
2022



A UNIVERSAL SCHOOL FOOD SYSTEM FOR BC

SMA RESEARCH & POLICY BRIEF



ALL LEARNERS NEED LUNCH



single
mothers'
alliance



The Single Mothers' Alliance held three focus groups in June 2022 to highlight the experiences and views of low-income parents and caregivers regarding universal school food to support the BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food and Food Secure Canada's federal and provincial advocacy in this area. One of the focus groups was open to all parents and caregivers in BC and two focus groups targeted inner-city designated schools that have a higher concentration of low-income students in the City of Vancouver. A total of 19 diverse parents and caregivers from the following 13 schools attended the focus groups:

- Lord Strathcona Community Elementary
- Britannia Community School
- Ideas Alternative High School
- Tyee Elementary School
- Gladstone Secondary
- Tillicum Community Annex
- David Thompson Secondary
- Xpey' Elementary School
- Grandview Elementary School
- Windermere Secondary School
- Sir Charles Tupper Secondary School
- Admiral Seymour Elementary School
- Dease Lake School

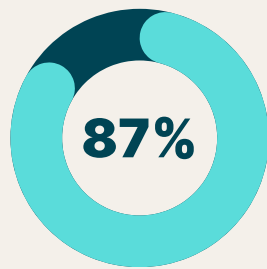
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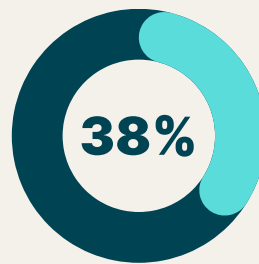
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

IDENTITY

Of the participants who completed an anonymous demographic survey:



identified as racialized



identified as Indigenous

The focus group participants were primarily those who identify as female or gender-diverse with one male-identifying parent attending one focus group.

Nearly 50% of participants had more than one child below the age of 18.

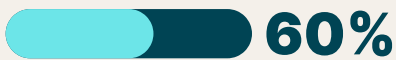


DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

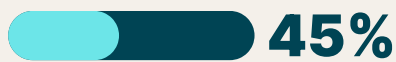
INCOME



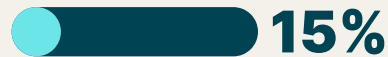
of participants in attendance
make below \$40,000 annually



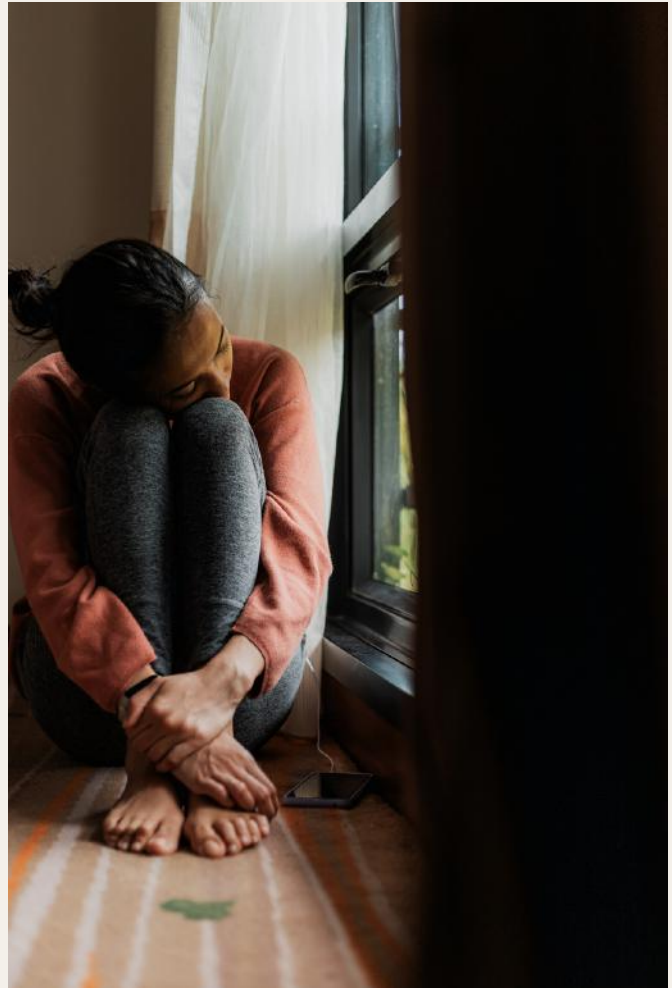
of participants live on a fixed
income



of participants receive
disability assistance



of participants receive
income assistance



Of the lowest three income brackets:

- **15%** of participants live on less than \$10,000 per year
- **15%** live on \$10,000 to \$19,999 per year
- **23%** live on \$20,000 to \$29,999 per year

KEY FINDINGS

The following key findings emerged from the discussions which were guided by a set of open-ended questions exploring parents' and caregivers' experiences and visions for school food programs.

