

CANADA MAKES NATIONAL SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAM PERMANENT

Budget 2025 secures long-term support but funding shortfalls remain

On October 10, 2025, Prime Minister Mark Carney announced that his government would be introducing legislation to make Canada's National School Food Program (NSFP) permanent and include funding for it in Budget 2025, which was passed on November 17, 2025. The NSFP will receive permanent funding of \$216.6 million per year starting in the 2029-30 school year.

***"It's not enough money,
but at least the commitment
is there now."***

DEBBIE FIELD, NATIONAL COORDINATOR,
COALITION FOR HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD

The five-year pilot for the NSFP was introduced in Budget 2024 with funding of \$1 billion. The NSFP's stated goal was clear: it aimed to provide meals to 400,000 more school children every year by working with provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners.

Canada was the last of the G7 nations to introduce a national school food program, so the news was welcomed but anxieties remained high. Funding

for the program was dependent on successful negotiations with each of the provinces and territories and, as that was occurring, a federal election happened — with no guarantee that the incoming government would maintain the funding, much less extend it.



Elsipogtog First Nation

A remarkably fast roll-out

As of March 31, 2025, the Government of Canada had signed bilateral agreements with all provinces and territories on the NSFP — a roll-out that occurred “faster than any other set of agreements in Canadian history,” says Debbie Field, national coordinator of the Coalition for Healthy School Food.

The government pledged \$227 million for school food programs in Indigenous communities over the five-year pilot, of which \$38 million was distributed in the 2024-25 school year. Because the federal government funds Indigenous schools in Canada, the process to increase funding to those schools didn’t require the types of bilateral, individually negotiated agreements with Indigenous partners as was the case for provinces and territories.

While in theory that made for an “elegant and seamless” implementation, Field says, that hasn’t been the experience of some of Kinvia’s Indigenous partners. On a recent visit to the five Indigenous

schools Kinvia supports in New Brunswick, Marlen Mondaca, Kinvia’s Vice President of Programs and Partnerships, says, “Many did not know how much money was received, or if they were recipients of any funding. In other cases, they received small amounts of money and are not sure of the disbursement schedule for further funding — making it difficult to plan.”

Overall, the allocation of funding has not been transparent, either to the public or, it would seem, to the schools involved. It is currently unclear which schools have benefitted from additional funding.

Field explains that the federal government considers this information private to Indigenous leaders, and that, because the amounts have been small, there has been no public fanfare around the additional funding. “The good news,” she says, “is that money is flowing and Indigenous communities can expect continued support. The problem is that it’s not enough money.”

How much money is needed?

In a conversation with the CBC’s Catherine Cullen, Field noted that provinces and territories have doubled their contributions to the program in the first year from \$200 million to \$400 million — more than twice the amount of the newly-committed permanent funding from the federal government. Unfortunately, this still leaves a full school meal program for all students underfunded.

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit schools may receive additional funding from provincial or territorial funding streams. These, however, vary by province and fall far short of the total budget envelopes allocated to school food by the provinces and territories.

For example, in Ontario, the federal government and the Ministry of Children, Community and



Tobique First Nation

Social Services both fund the First Nations Student Nutrition Program, with contributions of \$2.78 million and \$4.4 million respectively in the 2024-25 school year. Ontario's Ministry of Health provides an additional \$5.4 million for the Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program, which supports schools in northern communities for 20 weeks per year. Other provinces have similar contribution agreements.

Even with these amounts factored in, the level of funding for Indigenous school nutrition programs is inadequate. Field says that Indigenous leaders have asked for \$1 billion per year – the total amount designated for the entire five-year pilot – solely to fund Indigenous schools across Canada.

How far does the funding go?

Right now, it is a misconception to believe that the funding is enabling a robust program of substantial breakfasts and lunches for every student. According to Field and Amberley Ruetz, a school food researcher at the University of Saskatchewan, **this type of meal program would cost between \$4.50 and \$6.50 per student per day, a number that vastly exceeds the current federal funding level of about \$0.20 per student per day**, and even the total funding available when municipal and provincial funds are added.

“I think it'd be great if the federal government immediately matched what the provinces are doing, which would be \$400 million, but eventually it is actually going to cost billions to give us a quality program,” Field suggests, a call that Ruetz echoes.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food stresses that an investment at this scale will help fill bellies and fuel better learning – and also provide a range of health, educational, and community economic benefits.

The Government of Canada is positioning the current investment almost solely in terms of increasing affordability and alleviating food



O-Chi-Chak-Ko-Sipi First Nation

insecurity. It says that **the current program is saving participating families with two children an average of \$800 per year on groceries**. The Coalition for Healthy School Food cautions that while school food programs can relieve some of the pressure on household grocery budgets, they are not a replacement for robust income supports that address the wider issue of rising poverty and the escalating cost of living.

A patchwork system means inconsistencies

Even with the increased funding, there are still many inconsistencies in school meal programs between provinces and even between schools and school districts within provinces.

Some of this is due to the timing and the variation in the bilateral agreements between provinces and the federal government. Some is also due to the complex structure of the school meal ecosystem which is funded by all three levels of government (federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal), community associations and social

service agencies who often work with retailers, distribution agents, private grocers, and non-profits like Second Harvest, other charities and non-profits like Kinvia, and by families themselves in pay-what-you-can scenarios.

