

Backgrounder:

A National Nutritious School Meal Program for Canadian Children (January 2009)

I. Introduction

Canada, like many other countries, faces one of the most severe economic downturns in many years that promises to lead to financial hardship for many people. This acute economic distress follows on the heels of national (and global) food price inflation that, according to Statistics Canada, continue unabated. Rising food prices were caused, in part, by rising increased demand for “value added” foods by emerging developing markets, crop failures due to extreme weather associated with climate change, and conversion of some food crops for biofuels. These cost pressures are likely to continue to press food prices upward.

II. Three Crises Converge to Undermine Children’s Health:

Food price inflation, especially for nutritious foods, are exacerbating difficulties posed by an already enormous health and productivity burden of diet-related cancers, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes; premature death and disability hamper our economic productivity, and premature chronic illness strain the capacity of Medicare to cope with the demand for treatment. Food price hikes also undermine efforts by educators, health professionals, and public health authorities to encourage children to eat healthy foods.

- **Economic Crisis:** This world-wide economic crisis triggered by a housing credit crisis is projected to lead to widespread unemployment in Canada for an undetermined duration.
- **Food Price Inflation:** According to Statistics Canada, between November 2007 and November 2008, retail prices for bakery and other cereal products rose 13%, fresh fruit rose 19%, fresh vegetables rose 29%. Price inflation for these food groups, which are vital for Canadians’ health, far outstripped an otherwise large 7.4% hike in prices for all foods (compared to an overall inflation rate of 2% during the period).¹ This is unsustainable price inflation for nutritious food that severely undermines Canadians efforts to protect and enhance their health through good diet.
- **Diet-Related Disease:** In recent years, diet-related cardiovascular disease, type-II diabetes (previously known as adult-onset diabetes), and childhood obesity have risen to epidemic proportions among Canadian children, leading world-wide trends. Health Canada has long estimated that diet-related disease imposes health care expenses and productivity losses of \$7 billion annually. Only one-third of Canadian children aged 4-18 consume the number of servings of fruits and vegetables recommended by *Canada’s Food Guide* (though this estimate, which includes french fries, is optimistic);² sufficient consumption of fruits and vegetables is widely recognized as providing a protective effect against cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and certain forms of cancer.³

Always, but especially in difficult times, Canadians and their governments should help parents and educators ensure that children get nutritious food to help them learn, achieve good health, and ultimately be more productive members of society.

III. Investing in social infrastructure to stimulate the economy is consistent with political commitments

It is widely acknowledged by governments around the world, including the G-20 countries and the opposition coalition members in Canada that a program of publicly-funded financial stimulus to the economy is necessary to prevent the worst effects of the financial crisis. Investment in Canadian infrastructure is also widely considered to be a sound use of such funding.

Opposition Parties: For example, *A Policy Accord to Address the Present Economic Crisis* sets out, as a top priority the commitment of developing:

- “an economic stimulus package designed to boost the domestic economy beginning with (but not limited to): Accelerating existing infrastructure funding and substantial new investment, including municipal; and inter-provincial projects...[and]
- ensuring that the federal government has the appropriate programs in place to assist those most affected by the economic crisis so that all citizens will be in a position to fully participate in economic recovery to follow.”

The *Policy Accord* also recognizes the importance of *social* infrastructure, particularly pertaining to the welfare of children, by pledging to:

- “As finances permit, moving forward with improved child benefits and an early learning and childcare program in partnership with each province, and respectful of their role and jurisdiction, including the possibility to opt-out with full compensation.”

Ministers of Health: In 2005, the federal, provincial and territorial ministers of health committed to undertake several measures in the “Integrated Pan-Canadian Healthy Living Strategy.” Those commitments included the following objectives for the federal government:

- “Support [provincial and territorial] collaborative opportunities to assist in developing and implementing healthy eating programs and policies.
- Investigate ways to subsidize access to healthy food choices.
- Set up multiyear [federal, provincial and territorial] bilateral agreements to assist with P/T integrated physical activity/healthy eating strategies.
- Undertake feasibility study on fiscal measures to encourage healthy living (i.e. tax credits/penalties, subsidies, price supports, etc.)”

Election Campaign Platforms: Canada is one of the few western countries that does not offer a comprehensive publicly subsidized national meal program to students. (Even US government subsidies for school meals are more than 30-fold higher, even on a per student basis, than Canadian subsidies.)

However, the Liberal Party's 2008 election platform states (at p. 45): "Promoting good health is just as important as preventing disease." Likewise, the NDP's election platform states (at p. 17): "Ensure a healthy head start for kids... We will develop a Children's Nutrition Initiative to support and expand provincial and local programs that provide healthy meals to school children." The 2008 Conservative Party's election platform states (at p. 4): "A re-elected Conservative Government will continue to provide practical help to Canadian families to assist them with higher costs of living..." and the Conservative Party's 2006 election platform states (at p. 32) that: "The most important part of health care is prevention, including insuring that Canadians, especially children, have proper diet and exercise."