Access to food

Access to healthy and nutritious meals accompanied by food literacy education is a priority for parents and caregivers across the board.

School Food for All

Parents and caregivers support the campaign for a universal school food system due to its potential to provide healthy and nutritious food to children regardless of their family's income and status.

No More Shame

A universal school food program eliminates the shame and stigma associated with accessing targeted school food programs.

Saves Time & Money

All focus groups emphasized the importance of food security and financial saving, as well as the time-saving benefits of school food programs for families and children.

Overall, participants shared that a universal school food system addresses a range of personal, financial, and social needs for their families.

WHY IS SCHOOL FOOD IMPORTANT TO YOU?

Food Security

Addressing the food security needs of children is among the main reasons for participants' support for a universal school food. Several participants noted that due to the increase in food prices over time many parents and caregivers are struggling to get by, which is worsening the food insecurity of children. As a policy, participants support a universal school food system to meet the food security needs of all children.



“There are just a lot of kids that would not for a variety of reasons get fed in my daughters' school if it wasn't for the food program. So how can we not support that? If we are really looking at social issues kids are where we should be spending most of our money. And I think that this is a big budget item, it just should be.”

WHY IS SCHOOL FOOD IMPORTANT TO YOU?

Saves time and money

Participants who currently access free or subsidized school food programs mentioned that the programs saves them money and time. School food programs allow parents to save time that they would otherwise spend preparing and packing their children's lunches. Some participants who are not currently accessing school food programs noted that they spend more money on school lunches and snacks than food for their households. Participants described how preparing school lunches and paying for the school meal programs are becoming increasingly expensive and out of reach for low-income families, particularly those on fixed incomes.



WHY IS SCHOOL FOOD IMPORTANT TO YOU?

Saves time and money



“

To not have to make lunch every day especially when you're a single mom, and then when you're a single mom with a disability...sometimes making lunches is all the energy you have for the day. I make lunch and that's about it. I have to go back to bed for the rest of the day. So that's the kind of difference it's made for me. And then just to know that he's got hot food that I think really makes a difference for him.

”

For some parents and caregivers with disabilities, school food programs are an enormous support to provide food for their children as they may have limited mobility and capability to prepare and pack food for school.

“

For me, it's dealing with my son. I have to pack him two after-school snacks. I find it extremely costly. Before the pandemic, the school was charging me between \$100 to 120 a month, which I found was quite an enormous [expense], especially for my budget. And then on top of it, I was spending \$130 every month on school snacks for him to take to school and then after school program, so I feel that having that extra burden off me saves me a little bit of money in the long run.

”

WHY IS SCHOOL FOOD IMPORTANT TO YOU?

Access to nutritious meals

Across the board, the role of school food programs to help kids eat healthily was emphasized. Parents and caregivers are satisfied with existing school food programs that serve hot meals and healthy food options. All participants agree on the need to build a universal school food program that is healthy and nutritious.

Learning about food and culture

Parents view school food programs as opportunities for children and youth to learn about food cultures and traditions within the many cultural groups to which they belong. They feel that children are more open to trying different types and flavours of foods at school that they might not be willing or able to eat if prepared at home. The cultural aspect, expanding children's taste buds and learning about other food cultures, is an important value of food programs for parents and caregivers. Underrepresented communities and newcomers wish to see their foods introduced with cultural sensitivity and education.



WHY IS SCHOOL FOOD IMPORTANT TO YOU?

Social Connection

The equality aspect of eating together for kids and youth was highlighted by most participants as an opportunity to bring them together to help lessen the cultural divides among them. Socialization through eating together is thought to provide an opportunity for kids to get to know one another and it was also cited by parents as a potential anti-racism measure.



WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE ACCESSING SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS?

Access issues to existing programs



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Available subsidies for low-income parents are not communicated and parents have to jump through hoops to get the info about support. So, it's kind of confusing and uneven, and it's not really clearly offered. You kind of have to find out [what is available] and that's all extremely awkward.

”

Many parents and caregivers stated that they are required to sign up to participate in school food programs or receive available subsidies to access programs.

