

Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention – Budget Submission Call for a Universal School Food Strategy and Funding for Healthy School Food in Alberta

The Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention (APCCP), representing 17 prominent organizations from across the province, is calling on the Alberta Government to develop a Universal School Food Strategy (USFS). This submission discusses our call for a Universal School Food Strategy and funding for healthy school food initiatives in Alberta.

Healthy School Food in Alberta

It is widely recognized that access to healthy food while at school supports student health and academic achievement. However, many young people are not consuming enough healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables (1, 2), and many schools inundate young people with less healthy food and beverage options (3).

During the 2014/2015 school year, the APCCP surveyed school principals to understand their perceptions of the school food environment. The survey was sent to 1350 principals across Alberta and 363 principals completed the survey (27% response rate). Findings from this survey suggest that while many schools across Alberta have taken significant steps to promote healthy school food and beverages, schools many require additional resources and financial support in this area (4). For example, 50% of survey respondents indicated that long-term funding is not available for food programs and/or initiatives at their school and 62% of survey respondents indicated that hunger relief in their school is addressed through the provision of emergency food by teachers (4).

Call for a Universal School Food Strategy for Alberta

To address gaps in school food policies and programming, the Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention is calling on the province of Alberta to develop a Universal School Food Strategy (USFS). Key aspects of this strategy should include (1) making healthy meals, snacks and beverages available to all school-aged children (K-12) in Alberta; (2) student involvement in growing and preparing food; (3) education on the food system, and; (4) relationships with local producers and the development of local food procurement policies when feasible.

A USFS should aim to benefit all K-12 students across Alberta and build on successful initiatives already in place within Alberta schools. Further, it should be developed with the recognition that schools and districts have different assets and experience different obstacles to promoting healthy school food. Thus, levels of support and strategies to ensure access to healthy school food should be tailored to meet these diverse needs (5). In addition, meal and snack programs implemented through a USFS should be universally available to all students at the school level to avoid the stigma associated with programs that target participation based on socio-economic status (6).

The Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention believes Alberta is falling behind when it comes to funding healthy school food. For instance, acting on recommendations from Ontario’s Healthy Kids Panel, in 2014 the Government of Ontario announced an investment of more than \$32 million over three years to enhance and expand the province’s student nutrition program, with the goal of providing more healthy school food to elementary and secondary students across Ontario (7, 8).

Benefits of a Universal School Food Strategy

The school is an important location to promote healthy food consumption and eating habits given the large number of young people who access this setting. Development of a USFS has the potential to support current initiatives in place to promote healthy school food across Alberta, as well as fill in gaps in school food policies and programs to ensure more students benefit from healthy school food environments.

School food policies and initiatives, such as nutrition guidelines and fruit and vegetables subscription programs, have demonstrated positive impacts on students’ dietary intake of fruit and vegetables, particularly when paired with an educational component (9). Research also suggests that breakfast consumption can contribute to improvements in cognitive performance (10-12) and that diet quality is important to academic performance (13). Further, connecting schools to local food through initiatives like Farm to School may have a number of positive benefits, such as building community connections with local producers, improving fruit and vegetable consumption, and increasing knowledge about food, growing and agriculture (14).

Funding School Food in Alberta

Investing in prevention makes sense economically; a \$1 investment in prevention is expected to result in \$4-5 cost savings (15). To fund a USFS, the Government of Alberta is encouraged to implement a levy on sugary drinks in the province. Sugary drinks offer no nutritional benefit and have been linked to serious health risks. Considering this, the Heart and Stroke Foundation recommends limiting the consumption of sugary drinks through a variety of policies including banning sugar-sweetened beverages in schools (16). Further, a national 50 cent per litre levy on sugary drinks could generate up to \$1.8 billion each year (17, 18), which amounts to approximately \$158 million annually for the province of Alberta, accounting for a 20% decrease in consumption due to taxation.

The funding outlined in the NDP’s 2015 election platform to phase in a school lunch program (19) represents a significant investment that could help to establish Alberta as a leader in healthy school food.¹ The Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention believes that, guided by a USFS, this funding should be used to support school food initiatives across Alberta, building on successful initiatives already in place and filling in gaps to ensure more students benefit from healthy school food environments.

¹ The Table, entitled Summary of NDP Budget Changes, in the Alberta NDP’s 2015 election platform outlines the following investment in school lunch: 20 million years 2015/2016; 40 million years 2016/2017; 60 million years 2017/2018; 60 million years 2018/2019; 60 million years 2019/2020 (18).

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