

A photograph of two young girls in a school kitchen. The girl in the foreground is wearing a white sweatshirt with a cartoon pattern and is holding a white bowl of soup. The girl behind her is wearing a black and white patterned dress and is also holding a bowl. They are standing at a long table with red trays and white bowls. The background shows a kitchen area with a red wall and a white brick wall.

CANADA'S NEW NATIONAL SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAM

What we know so far

TOPIC BRIEF | May 21, 2024



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INTRODUCTION

The Government of Canada has pledged to invest \$1 billion over five years in a new national school food program to address disparities in food security for children across Canada. The program could begin as soon as the 2024-2025 school year and is dedicated to supporting 400,000 additional students beyond those served by existing school food programs.^{1,2}

CFTC is proud to be a member of the [Coalition for Healthy School Food](#) and co-chair of CHSF's [Indigenous School Food Circle](#), which have advocated tirelessly for this outcome. As the only G7 country and one of the only Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries without a national school food program, Canada has relied on a patchwork of charitable efforts that address food security and child hunger but fall short in addressing their root causes or implementing structural changes needed to build sustainable, self-reliant food systems.

While celebrating this historic announcement, it is important to acknowledge that school food is one facet of a comprehensive journey to achieving food security. This journey is longer for some than others, particularly in remote, northern, and Indigenous communities where both food costs and food insecurity are much higher than average.

At CFTC, we believe in taking a holistic, multi-pronged approach, integrating all elements of food systems to overcome systemic barriers to adequate nutrition. Our initiatives in Indigenous communities across Canada are specifically designed to align with broader community objectives, including bolstering local food systems, and

supporting nutrition and land-based learning that recognize the unique health, cultural and historical contexts experienced by Indigenous Nations.³

Along with best practices in the design and delivery of school food programs themselves, this food security and nutrition ecosystem helps ensure that funding designated for school meals – either from charitable organizations like CFTC, or from provincial, territorial, or federal sources – is applied in a way that optimizes its effectiveness.

School food programs are more than just meals: they are components of a broader strategy to improve nutrition, support better health and educational outcomes, and increase food and economic security for children, their families, and communities.



¹ Government of Canada, [A National School Food Program to set kids up for success](#), April 1, 2024.

² CBC News, [Federal government commits to creation of national school food program](#), April 1, 2024.

³ Canadian Feed The Children, [There's No Such Thing as a Free Lunch. But there should be](#). Topic Brief, March 2023.

THE PROPOSED NATIONAL SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAM

Funding for a national school food program was announced on April 1 and included in the budget tabled on April 16, 2024. The details of how the funding will be distributed are sparse, however what we **DO know** is:

- \$1 billion will be distributed over five years with a target of providing meals to 400,000 more students each year
- this new funding is intended to *augment* existing programs funded by ministries of education in the provinces and territories
- the federal government will begin negotiating transfer agreements with the provinces and territories (similar to how childcare agreements currently work)
- pending these agreements, funding could start to flow in the 2024-2025 school year
- these transfer agreements will be informed by the forthcoming National School Food Policy, which is expected soon

What we **DO NOT** yet know is:

- how this funding will be distributed to on-reserve schools – *these are the schools that CFTC supports*
- whether funding will cover expenses related to school meals, such as cafeteria equipment, supplies, or staff salaries – *these program expenses are covered by CFTC funding*
- which schools, already provincially, territorially or federally-funded, will *not qualify* to receive national school food funding because they are already funded by some level of government – *CFTC does not know or consider what other sources of funds schools have access to*