They described the subsidy process as confusing and humiliating, as parents must advocate to the principal or their Parent Advisory Council to obtain subsidies, and this application process singles them out and stigmatizes their family within the school community.

Several participants shared that they had paid for years before learning about available subsidies, and that because each school has its own system, it was often hard to understand how the subsidy systems worked and how to access them. Without much clarity, transparency, or accountability around the functioning of such systems, parents were unsure of the fairness in access and distribution.

WHAT IS WORKING?

Healthy and accessible food everyday

Some parents and caregivers prioritize the availability of school food and knowing that their children have been fed, so simply having access to a school food program is important to them, as many schools do not provide school food.

A few of the school food programs that participants used were said to provide high-quality food to all students. In addition to lunch, a few schools offer breakfast to families. Some parents and caregivers loved the opportunity to join their children at school for breakfast as this created community and dealt with whole family food insecurity.

Parents also discussed the importance of frequent and clear communication on the part of the school and school food program as a key part of the most successful programs; for example, they loved receiving detailed monthly menus where they could see each week what their children were going to eat at school.

The food program at Strathcona Elementary in Vancouver was cited as an example of a very successful and appreciated food program that does not stigmatize families, and a potential model for other programs and schools.



WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED OR DONE BETTER?

More fresh healthy food

All participants in the focus groups emphasized the importance of incorporating fresh, less processed foods, and healthy nutritious options into school food programs. Some participants noted that some programs only provide cold and packaged foods like cereal and sandwiches, which was exacerbated by the pandemic.



“

A lot of teachers are handing out sweets as an incentive and that doesn't consider the impact of these foods on kids in the long run.

”



Attention to children with disabilities

The challenge of providing school food to children with disabilities who might not always make it to school was raised by participants.

“

My child doesn't always get to school, and I find that some kids probably fall through the cracks if they can't get to school, like kids with disabilities. If there could be a way to reach families that aren't always able to attend the bricks and mortar school.

”

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED OR DONE BETTER?

Consistency of school food programs

Many existing programs are not offered on a consistent basis. They are intermittent, and the number of food programs available in high school is limited. Participants in focus groups who currently use elementary school food programs are concerned about the lack of high school food programs. High school students have limited access to school food programs.



SDGS AND UNIVERSAL SCHOOL FOOD

To inform the Coalition for Healthy School Food's work on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, participants were asked to share the top five goals they think may be achieved through a universal school food system. The lack of a standalone goal for Indigenous reconciliation was cited as a significant shortcoming when using the SDGs to evaluate policies and programs.



Most participants connected most of the SDG goals to the idea of a universal school food system during the discussions, but Goals 1 (No Poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger), 3 (Good Health & Well-being), 10 (Reduced Inequality), and 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), were repeatedly mentioned as goals that would be met through the implementation of universal school food in BC. Parents discussed the importance of school food programs in reducing plastic waste associated with disposable lunch items and food packaging, thereby attaining SDGs connected to climate change and the environment.

“

Universal school lunch covers so many needs at once. Because it meets my personal need, as a mother, to have any sort of practical help with the immense challenge of raising a child from infancy to adulthood. It keeps my kid nourished. A universal school lunch also means every kid is nourished, the same, like there's equality about that. So, it is fundamentally egalitarian.

”

VISIONS AND DREAMS FOR SCHOOL FOOD



The ideal school food system for participants is a universal one that provides free, healthy, and culturally appropriate food to all children throughout the day, every day. A system in which children are automatically enrolled and have the option to opt-out if they do not wish to participate.

Teaching about Indigenous food and diverse food cultures was identified as an important component of a universal school food system.

All participant caregivers and parents rank food literacy and healthy eating as top priorities. Participants would like a universal school food system to emphasize the provision of and education about healthy foods at every school.

Most participants would like to see universal school food programs at their schools that involves students from food preparation to cleaning up.

VISIONS AND DREAMS FOR SCHOOL FOOD

Reducing inequality



A universal school food system in BC is one important way to level the playing field for everyone to have access to healthy food, which has been shown to aid in child development. Equal access to school food is thought by participants to be one way to combat racism and social division.

“

So that's another reason to have a universal system- everybody has the same quality of food, the same nutrition, and also healthy food, and we don't have to stress about food now that food prices are up.

