences were not considered by adults making their lunches.

Students didn’t just see themselves as depending on others for care during lunch, they also extended care to others. Students were observed sharing and trading food with classmates as they collaborated to meet their own and their classmates’ food desires. Similarly, during a presentation about the new catered program, a student asked if they could bring leftovers home for family members to eat. Officially, the answer was no. Food safety rules prohibited storing unrefrigerated leftovers. Yet unofficially, we observed students saving leftovers and eating them the next day. We were not at school when students left at the end of the day, so we don’t know whether some students took leftovers home, but research demonstrates that children in food insecure households actively engage in food provisioning (23, 27). Children are not just passive recipients of the caring labor of lunch; like adults, they consider others’ food needs and may even provide care themselves through food. Official program rules may be bent or ignored by students who find creative ways to secure and achieve desired ends with food.

In addition to talking about the caring work that students themselves or family members did to make daily lunches, students also highlighted the carework of the lunch staff who oversaw the former program(26). Students in two schools with lunch workers whose positions were eliminated with the transition to the new program run by an outside caterer, expressed how much they missed the lunch staff, even if they had not participated in the former program themselves. Although our research had not paid much attention to the lunch staff prior to their positions being

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eliminated, reflecting the way their work is often invisible(26, 28), it quickly became clear that lunch workers had played a central role in caring for students. For example, a fieldworker spoke with a group of middle-school students, including one with no lunch, after the new program had been implemented and wrote:

I don't see this student with any lunch, and he and his fellow students start talking about how challenging it is for students who don't have a strong support network. They say, “Some kids don't have any food.” These students were supported by the old program and felt like they could always go to [the former lunch staff] if they didn't have time (or their parents didn't have time) to pack a lunch. “Now you just have to starve.” (middle school, visit #6)

This vignette points to the appreciation students had for adults who prepared meals, looked out for their food needs and provided care, at school and at home. It also shows how caring relationships between children and lunch staff created informal means by which children could secure needed food in a way that maintained their dignity. Students recognized that sometimes a student won't have lunch and will need help. When that happened, in the former program, they knew who to turn to, and how they would be treated. Yet, in contrast to students' views, the former program was largely viewed by school district administrators as stigmatizing, and reducing stigma and improving access to healthy food were main rationales for shifting to the new catered program. The differing views between students and administrators shows the value of including children's perspectives in understandings of SFPs.

The work involved in preparing, serving and cleaning up after children's meals is often part of the “invisible care work” carried out by school lunch staff, as well documented by Gaddis (26, 28). In the U.S., this work is most often done by low paid lunch workers (28). In Canada, the labor of lunch is so invisible, that there is no research about the people charged with ensuring a safe, caring environment for children to eat, socialize and learn during lunch. Yet they, and their caring efforts, are clearly visible to children. As Brent, a teacher and former director of a sustainable food systems advocacy organization stated, referring to a survey done in a school where Brent works:

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When they did the survey of the entire school, who they [students] felt most connected to...It was the "lunch lady" at the time... that was actually the most frequently reported as who students felt connected to. But what's the value of that? When we have data that that enhances mental health and enhances academia, what's that worth?

It is hard to estimate the value of care (29), but clearly care is central to children’s experiences of and perspectives on school food. It can be especially difficult to determine care’s worth when it is being done in ad hoc ways, typically without federal or provincial support, as is the case in Canadian schools. A recent survey of British Columbia teachers found that 40% of teachers bring food to school for students who are hungry, spending an average of \$29 per month, an estimated \$4 million per year (30). But this is not enough to fill the gaps. In our research, we saw students with moldy lunches, without lunch and with meager lunches(15). Staff on the ground felt powerless to help all students in need and administrators did not seem aware of these gaps. Practitioners tell us that the caring work of lunch is happening on the margins, carried out by parent volunteers and school staff who are often unacknowledged and are typically women. Conceiving of children as interdependent beings, requiring and participating in care, supports the need for and value of care workers in SFPs who are on the ground connecting with and to children through food. It also helps to acknowledge the role children themselves play in the caring labour of lunch. Children, like adults, give and receive care.