IV. Financially Supporting Healthy Eating for Canadian Children is Sound Public Policy

- A November 2008 scientific literature review by experts at Harvard University^{*} concluded that:

"...more than 100 published research articles, provides the scientific basis for concluding that the [US] federal School Breakfast Program is highly effective in terms of providing children with a stronger basis to learn in school, eat more nutritious diets, and lead more healthy lives both emotionally and physically...significantly improves their cognitive or mental abilities, enabling them to be more alert, pay better attention, and to do better in terms of reading, math and other standardized test scores. Children getting breakfast at school also are sick less often, have fewer problems associated with hunger, such as dizziness, lethargy, stomach aches and ear aches, and do significantly better than their peers who do not get a school breakfast in terms of cooperation, discipline and interpersonal behaviors."⁴

- In the Chief Public Health Officer's 2008 *Report on the State of Public Health in Canada*, Dr. Butler Jones observed:

"When children go to school hungry or poorly nourished, their energy levels, memory, problem-solving skills, creativity, concentration and behaviour are all negatively impacted. Studies have shown that 31% of elementary students and 62% of secondary school students do not eat a nutritious breakfast before school. Almost one quarter of Canadian children in Grade 4 do not eat breakfast daily and, by Grade 8, that number jumps to almost half of all girls. The reasons for this vary – from a lack of available food or nutritious options in low-income homes, to poor eating choices made by children and/or their caregivers. As a result of being hungry at school, these children may not reach their full developmental potential – an outcome that can have a health impact throughout their entire lives."⁵

^{*} Note: Recent studies published by the USDA in November 2007 and July 2008 looking chiefly at nutritional outcomes of the school meals programs demonstrated the need for refining the US Dept. of Agriculture nutrition standards for the school meals programs to, for instance, better limit amounts of sodium and saturated fat; the US Institute of Medicine was charged with the task and released an interim report in December 2009.

- Dr. Butler-Jones featured Breakfast for Learning as a key Canadian non-profit tackling hunger. The CPHO concluded (like the later Harvard review):

“...school staff have reported improvements in scholastic performance, improved behaviour and attentiveness among some students. Also, volunteers in this program report high satisfaction rates and a feeling of sense of community. The success of Breakfast for Learning[†] in terms of reaching so many school children is largely attributed to the community-level involvement and management of each program. The needs of each area are determined by the combined efforts of governments, private businesses, community agencies, volunteers, food banks, parents and educators.”⁶

- Investing in school nutrition during the school year complements other investments in public transportation and utility infrastructure which often must be carried out during the summer months.
- There is anecdotal evidence in Canada that subsidized school meals can:
 - Improve school attendance and likelihood of graduation, especially among high risk children.
 - Help equalize opportunities for life success among children from families with unequal financial means.
 - Relieve the time pressure from all parents, but especially single parents, and families where both parents work outside the home and, as such, have limited time to prepare nutritious individual lunches for their children 190 school days annually (especially parents with several children in school).
- Properly designed funding eligibility requirements can help:
 - Improve the health of 5.2 Canadian school children K-12 by ensuring only nutritious foods are eligible for funding. (The House of Commons Standing Committee on Health recently worried that this generation of children would live shorter, sicker lives than their parents.)
 - Protect the natural environment by setting food eligibility standards that favour environmentally sustainable products, production and manufacturing techniques (e.g., locally sourced, minimally processed, and minimally packaged fresh fruits and vegetables⁷).
 - Canadian farmers sell their produce, often directly to end consumers (if local program administrators purchase directly from farmers and farmers' markets).
 - Stimulate community employment opportunities for part-time school meal administrators for up to 13,500 schools plus regional financial stewards.
- A national nutritious school feeding program is supported by and consistent with the World Health Organization's *School Policy Framework*⁸ (published November 2008), developed in close partnership between the WHO, the Government of Canada, and Canadian meeting at a world technical meeting held in Victoria, British Columbia in 2007.

[†] Breakfast for Learning has fed 1.5 million students across Canada since being established in Toronto in 1992. It's Honorary Patron is the Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, Governor General of Canada.