”

VISIONS AND DREAMS FOR SCHOOL FOOD

Decolonizing food literacy & education

Teaching about food and food choices should be an essential component of school food programs. The importance of teaching about food choices and healthy eating, as well as where food comes from and how it is transported, should be emphasized in school food programs. As one participant noted, the reconciliation and decolonization process should also be reflected in all aspects of education. Teaching kids about Indigenous food and its relationship to land and water could be an important aspect of decolonizing learning through school food in the curriculum.



VISIONS AND DREAMS FOR SCHOOL FOOD

Provision of school food programs



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Universal school food will take out the stigma associated with school food: no more filling out a form and feeling like you are begging for food. You don't want the stigma of being the low-income student who accesses the program - less than universal is stigmatizing for families and kids.

”

Some participants brought up the issue that some inner-city schools provide charity-based and lower quality food, which sparked a discussion on the delivery and provision of school food programs.

Due to quality issues, contracting out to non-profits raises concern about the establishment of a two-tier system in which schools in affluent neighborhoods contract out to for-profit providers and low-income schools contract out to non-profits and may be provided with lower quality food.

The discussions underlined the need to avoid the notion of charitable food defining school food. One participant noted that contracting out to for-profit organizations whose bottom line is profit is also a concern and may explain the continuous increase in the cost of school food over the last few years.

VISIONS AND DREAMS FOR SCHOOL FOOD

Accountability & transparency



There was a strong consensus on the need to establish a universal school food system and resulting programs at each elementary and high school in BC with input and clear roles and responsibilities defined for all responsible parties including schools, teachers and parents.

“

There should be accountability. There needs to be a system that is accountable to parents as well. It shouldn't be left to teachers to decide the way the school food program is built and run. That really speaks to this need for very clear policy, where it would potentially look different at each school in terms of the type of food, relationship with the community and local growers, but there needs to be some standard that is applied where it isn't up to a school to say 'no we won't bother' with the lunch program.

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VISIONS AND DREAMS FOR SCHOOL FOOD

Strong parent involvement



Most participants believe that parents and caregivers should be consulted and asked what they envision a universal school food system to look like and how it should be built using less conventional and informal engagement methods.

Although all participants believe that many parents and caregivers agree on the importance of school food for children and youth, depending on their background, they have a different understanding of the social, economic, and cultural aspects of food, making it difficult to mobilize parents for universal school food programs solely through existing formal parent engagement methods such as Parent Advisory Councils (PACs).

Most participants see PACs as primarily political organizations where parents with the time and resources gather and shape school priorities. Due to the gentrification of some East Vancouver neighbourhoods, participants shared that the PACs in these schools are beginning to have what one participant described as a rich group and poor group. Indigenous parents and caregivers, in particular, stated that PACs and the school system are not welcoming to them and that they believe they are being looked down on regarding how they raise their children.

VISIONS AND DREAMS FOR SCHOOL FOOD

Child and youth participation



Participants talked about the importance of getting kids and youth involved in building the universal school food system, in addition to the role of parents, because they have firsthand experience with the school food programs at their schools. Children are more likely to participate in school programs if they help design them. It was suggested that youth should be ethically engaged in sharing information and discussing their thoughts on school food through social media tools such as TikTok and Instagram, as well as other accessible media such as podcasts.

I find that a big issue often in the parent population or in those communities is there's a lot of under-representation. And I find oftentimes that the parents that were going to the PAC meetings while well-intentioned sometimes were taking it upon themselves to represent other people. I think it's just a question of reach because a lot of families don't feel welcome in spaces like PAC meetings, and more traditional ways of interacting as these are places of privilege with time being a huge asset a lot of single parents don't have. So, I think what needs to be considered is using just less traditional and more informal casual ways of engaging families that perhaps normally don't speak up, and are often being spoken on behalf of other members in the community, would be great.

VISIONS AND DREAMS VERBATIM



“

So, the ideal school food program is **free and universal with the possibility to opt-out** with a lot of education for the children on food literacy. Not just education but ultimately, in the long run, if something universal is put in place, there should also be **participating in making their food** by doing the prep and cleanup.

”

“

Interestingly, **my son won't participate in the breakfast program, because he feels like it's a charity** and he shouldn't be pitted against someone else. He accesses the backpack program because we go and volunteer and he is okay with that. So, if there was some way to make it more community-oriented, everyone doing some part or doing what they can it would be helpful.

”

“

Money isn't the only reason parents need the school food program; it is more than that. **It's about convenience for parents.** There is so much stigma around food and food access **so let's get rid of this stigma** by taking (it) off the plates of parents.

”

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