We stand to learn much by consulting children in the development of a national SFP and considering children as stakeholders. The goal of centering children’s perspectives is amplified by a vision that positions children as competent social actors in their own right. This notion of childhood is needed to underpin an approach that prioritizes children not based on adult conceptions of what’s best for them, but from children’s own experiences and meaning-making, recognizing that children are part of the broader social and cultural world they inhabit. Yet they also occupy an important vantage point from which to understand this world and to gauge whether programs designed for them are actually hitting the mark.

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## **Affirming an Inclusive Vision of Health and Being Well as a Core Goal**

Advocates for SFPs frequently posit improved access to nutritious school meals is needed to improve suboptimal dietary quality of Canadian children and to reduce nutrition-related chronic disease risks in adulthood (2, 31). In a recent review of SFPs in Canada since 1970 (although most were from the last decade), Everitt and colleagues (2020) reported that *all* 23 programs overtly aimed to improve students’ diets (11). In this section we argue for the need to explicitly affirm that health is a core SFP goal, given that when asked, school food administrators often prioritize food access for marginalized students over health benefits for all students (32). We further propose an inclusive vision for health-promoting SFPs that embody the concept of “being well”. We draw on Indigenous perspectives which conceptualize health as “achieved through relationships to other people, to the land and creation, and to our ancestors in the spiritual realm” along with ensuring access to fresh and healthy foods that are physiologically nourishing (33) p4.

Although there is general consensus that expanded SFPs should be “healthy”, there remain diverse definitions and values imbued in targets of what nourishing meals should strive for. At present, there are no national nutritional criteria for school foods, although across Canada, provinces have created guidelines for school food sales, many of which share similar underlying nutritional principles drawing on national dietary guidance and Canada’s food guides e.g. (34). While we agree that defining and ensuring a high nutritional standard for school meals across the country is an important mandate for a national program, meaningful benefits will be lost if only narrowly defined nutritional improvements are posed as the primary measures of a healthy SFP. Limited nutrient-focused goals risk succumbing to challenges experienced in the US and UK with “nutritionism” (35). In nutritionism, nutrient intakes and specific quantitative targets become the key measures of a meal program’s success, whereas the overall quality, taste, appeal, cultural, social and environmental value of the foods and meal experiences are largely overlooked and devalued.

Meal programs that focus exclusively on nutrient-based standards (e.g., specific limits on sodium or saturated fat or ensuring minimum levels of nutrients or food groups) can be co-opted by food industries with a vested interest in profiting by selling heavily processed, or nutrient-

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fortified items to meet quantitative, but not the qualitative or spirit of the requirements, at low costs (26, 36). Our key informants highlighted the overemphasis on nutrient targets or narrowly defined food targets (such as fruit/vegetable intake alone) as a potential pitfall. They argued that by framing broader concepts of nutrition and health within the recommendations in Canada’s latest Food Guide (CFG) (37), meal programs could have more meaningful benefits.

Accompanying the new CFG is a visual representation of a plate covered half in vegetables and fruit, one quarter protein foods (emphasizing more plant-based proteins) and one quarter grains (emphasizing whole grains) (37). The guide places explicit emphasis on reducing consumption of highly processed foods, increasing consumption of a variety of health-promoting foods, and shifting diets towards including more plant proteins. It also promotes eating as a social and conscious act, the value of eating with others and cooking while involving others in meal planning and the cultural importance of food traditions. “Healthy eating is more than the foods you eat”, according to the CFG, “it is also about where, when, why and how you eat” (Health Canada 2019). The CFG may offer a more holistic and socially-embedded model of food and eating to support a broader vision of food-related wellbeing if incorporated into formal and informal curricula.