V. Current Public Investment in School Foods

Jurisdiction	Government / NGO Financial Investment	Sources/References
United States Federal Dept. of Agriculture	US\$12 billion (Not all of 45 million students participate.)	US Federal Costs of School Food Programs (Data as of December 30, 2008). See: http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/cncosts.htm Weighted average investment per student, per school day: US \$1.24 ⁹ Six states fund programs on a “universal free” basis.
Breakfast for Learning	\$3 million	Supports approx. 365,000 students daily.
City of Toronto	\$4.3 million (Not all of 361,500 students participate.)	The Toronto program recently increased funding to cover increased food costs and to expand other programs to encourage the uptake of provincial government funding that otherwise would only cover approx. 15% of program costs (i.e., would otherwise not likely be viable). Toronto Public Health, Student Nutrition Program Funding—Current Status and Recommendations for 2009, November 3, 2009 available at http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2008/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-17189.pdf Toronto Public Health estimate of wholesale cost of a simple, nutritious student meal: CAD \$1.50 ¹⁰
Total Canadian Provincial Spending	\$39 million Breakfast for Learning estimates that only 7%-10% of Canada’s 5.2 million students receive even partially subsidized school meals.	National weighted avg. daily investment/student : \$0.04 ¹¹
Canadian Federal Government	Nil.	
Newfoundland & Labrador	\$1,250,000	Government funding for school food programs is administered by <i>Kids Eat Smart Foundation</i> .
Prince Edward Island	\$325,000	For the past 3 years, the Department of Education has fulfilled the largest school board’s request for \$25,000 annually to pay on-site breakfast program coordinators. Department of Health has provided PEI Healthy Eating Alliance with \$200,000 (over a period of 3 years) for the development and implementation of school nutrition policies along with another \$100,000 for breakfast programs and support.

Nova Scotia	\$1,044,000	<p>Total amount \$1,043,980: \$750,000 supports Breakfast Programs \$250,000 supports implementation of the School Food and Nutrition Policy for NS Public Schools \$43,980 is HR support for BFL coordinator, consultant to DoE/HPP</p> <p>The investment has been made jointly between the Nova Scotia Departments of Education and Health Promotion and Protection. The Provincial Breakfast Program Standards were developed collaboratively between DoE/HPP and BFL-NSAC along with school boards and district health authorities, and are based on BFL's Keys to Success, best practice quality standards.</p>
New Brunswick	\$1,250,000	<p>Healthy Minds Program under Department of Education; funds available to elementary schools for nutrition programs. This program is administered under by the individual school district. Funding available is based on a formula. See: http://www.gnb.ca/cnb/news/edu/1999e1225ed.htm ; 3) Fruit and Vegetable Program developed for middle schools is under the Department of Wellness. See: http://app.infoaa.7700.gnb.ca/gnb/pub/EServices/ListServiceDetails.asp?ServiceID=17696&ReportType1=All ; 4) Tobacco Free School Funds for high school students. See: http://app.infoaa.7700.gnb.ca/gnb/pub/EServices/ListServiceDetails.asp?ServiceID=17736&ReportType1=All</p>
Quebec	\$2,000,000	Government of Quebec granted \$2 million to Club des petit dejeuner du Quebec each school year since 2005.
Ontario	\$17,000,000	Ministry of Children and Youth Services distributes \$17million, annually, throughout the province using its Regional Offices and the appointment of Lead Agencies.
Manitoba	\$100,000	
Saskatchewan	\$2,000,000	Department of Education \$500,000 school nutrition programs, overall government investment is approximately \$2M.
Alberta	Nil.	No long term financial support. However, BFL has just received word that Alberta will provide on a one time basis \$100,000 to supplement BFL-Alberta Council programs and are creating a committee to review the long term situation.
British Columbia	\$14,000,000	Community LINK funding from Ministry of Children and Family Development for community-based school programs totalling \$45.4 million, of which an estimated \$14 million supports school meal programs.
Yukon	\$42,000	Ministry of Health and Social Services provides a nutrition grant annually to Yukon Food for Learning.
NWT	Nil.	No territorial funding for school food programs but many programs access funding through Brighter Futures (Health Canada).
Nunavut	Nil.	No territorial funding for school food programs but many programs access funding through Brighter Futures (Health Canada).

VI. A proposed schedule for rolling out a national program

In the complete absence of federal government involvement (even in aboriginal communities), other jurisdictions (e.g., most provinces, a few municipalities, and non-profit organizations such as Breakfast for Learning) have patched together a variety of programs to help some Canadian children meet their food security and nutrition needs. A new national breakfast, lunch and/or snack program could build on those programs, possibly by extending existing networks and infrastructure and community development models, enabling programs to roll out quickly.