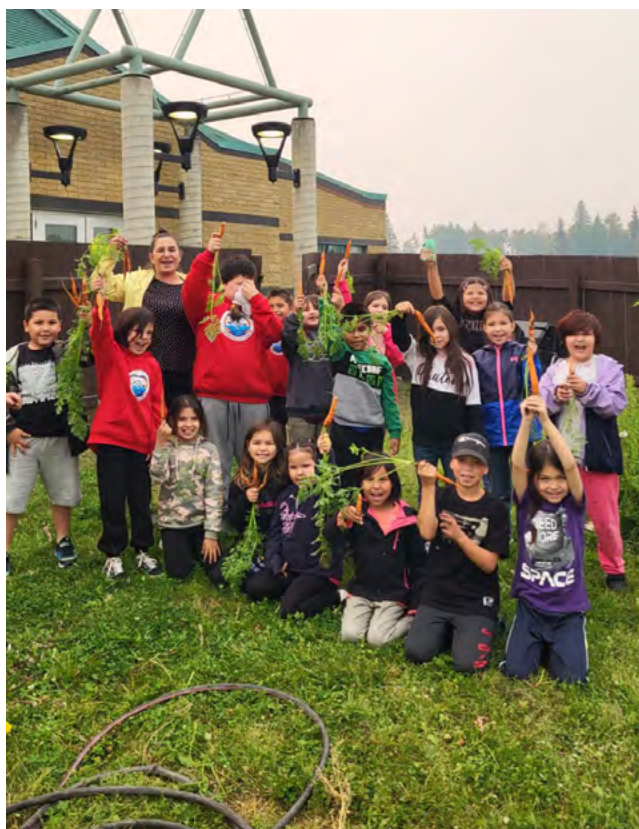
The answers to these questions are critical in order for us to understand the impact of the national school food program on the schools that CFTC currently funds. Debbie Field, coordinator for the Coalition for Healthy School Food, says about two million children are already participating in



school food programs administered by provinces and territories. “The other 400,000 are at the 1,000 schools that are on waiting lists for such programs,” Dr. Field told CBC News.⁴

If that is true, it would mean that ***the \$1 billion investment would not apply to most of the schools CFTC currently supports.*** Only ***one*** of CFTC’s funded school meal programs – Perth-Andover Middle School in New Brunswick, which is off reserve – may be eligible for these funds.

Although the government has stated that the new national school food program will include “investments for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities ... [and] will also help provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners expand their existing school food programs,”⁵ it is not clear how on-reserve schools will benefit – or if they will benefit – from the national school food program.



Despite the funding, built-in inequities will persist

The overall costs of a school food program to each school can vary widely based on location, student population, other sources of funding, and the composition of any school food program that may already be in place. Some programs offer a mid-morning snack or a breakfast, “grab and go” bins, or a full breakfast and lunch program. Of these, some are free, others are pay-what-you-can.

As a result, there is and will continue to be, despite the national school food program’s stated intent, wide variation in programs across provinces and territories, and even within them at the school board or school district level.

It is also not yet clear how many of the supportive infrastructure or best practices – such as universality to destigmatize the use of school food programs, well-equipped kitchens and well-trained school cafeteria staff, high-quality, fresh food and availability of culturally appropriate, locally-harvested food – will be considered as the program is implemented.⁶

Canada is late to the table but we have the opportunity to learn from other countries’ missteps. It is vital that those who have long advocated for the implementation of a national school food program continue to push the government not only to **get it done**, but to **get it done well** and at a scale that will **truly address existing inequities**.

⁴ CBC News, *What we know – and don’t – about the national school food program*, April 3, 2024.

⁵ Government of Canada media release, op. cit.

⁶ Ruetz, A. and Engler-Stringer, R., *What needs to happen next for Canada to have a successful school food program*, April 2, 2024.

CFTC'S INDIGENOUS PROGRAMS

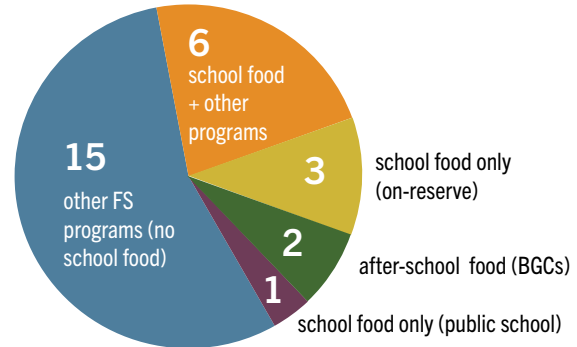
CFTC's partners

CFTC currently funds **27 Indigenous community partners** in six provinces and in the Northwest Territories. These may be schools, social enterprises, other charitable entities, or band departments.