Indigenous perspectives related to health and being well are crucial to foreground in SFPs to, among other things, connect pedagogically the ways food is grown and served with stewardship of the land, care and connection. Indigenous notions of health and being well acknowledge “physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual aspects” of food and complex relationships between food, people and land as described by Dennis and Robin (33). By embracing Indigenous ways of conceptualizing health, the nourishing potential of SFPs can be expanded beyond physiological nutrient requirements to more comprehensively nourish community, the public provision of care for children, the land and water used to grow foods, and the people across the food system. It is important to acknowledge however, that schools themselves and the government agencies that shape their programming are colonial institutions (38). While some Indigenous communities have re-taken control over their educational systems, the history and current contexts of Canadian school systems are indelibly marked by colonial processes and legacies (39, 40). There remains much work to be done in the process of moving forward in decolonizing the school context and decolonizing food and nutrition (41).

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There are also many strong arguments for expanding the health mission of SFPs to include environmental health and sustainability (10, 32). For example, the CHSF advocates for “comprehensive” best practices to bolster food literacy education and curricular connections between the food served and food system learning. And previous Canadian action-research such as the Think&EatGreen@School project, have developed frameworks for weaving health, nutrition and sustainability challenges into SFPs and educational strategies (42).

Some Canadian schools have already integrated environmental health into their school food and nutrition philosophies (see (32, 42)). The growing integration of school gardens, food preparation and composting activities and hands-on food education also serve as entry points for schools to integrate food systems teaching and learning (43). Our work documenting a new lunch program in a suburban school district also found that environmental concerns while not the main priority for parents’ decisions about ordering school meals, was a meaningful consideration. When parents were surveyed about their perceptions about the new program, 40% agreed or strongly agreed that they would order more often if “there was less packaging waste” and several parents wanted the meal program to model environmental sustainability values. As one parent noted, “Biodegradable packaging would set an example-reduce greenhouse gas emissions, lower carbon footprint, be sustainable with our choices. The kids will see that and grow to expect life cycle stewardship rather than single-use”. With climate change posing one of the world’s greatest challenges, future meal programs would be remiss to neglect the opportunity to affirm planetary health as part of the core mission.

Overall, our work finds growing examples of Canadian SFPs that are successfully integrating broader notions of health that foster physical, mental, social, spiritual and environmental health. But to reap these benefits, health targets must explicitly acknowledge the value of food beyond its nutritive value.

### **Improving Justice, Fairness and Equity as Core Goals**

Justice is a broad concept (44), but here, we consider fairness and equity, and how considerations of stigma must be central to conceptualizing both (45). Fairness is the idea of equal treatment between groups. But fairness can mean treating people unequally in order to rectify harms that

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have disproportionately impacted groups (44). Equity is closely related to fairness and focuses on removing avoidable inequalities between people (46). Finally, stigma is defined as labeling, stereotyping, status loss, and discrimination in contexts where power is exercised (47) and is an important aspect of both equity and fairness, but neither can be achieved when stigma exists (45). Critically, there is compelling evidence that people who experience food insecurity also experience significant stigma (described as ‘targets’ of stigma), and also face misconceptions and prejudicial assumptions made by people in positions of power (described as ‘perceivers’ of stigma) (45).

Historically, most national SFPs have shared the expressed goal and dominant framing focussed on reducing food insecurity and its consequences (48). Many existing SFPs in Canada were established in response to child hunger with healthy eating as a secondary goal (32). There is evidence that SFPs have narrowed gaps in food security and nutrition-related health outcomes for low income children in countries such as the United States (49). However, given the narrow reach of Canada’s current SFPs and vastly insufficient social safety nets more broadly, inadequate and unstable access to food affects over 1 in 6 Canadian children (50). Beyond the physical and mental health consequences, food insecure children, on average report slightly lower dietary quality during school hours, and are twice as likely to report eating no lunch on school days in national surveys (2).

The practitioner authors explained that equity and stigma need to be considered when framing meal programs as broadly serving population health goals. Yet, previous Canadian SFPs commonly specifically targeted the needs of low income, food insecure or otherwise vulnerable students. Their developers sought ways to solve perceived problems (51): namely that some children were bringing no lunches, inadequate lunches, or were not coming back to school after the lunch period (52, 53). This deficit framing by ‘perceivers’, people in positions of power, in this case community organizations or school administrations, contributes to stigma experienced by ‘targets’, in this case children and caregivers perceived as not bringing “adequate” lunches to school (45).