A proposed timetable could follow the following course:

1. Jan-Mar 2009: Identify current programs and practices across the country, particularly regarding program administration, nutrition standards, use of local foods, and environmental practices and identify prospective competent financial administrative authorities in keeping with varied provincial and territorial government school governance structures.
2. Jan-June 2009: Develop national nutrition requirements for school meal programs; stakeholder input from parents, public health authorities, and educators is integral to the process. On-reserve school nutrition programs requires an additional consultation track to address unique issues concerning local infrastructure and remote access.
3. July-Dec 2009: Enlist existing networks and adapt accountability procedures to meet federal government protocols, pilot the program in various jurisdictions across the country. The federal government must marshal provincial government, local government, NGO, and private sector support to parents and children for this program which would cost up to an estimated \$1.5 billion. In some cases, new programs would be established and in other cases, existing programs may be enhanced to, for instance, all classes at a school when only one is served now by an industrious teacher/parent.¹² Document all aspects of the program, including job creation and economic benefits and facilitate the publication of experiences—success stories and lessons learned—on a decentralized school meals website, perhaps coordinated by Breakfast for Learning.
4. Jan 2010: Roll-out the program nationally, reaching full implementation by September 2010. The program would provide funding, implementation, and evaluation support to jurisdictions that agree to meet program requirements.

References

¹ *Summary Table, Consumer Price Index: Consumer Price Index, food, by province (monthly) November 2008*; available at: <http://www40.statcan.gc.ca/101/cst01/cpis08a-eng.htm>

² See Garriguet D, "Overview of Canadians' Eating Habits, 2004" Statistics Canada. Cat. No. 82-620-MIE–No.2 at pp. 5 and 20. Available at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-620-m/82-620-m2006002-eng.pdf>

³ Report of the Joint WHO/FAO Expert Consultation on Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases (Tech. Rpt. 916) (Geneva, 2003) at pp. 147-149. Available at http://whqlibdoc.who.int/trs/WHO_TRS_916.pdf. See also World Cancer Research Fund, *Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity and the Prevention of Cancer*, 2007 at p. 370 available at: <http://www.dietandcancerreport.org/>

⁴ J Larry Brown, William H. Beardslee, Deborah Prothrow, *Impact of School Breakfast on Children's Health and Learning: An Analysis of the Scientific Research* (Nov. 2008) Unpublished Manuscript. Harvard School of Public Health. Available at: http://www.sodexofoundation.org/hunger_us/Images/Impact%20of%20School%20Breakfast%20Study_tcm150-212606.pdf

⁵ David Butler-Jones, *The Chief Public Health Officer's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2008*, (Ottawa: Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008) at 41.

⁶ David Butler-Jones, *The Chief Public Health Officer's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2008*, (Ottawa: Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008) at 42.

⁷ Under the 2008 US Farm Bill provided fruits, vegetables, and whole grain products for use in school lunch and breakfast programs. See: *Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008*, P.L. 110-246 (June 18, 2008) cited in US Institute of Medicine, *Nutrition Standards and Meal Requirements for National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs: Phase I; Proposed Approach for Recommending Revisions* (Chair: Dr. Virginia Stallings) at 113. Available at <http://www.iom.edu/CMS/3788/54064/60521.aspx> The purpose of the National School Lunch Program is set out in the enabling legislation: "to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food." (quoted in IOM 2008 at 16)

⁸ Available at: <http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/SPF-En.pdf>

⁹ See United States Department of Agriculture. Federal Costs of School Food Programs, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/cncosts.htm> Costs for 2008 of US\$11.7 billion, then divided by 49.5 million, the total number of children enrolled in elementary and high school in the US in 2003 (most recent figures available); see "School Enrolment Surpasses 1970 Baby-Boom Crest, Census Bureau Reports," Press Release, US Census Bureau News, June 1, 2005, <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/education/005157.html> last accessed September 23, 2007, assuming a 190-day school year.

¹⁰ See Total Cost of Providing Breakfast to School Aged Children in Canada for the Entire School Year, http://breakfastforlearning.ca/english/prog_events/pdfs/Federal%20Grant%20Analysis%202.pdf.

¹¹ Centre for Science in the Public Interest, *Are Schools Making the Grade? Provincial Nutrition Policies Across Canada* at 34. Available at http://www.cspinet.org/canada/pdf/makingthegrade_1007.pdf as modified by the \$10 million increase by the Government of Ontario. See: News Release issued by CSPI: "Health and Child Protection Groups Call for Pan-Canadian Healthy School Foods Summit" (http://cspinet.org/canada/pdf/final.schoolfoodrelease_june_19_2008.pdf) and Canada News Wire: News Release: "More Brain Food For Ontario Kids" issued May 22, 2008.

¹² A *National Nutritious School Meal Program for Canadian Children* could be styled as government procurement program (administered in partnership between the federal government and school boards/districts or local health authorities directly) or a grants and contributions administered on application to the federal government by parents' groups or other community organizations.