Of these:

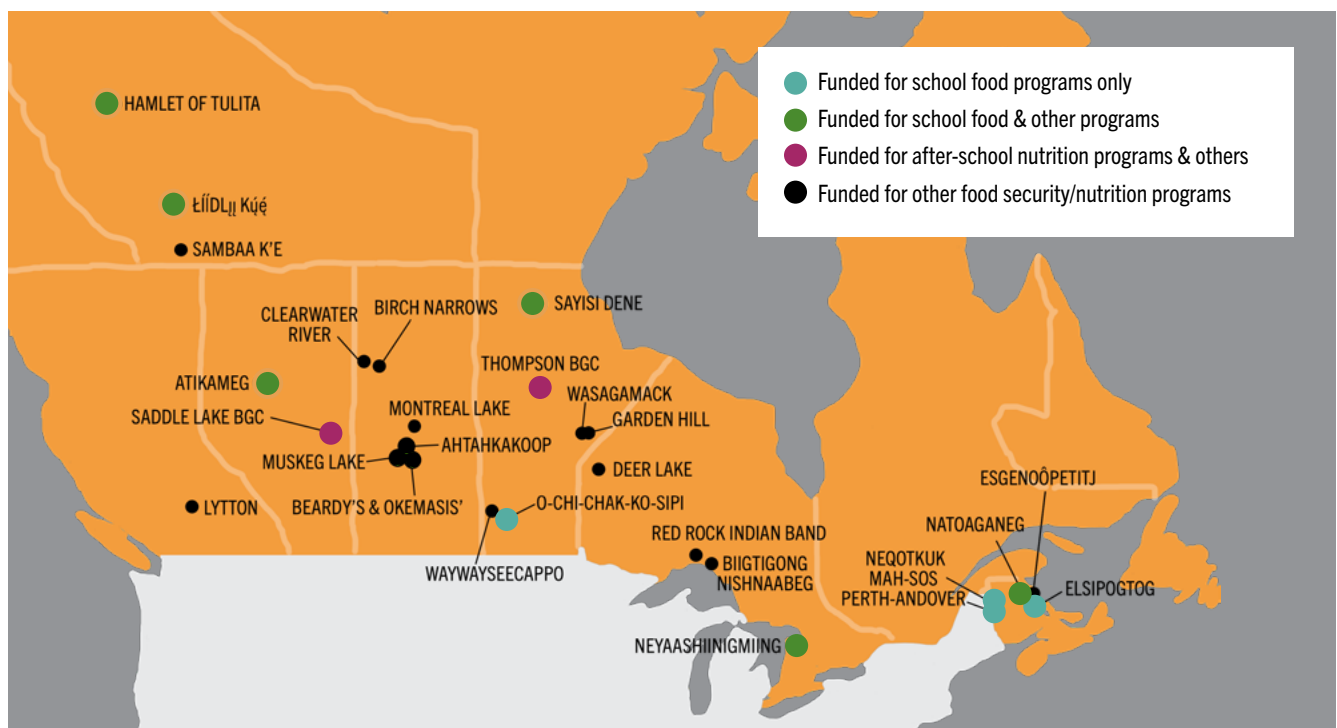
- **four** apply CFTC funding to school food programs *only* (breakfasts, lunches, snacks, staff and supplies):
 - o **three** are on-reserve schools
 - o **one** is a public school serving a largely Indigenous population
- **six** apply CFTC funding to school food programs along with food security (FS) programs such as nutrition, land-based education and local food systems
- **two** are Boys & Girls Clubs (BGCs) that use CFTC funding for meals and snacks distributed through after-school clubs

CFTC'S 2024 INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY PARTNERS



Where and how CFTC works

CFTC works with our partners in a community-led process, enabling people to plan and implement initiatives to achieve their own self-determined development goals. Our approach in Canada is grounded in supporting communities to reclaim their local food systems by incorporating traditional knowledge, practices and knowledge transfer from Elders to youth.



Comprehensive programs equal greater impact

The funding to CFTC's Indigenous community partners covers a variety of food-related initiatives:

- **school meals** (breakfasts, lunches and snacks) and related expenses such as cafeteria supplies and staff
- **nutrition education programs** – both school and community-based; these may be cooking classes, food preparation and preservation, and education related to traditional food sources and their importance to Indigenous diets and cultural practices
- **local food systems initiatives** including home, school and community gardens, food forests, poultry and other livestock programs
- **community engagement and capacity building** including support for community celebrations and meals, food distribution programs (such as fresh food boxes, food pantries), food security committees and environmental stewardship programs
- **land-based education** – both school and community-based; this may cover activities such as communal hunting and fishing trips; Elder and Knowledge Keeper-led food and medicine harvesting; community-led food preparation and food preservation workshops

How much do school food programs cost?