Paradoxically, there is reason to believe that targeting meal programs at more vulnerable students is likely to weaken the potential benefits of SFPs for those very students. Evidence

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suggests that framing programs around food insecurity alone, ignoring the lived experiences of children and broader conceptions of wellbeing described in the sections above, leads to targeted programs that are stigmatizing to users (52, 53) and resisted by parents who fear stigmatization (53, 54). These notions were raised during interviews with all community-based practitioner authors. Emphasizing the food security mission also risks overlooking food quality, as program planners aim to get (any) food into bellies but have less incentive (and sometimes more barriers) in ensuring high standards for nutrition (and other facets of wellbeing described above including taste and environmental sustainability). These concerns have been well documented in the U.S. NSLP, where, without the ongoing advocacy of affluent parents who are less likely to participate in programs framed as targeted for needy children, the nutritional quality and overall meal experience for program users (including the experience of stigma) suffers as programs aim to keep costs low while meeting minimum nutrient standards (26, 36).

In our 2019 study of a new program designed so “no child goes hungry and all children eat healthy”, parents requesting financial subsidies were asked to indicate financial need such that they “struggle to provide a healthy meal for their child(ren)” (15). Requiring parents to attest to struggling to feed their children before accessing the subsidy was described by parents and school staff as stigmatizing. Food provisioning is a key aspect of what families are expected to do and held morally accountable for (17, 18, 26, 55). Yet key school district staff, while worried about stigma, also feared that some parents might “undeservedly” get a free ride if there was not some stigma attached to applying for subsidies. This is an example of staff playing the role of ‘perceivers’. As one program planner put it: “The challenge is always, the program has to be fiscally sustainable, so you can't have people subscribe for a subsidy that don't need a subsidy, and just want to get a free lunch. Yet you don't want to create so much stigma that people don't apply.”

There is also evidence that participation by the wider school community (beyond students who are labeled as vulnerable/at risk) is needed to mobilize and advocate for better quality services for all students. As Thibaud, who leads an organization that runs school lunch programs across Montreal stated:



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Our approach has been to make it available, all the food programs available to everyone...but making sure that it's economically and culturally accessible for the most vulnerable people. And that's the idea of universality. I mean, we're very anti-targeted programs. They're bad. Not only are they bad because of stigmatization, but also, when your goal is to promote healthy food, the main goal is to promote healthy eating, it's not necessarily the most vulnerable people that eat badly.

If we consider the ideas presented in this quote in relation to the concepts of justice, equity and stigma, we see each at play. There is clearly an intention to avoid overemphasizing group differences (equity approach) and to have special considerations ensuring food is appealing and accessible for those most marginalized (fairness). Both aims may in turn reduce stigma. In fact, Canadian data agree that suboptimal dietary intake is a nearly universal problem among children, regardless of socio-economic status (56). Stigma carried out by ‘perceivers’ in their focus on “vulnerable” or otherwise marginalized children overlooks evidence that most children could benefit from a nutritious meal at school and that increased participation by a broader array of children (if the program is well designed) could reduce stigma.

Another problem with targeted approaches is establishing a definition of which children are viewed as ‘needy’ versus ‘deserving’ and how to identify them. The stakes are high for some parents to admit that they need help feeding their children a healthy lunch. Indigenous, Black, racialized and other marginalized families worry about losing custody of their children if an authority figure believes they cannot feed them adequately (55). A BC Report (2018, p 31) found parents “fearful of having their children taken away, because they are struggling to afford healthy food(57).” Families may be uncomfortable applying for subsidies and the language of “struggl[ing] to provide a healthy meal” can activate feelings of parental inadequacy and possibly stigma.