This patchwork system means that some students enjoy full meals, while others may get snacks, and some may have nothing at all.



An issue of infrastructure and capacity

Disparities are often due to differing capacity within schools where things like how many volunteers or staff are available and whether the school has a fully equipped kitchen or appliances can determine what type of food is offered. More remote and smaller schools experience greater challenges in infrastructure, funding, and support.

This is particularly the case for many schools in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, including many that Kinvia supports.

The NSFP does not cover tangential costs related to the provision of school meals, such as transportation, cafeteria staff, or cooking equipment. According to Diane Berard in an article for *Future of Good*, “The infrastructure deficit is a significant hurdle to amplifying the national school food program.”

Berard cites Judith Barry, co-founder of the Breakfast Club of Canada, who says that Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada estimates that a yearly investment of \$100 million is necessary to upgrade Canada’s school and community equipment, over and above the cost of food itself.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food points out that there is no mention in Budget 2025 of a renewed School Food Infrastructure Fund or Local Food Infrastructure Fund, although both were referred to in the Liberal pre-election platform.

Significant gaps remain between the funding available and the costs and infrastructure required to provide high-quality, nutritious food to students across Canada in a universal, non-stigmatizing, culture- and health-supporting way.

As we work to discover more about the nuances of the NSFP’s funding agreements and reach, we concur with the Coalition for Healthy School Food that there is “a need to advocate to expand the funding of the National School Food Program to align with the actual cost of healthy food, cost-of-living growth, evaluation findings, and emerging needs.”

Regardless of how strong the case is for ensuring that every child has adequate nutrition to support

their learning, physical development, mental health, and overall well-being, this is going to require **steady advocacy and ongoing investment in school nutrition programs.**

Kinvia helps bridge the gap

Even the best designed school food programs are a time-limited solution that apply a band-aid to the problem of childhood food insecurity. For example, food insecurity and hunger increase during the summer months when schools are not open. For students in areas with more access to community programs and social services, some of this gap is filled. For others — especially First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students or those in more remote areas — it is not.

Kinvia currently supports 14 school meals and snacks programs in Indigenous communities across Canada. We have heard first-hand that the cost of food is much higher than the level of funding schools have available to them and that schools struggle with the resources, staff, and infrastructure to fully support student nutrition. As a case in point, Marlen Mondaca shared that staff at one Kinvia-supported school said that they get food directly from a food bank but *“although the food is delivered, the school has problems receiving it, due to lack of staffing.”*

An increasing number of communities have school gardens, greenhouses, and food forests that supplement school food programs. Many also have land-based education programs and engage Elders, Knowledge-keepers, and other community members to conduct hunting, fishing, and food gathering trips, helping to pass along traditional teachings to students.

Food-related programs such as these are envisioned as a way to support community-wide food security and the reclamation of ancestral culture and knowledge. Ideally, they integrate with school food programs not only

by supplementing the food available to students but also to form a basis for culturally-relevant nutrition education. Again, however, Mondaca stresses that many schools are not resourced to provide nutrition education and educators don't have the tools, resources, or skills to integrate it into their lesson plans.

Communities like Elsipogtog First Nation near Miramichi, New Brunswick, stress that they could do more, and be more effective, if they had stable funding for additional, dedicated resources like a horticulturalist to guide the planting and management of a community garden and their newly-installed greenhouse and someone to support embedding gardening and nutrition in the school's curriculum.

Even with additional federal funding — which many schools have not seen yet — the resources to run a comprehensive school nutrition program remain out of reach.



Elsipogtog First Nation

We continue to work with Indigenous Peoples not only to support the direct purchase of food, but also the related staffing, infrastructure, and programming crucial to make school nutrition programs sustainable, equitable, and effective.



A broader vision for nourishing children in communities

Ideally, school nutrition is part of a broader vision for a year-round, local food systems strategy that unites economic development, land and water stewardship, food sovereignty, and culturally-specific nutritional needs and preferences.

In Indigenous communities, it is essential that this approach be led by Indigenous Peoples themselves and include ancestral food traditions, knowledge, and practices.

A local food systems strategy creates links between local food producers, schools, and others such as community food centres and food banks. Of critical importance now, it offers the added

benefit of supporting Canadian farmers facing rapidly changing global markets. And in many communities, it brings new skills-building and vocational opportunities to light.

This approach is one that the federal government hinted at in the Liberals' 2025 costing plan, which included a reference to the "Buy Canadian in School Foods Program," but which was not included in Budget 2025.

Join us to support nutrition in school and beyond

Making the National School Food Program permanent is an important step toward ensuring that every child has access to nutritious food at school — but permanence alone is not progress.

We must raise our voice to advocate for scaling funding to meet the real cost of quality meals, address infrastructure gaps, and ensure equity between schools and communities.

Progress will also depend on centring Indigenous leadership in program design and delivery that extends into the community, ensuring that local food systems, Indigenous knowledge and food traditions, and self-determined approaches are part of how children are nourished.

As advocacy continues to expand the federal program's reach, donors can help by supporting Kinvia's work to strengthen school nutrition programs and advance Indigenous-led, community-driven solutions that foster the lifelong health and well-being of children within their families and communities.

Join Kinvia to support better nutrition for Indigenous students. [Learn more.](#)

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