Because there is so much variability in school food programs across Canada, it's challenging to calculate their costs. There are several ways to approach the issue:

- **CFTC's experience**, limited to small schools in Indigenous communities with high levels of food insecurity, suggests that, on average, the cost of a school food program is

approximately \$100,000 (based on an average school population of 165, including food, labour, supplies, cafeteria equipment, and other operating costs). For a school year of 180 days, this works out to **\$3.37 per day per student**.

- **The Coalition for Healthy School Food** has estimated that it would cost about \$2.7 billion per year — **or \$5 per day per child** — for a national school food program.⁷ This estimate averages out regional, school size, and program variations, and was constructed pre-COVID and before today's inflationary pressures.
- **Amberley Ruetz**, one of Canada's leading voices on school food programs and advisor to the Canadian Coalition for Healthy School Food since 2018, suggests that the average cost of school food is "**\$7 per lunch and \$5 per breakfast** to account for all expenses including paid labour."⁸ These costs are adjusted for 2022 and 2023 inflation and consider a variety of models in place across Canada. Dr. Ruetz notes that when there is universality (every child participates), or when both breakfasts and lunches are offered, the number is lower based on economies of scale.

The ongoing need for funding

For the 2024 year, CFTC projects a total Indigenous programs spend of \$930,000. Of that, \$304,500 (one-third) will be dedicated to school food programs. The remaining two-thirds will go to nutrition education, land-based education, community engagement, and local food systems such as gardens and food forests.

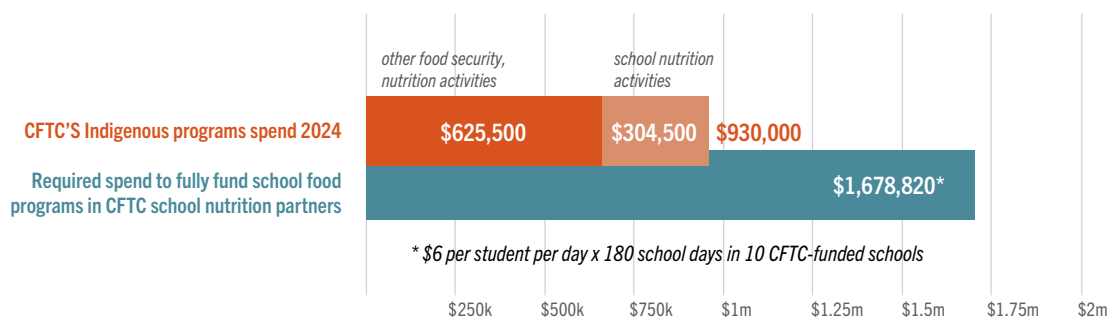
If we average Dr. Ruetz's most recent estimate to \$6 per meal, we can extrapolate a total cost of \$1,678,320 to fully fund school meal programs in all ten CFTC schools that currently have them.⁹ See graph on next page.

⁷ Canada's National Observer, *Advocates 'delighted' as Canada gets school meals*, April 2, 2024.

⁸ Ruetz, A. Private correspondence, July 21, 2023.

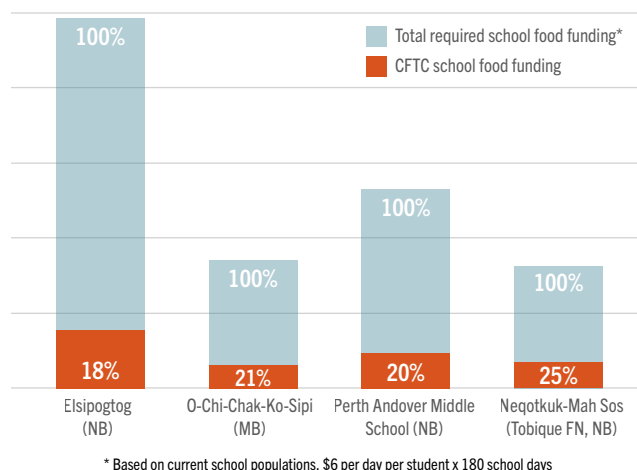
⁹ Based on an assumption of one meal per student per day for 180 school days per year in ten schools.

CFTC'S TOTAL PROGRAM SPEND & COST TO FULLY FUND PARTNERS WITH SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS



As becomes immediately clear, CFTC's total spend for Indigenous programs does not come close to covering the full cost of school meals in schools that are currently funded for them.