This leads to questions about alternatives to targeted programs, which are described in the literature as ‘universal’ (58). The term universal is broad and used in different ways. Debbie, the Coordinator of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, who is retired from decades of running a large community organization in Toronto that established hundreds of SFPs, addressed this when she said: “I... have made the distinction that has stuck, between the two words universality and

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universal. So what I think we are doing is looking for universality in the catchment area to reduce stigma on our way to a universal program. It will take four or five years to phase in.” Her distinction is between offering a program to everyone (universality) and one where everyone participates (universal). Moreover, she argued that a program can be universal (all children participating) without being free. Japan, France and Italy are countries with (near) universal participation, but where the majority of parents pay a portion of the cost (59, 60). Only two affluent countries have universally free programs (Finland and Sweden) (60). As discussed in this volume there are also less affluent countries with universal free programs (e.g., Brazil and India). Other than the five affluent countries mentioned already with near-universal participation – two free for parents, three where parents pay a portion – there is much less than near-universal participation in most SFPs (ranging from ~10-60%). In most affluent countries, most parents pay all or part of the cost, with some parents (deemed neediest) paying nothing.

In the US, there is headway in several states, and especially in larger cities where suburbanization has led to a concentration of poverty in city centres, towards universal and free SFPs on a district by district basis (see further action towards universal, free programs discussed by Read et al. in this volume) (58). This may partly be in response to arguments that stigma and low participation by children from across the socio-economic spectrum can only be addressed through universal free programs (61). We need to engage with this debate in Canada considering the tensions here, even among our author-informants. Stephanie, a parent advocate in Southern Ontario who formerly spent two decades managing a regional program that supported more than 450 volunteer-run SFPs, stated a strong preference for a universal free school food model that would be paid for by federal, provincial/territorial and local governments:

I think a fully funded government model is going to get us the best value for dollar. ... And I just believe that with a fully funded government model, we could put in place new, more innovative community food systems that could employ people with disabilities and support small-scale agriculture and just have more of a circular economy approach to the program. ... I personally think that it should be paid for by governments.

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Whereas, Debbie’s stance was more uncertain, suggesting that a cost-shared model, that would also include some portion of the costs paid by parents/caregivers shared with local, provincial and federal levels of government, might be more feasible:

Well, I’m not sure what I think and I change my mind a lot. ...I do fluctuate between thinking we have enough money in our society that we need to make school food free. And I think we might get there eventually. Then I think, no, in a consumer society, in which parents are paying now, then we will actually pick a model where it's cost shared. So for today's purpose, I will say it [the cost] should be cross shared between three levels of government, parents, and in the smallest part should be outside charities in the corporate sectors.

One of several related justice questions is if it’s possible to create a just SFP in Canada that achieves equity and fairness by eliminating stigma without being free for all families.

Another issue of justice relates to carework and whether SFPs should alleviate some of the burdens families shoulder for feeding children. While schools are responsible for caring for children during school hours, in Canada, food provisioning is still largely seen as a private responsibility (18). The majority of that burden still falls to mothers, who now often do “double duty”, commonly working in the paid labor force, but also on average, performing more hours of housework and childcare than men (62). Covid19 has revealed these gender inequities starkly as mothers lost jobs at faster rates and also shouldered more burden juggling family life, home schooling, and food preparation than fathers (63). And while there is some recent evidence that Canadian fathers have increased participation in housework and childcare (62), supporting public provisioning of food is a collective way to share the load across society, freeing a small slice of time and cognitive load for mothers, and other caregivers.

When we surveyed parents about participation in SFPs in British Columbia, we saw the challenging trade-offs parents negotiate between reducing their loads and shouldering costs of pricey school meals. As one parent noted following the shift to the new costlier SFP: “As a single parent, I used to be able to afford the \$60 a month cost and would really appreciate the time saved in not having to prepare a lunch, however now I can't afford the \$9 a day and I have

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to take the time and effort of shopping and preparing lunches. This new program is lose/lose.” Hence, SFPs have the potential to reduce burdens for families, but school districts are often faced with challenging decisions about who will gain access. Overall, an expanded meal program aimed at reducing family burdens must ensure that benefits reduce rather than reproduce inequalities. If the models include fees and only well-resourced parents gain access, then inequities are not mitigated.

