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October 24th, 2022

**VIA E-MAIL**

**Re: A universal school food system at every public school in BC**

Dear Honourable Premier John Horgan, Minister Whiteside, Minister Popham, Minister Dix, Minister Simons, Minister Kahlon, Minister Heyman, and Minister Robinson,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this letter from the Single Mothers' Alliance in support of a universal school food system for British Columbia. The Single Mothers' Alliance is a community-based organization that carries out research and advocacy to achieve public policy solutions that end family poverty in BC. As a member of the BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, we are eager to express our strong support for the Coalition's excellent policy proposal. We support the funding and implementation of a universally accessible school food system within the Ministry of Education that guarantees free and healthy meals every day for every child and youth in a BC public elementary and

high school. We recommend that the design and implementation of a universal school food system reflect the eight principles proposed by the BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food.

Through June 2022, the Single Mothers' Alliance, in collaboration with the BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food and Food Secure Canada, conducted research to impact policy development around universal school food. SMA is happy to share our research findings with you today in support of the Coalition's proposal.

Our focus groups engaged low-income families, most of them led by female lone caregivers with children and youth attending inner-city designated schools in the City of Vancouver, and some parents in rural and remote areas of BC. Participants included parents whose families experience food insecurity and already access existing school food programs, as well as those who struggle to access needed programs. We asked them to tell us what was and was not working, what an ideal school food system would look like for them, and what they valued most about school food. Their insights and experiences have brought us to the recommendations we are making today.

### **A universal school food system to level the playing field for children and youth**

Parents expressed that they value food provided by schools as it reduces food insecurity for children, youth, and families. Parents advocated for the creation of an opt-out rather than an opt-in universally accessible and inclusive system for BC. The low-income parents we heard from shared that there are layers of stigma and shame that children and families face when accessing existing 'targeted' programs, or subsidy options within fee-based food programs.

We heard about children and youth who refuse to enroll due to fear of judgment and ridicule from their peers, and parents who find applications for charitable subsidies humiliating. We heard from parents that the administration of fee subsidies within fee-based programs often operates without transparency, clarity, or fairness when it comes to distribution and access, with unclear enrollment criteria and sign-up procedures. Targeted subsidies and charitable school food programs deepen and reinforce a two-tier treatment of families within our public education system. A universally accessible school food system would overcome this.

### **An opportunity to leave no child or youth behind**

We heard that some existing programs are not offered consistently and there is much variation from school to school. Programs may be intermittent, and there are a limited number of food programs available in high school. Parents shared about having to switch their children to a new elementary school with a food program

when a needed program shut down at their existing school and expressed worry about increased food insecurity when their children move to high school.

Our research revealed that BC's current piecemeal funding with ad hoc implementation creates a patchwork of programs that has an opportunity to evolve regarding accountability, fairness, and transparency in access and distribution. Parents shared a strong vision for a system that guarantees access to healthy meals for all children and youth in school regardless of their socioeconomic status; a system that surpasses the stigma of subsidy programs for 'needy families' and instead guarantees equitable and consistent access and availability to every child and youth in public school.

### **A chance to nourish all children and youth with healthy meals while learning**

On the topic of what could be improved, parents stressed the importance of healthy meals to support learning and development as a core value. Existing school food programs do not always incorporate healthy options and parents expressed frustration with this. We heard much from parents who feel the charitable food programs at their schools are underfunded and do not provide the standard of healthy food they wish for. Parents shared their fear that the continuance of targeted charitable programs at schools with higher numbers of families experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage would mean the provision of lower-grade food to some needy schools, and better food at schools with the means to provide better programs, perpetuating inequitable access to quality food at schools. Their experiences and insight reinforce the necessity of a fully universal system that is free for all. We would like to express our support for the continued implementation of the healthy school food guidelines.

### **A chance to foster decolonizing food literacy**

Many Indigenous participants emphasized that teaching about Indigenous food and its relationship to land and water could be an important aspect of decolonizing learning in the curriculum. The provision of Indigenous-determined food and programs for Indigenous students is crucial within a universal school food system.

### **Time gained and money in the pocketbook for families hit by inflation**

Lunch grocery foods are expensive, food costs are skyrocketing, and the time to prepare packed lunches every day is a drain on BC's families. Another key value stressed by both low-income parents and parents of greater means is the time and money a universal school food system saves for parents and caregivers.

### **A province-wide end to wasteful single-use plastic lunch packaging**

Parents brought to our attention that the specially packaged lunch foods families buy out of convenience are costly and wasteful, not to mention unhealthy. In line with CleanBC and climate change mitigation mandates in BC, parents emphasized

that a universal school food system can reduce plastic waste associated with single-use plastic packaging of many disposable lunch items.

**Parental input to reflect the socioeconomic diversity of BC's families**

Parents emphasized the value of consultation that engages a diversity of parents in the school community who may not have the time or resources to participate in formal Parent Advisory Councils and the importance of socioeconomic diversity in parent engagement efforts to both build and sustain a universal school food system for BC.

**A diversity of green jobs for BC in a time of economic recovery**

A universal school food system would create a diversity of quality, green jobs for BC, boosting local agriculture, delivery, production, food preparation, cleaning, and program administration, as well as sustainable gardening and the potential for on-site food production.

To conclude, universal school food would impact children's health, reduce inequality, and improve the quality of life for families. Inflation is hitting BC families hard and creating a universal school food system will help families save both crucial time and money, support economic recovery and food security, and ensure that all children and youth are ready to learn.

We understand that the development of a school food program for each school and district within a standardizing new pan-provincial universal school food system may take time and care and that each program would reflect the unique location of each school. Nonetheless, we strongly recommend that the system is designed to ensure equitable access and distribution to every child and youth at every public elementary and high school in the province, every day.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share our research data and resulting policy recommendations with you. Please find our full research report attached to this letter. We look forward to further dialogue about this exciting policy solution to benefit children, youth, and families in BC.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Viveca Ellis".

Executive Director  
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