CURRENT CFTC & TOTAL REQUIRED PROGRAM SPEND FOR PARTNERS THAT DEDICATE 100% OF THEIR CFTC FUNDING TO SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS



As shown above, even in schools that dedicate all or almost all of their CFTC funding to school food programs, we cover 25 per cent or less of the total required.

To make up the difference, these and other communities with school food programs receive funds from other charitable donors and foundations, the federal government, provincial or territorial governments (rare since most funding for Indigenous communities is federal), and other revenues that the community might generate.

Additional funding from a national school food program could go a long way to make up these

gaps **if it is available to the schools that CFTC currently funds**. It might even allow schools to use CFTC funds for other related and essential food security programs. It appears, however, that we are still some distance away from a national program that is committed to making a large enough investment to achieve this vision.

Of growing concern, funds are not going as far as they used to because of the dramatic rises in inflation and the cost of food over the last several years. This has an impact not only on the students and schools who rely on the meals, and on the staff who are administering the programs, but also on family and community food security. Dr. Ruetz estimates that school food programs can shave \$130 to \$190 per child off a family's monthly grocery bill.¹⁰

In an interview published May 14, 2024, Coalition for Healthy School Food's Debbie Field describes CHSF's history of advocacy for a national school meal program and shares that "when we look back, it's interesting to see that in our first meeting, we were asking for a CAD \$1 billion investment in school meals, which came a decade later." She concludes that, "Though the Government has taken a bold step, the funding is currently not going to be enough, and we are already preparing next year's advocacy to request more funding for school meals. There are indications that the Government will roll out CAD \$79 million this year to start having some ability to talk about a national program. The fact is, it's not yet a national program and certainly not a universal one yet."¹¹

¹⁰ Canada's National Observer, op. cit.

¹¹ School Meals Coalition, [Coalition for Healthy School Food welcomes progress in school meals in Canada](#), May 14, 2024.

CONCLUSIONS

- The \$1 billion investment by the federal government in a national school food program may not apply to most of CFTC's school food program partners.
- Even if it does, these schools remain grossly underfunded while costs continue to climb.
- School food programs operate most efficiently and effectively when they are nested in broader food security and nutrition programs, such as those that CFTC and its donors fund.
- These other programs comprise a significant and growing proportion of CFTC's overall spend on Indigenous programs in Canada.
- Continued advocacy is required to ensure that Canada's national school food program grows to meet the needs of all students, across Canada, fulfilling its promise to be national, universal, and equitable.

We know we are aligned with other voices in the sector, with our generous donors, and with families across Canada in applauding this important first step towards a national school food program.

Together, we look forward to continuing the work needed to ensure that Indigenous children, families, Elders and communities – who experience the highest levels of poverty and food insecurity in Canada – continue to get the nutrition they need to grow up strong and healthy.

COALITION FOR HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Best practices to ensure that school food programs live up to their full potential.



Health-promoting

Serve tasty, nourishing and culturally appropriate foods to all children, focusing on vegetables and fruits. Ensure that programs are in line with the revised Canada's Food Guide, foster a healthy food environment, and promote mental health and wellbeing.



Universal

Ensure that ALL children in a school can access the program in a non-stigmatizing manner. Over time, all children in Canada will be able to participate in a school food program.



Cost-shared

Use federal funding to both expand on current provincial, city, parental and community funding and to initiate new programs in a cost-shared model.



Flexible and locally adapted

Successful school food programs reflect the local context of the school and region and are connected to and informed by students and their parents or caregivers. Ensure that funding builds on existing programs, local knowledge, skills and relationships and that it supports different food service models, from breakfast to lunch to snacks.



Committed to control over programs for Indigenous students

Embed Indigenous Food Sovereignty in a School Food Program for Canada and negotiate funding for school food programs with First Nation, Métis and Inuit leaders.



A driver of community economic development

Encourage school food programs to set local and sustainably produced food purchasing targets, which would create jobs for Canadian farmers and local food producers.



Promoting of food literacy

Support the conditions for school food programs to be integrated into the curriculum and enable food literacy and experiential food skills education.



Supported by guidance and accountability measures

Build on provincial and territorial school food funding and policies to ensure that programs have strong public accountability measures in place and 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.