The Canadian state is built on colonial displacement, forced assimilation and ignorance of the rights of Indigenous peoples (38). It would be a significant omission to consider a SFP for Canada without addressing justice related to the sovereignty of Indigenous nations, and the rights of people considered Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) under the Canadian constitution (64). We argue this is an important opportunity to get a program “right” by centering Indigenous rights from the very inception of any national program. When speaking about a model for a national program, Thibaud stated:

To me, the local control piece is not just about engagement, but to me, that's the only way that cultural and especially Indigenous piece can come in. There needs to be [a] governance piece. I think the federal standards could be parameters... It could be quite loose, and then give that over. And I think especially, probably how it's handled with Indigenous communities, it's going to need to be quite different even [than] in how we look at urban culturally diverse populations.

He is bringing up an important issue that falls within the purview of justice: the balancing of central versus local control. There was considerable consensus between informants that the role of the federal government is to create a framework (including nutritional and other standards) and funding, but that control over all other aspects of the program should be in the hands of local communities. When it comes to Indigenous community programs, this is particularly critical. The Canadian government has an extensive history of undermining Indigenous sovereignty and this may be far more difficult to address than it seems. One way forward may be the development and roll-out of a national program that starts with Indigenous communities, with funding and other resources provided (an equity approach). This is challenging because more than half of Indigenous people are urban residents (65), yet must be a priority.

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The final justice issue we will address is the importance of including what Gaddis (2019) calls “real jobs” in a future national SFP (26). Paid employment opportunities that provide a living wage, fair working conditions, autonomy and job satisfaction are important justice concerns. Bringing up the issue of good jobs in school food Brent, who is a teacher, stated: “There's a tension to me about how much of it is public and unionized, and how much of it is not, that I don't know the answer to, but it actually worries me a little bit.” Ultimately, difficult funding decisions will be needed to ensure adequate and stable resources to enact labour standards that honour the justice goals articulated here. But as a starting point, we argue that justice must be ratified as a core goal of a Canadian SFP, and that the broad goal of justice cannot be achieved without ensuring: equity of access for all who serve to benefit (which we argue includes all children and families who want to participate), programs delivered without stigma, the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, and a fair distribution of economic benefits across workers and communities.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we argue for a foundational vision of the transformational potential of school food in Canada by articulating three broad and interrelated goals for Canadian SFPs. There is now a need for collective support around such goals given the national policy reckoning transpiring following the Covid-19 pandemic. While we have presented each of these three goals related to centring children, health and justice separately, we argue that these are actually intersecting and mutually dependent aims; choosing or valuing one over the others will weaken the power and potential of achieving any of them. Without centring the experiences of children, we can't know how program designs exacerbate injustice or stigma for children; without centring justice, we may leave out children, workers and communities who stand to gain, and without centring broad conceptions of health, programs could provide nutrient-rich food products but still fail to nourish the relationships, land and bodies they intend to serve while reproducing past social and nutritional inequities. As Thibaud stated:

There is tension and as long as we keep promoting those programs as food security programs, it's going to be hard to sell universal school food programs.....But it's a healthy safety net... And the intention is really healthy food for everyone, so therefore, food for

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everyone. And then the consequence can be positive for the parents who will lose the burden of making meals, and can be positive for local producers and the environment...”.

CHSF and their members are currently mobilizing efforts across the country and asking provincial leaders and ministers of education to begin immediate negotiations with the federal government on a plan to implement the school food program proposed in the 2019 Food Policy for Canada and Federal Budget. The Coalition’s priorities come from members’ views about the need for universal, non stigmatizing school food programs that focus on healthy food and through research partnerships, the Coalition seeks to learn from global best practices. Their priorities are continuously refined in conversation with members and academic partners which include non-profit organizations, Indigenous leaders, and national health, education and philanthropic organizations from all provinces and territories with the endorsement of 26 government bodies and other non-profit organizations. But it is time to come together to ratify a vision that embraces the full transformational potential of a national SFP. This will require future program designers and advocates to centre the voices and perspectives of children, strive for a holistic understanding of health and commit to enhancing justice by ensuring universal access, equitable distribution of economic and social benefits across families, food-system workers and communities, and commit to an actively decolonizing approach.

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