



Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association

Box 2064, Suite 1804
20 Eglinton Avenue West
Toronto, Ontario M4R 1K8
T. 416.932.9460 F. 416.932.9459
ocsta@ocsta.on.ca www.ocsta.on.ca

Patrick J. Daly, *President*
Michael Bellmore, *Vice President*
Nick Milanetti, *Executive Director*

May 9, 2023

The Honourable Karina Gould
Minister of Families, Children and Social Development
249 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

The Honourable Marie-Claude Bibeau
Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food
229 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Ministers Gould and Bibeau:

Re: National Food Policy Review

Thank you for conducting a review of the federal government's National Food Policy. We appreciate the opportunity to share our thoughts and recommendations with you.

The Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA) was founded in 1930. It represents 237 elected Catholic trustees who collectively represent 29 English-language Catholic district school boards. Together, these school boards educate approximately 559,000 students from junior kindergarten to grade 12 and adults in continuing education programs in over 1,200 schools province-wide.

Inspired by the Gospel, the Mission of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association is to provide leadership, service and a provincial voice for Catholic school boards in promoting and protecting Catholic education.

National School Food Policy and Program

OCSTA supports the concept of a universal national school food policy and program for publicly funded schools with certain requirements. The program could provide a variety of benefits, including:

- Improving access to nutritious food for students, allowing all students to focus on learning in school;

- Addressing food insecurity and the resulting anxiety and mental health challenges that affect students;
- Improving the social determinants of health for marginalized communities;
- Promoting healthy eating habits, choices, and lifestyles;
- Increasing food literacy;
- Supporting local agriculture and traditions;
- Supporting a healthier and more sustainable food system; and
- Improving student achievement and well-being.

Additionally, it can also contribute to the development of a more sustainable food system by supporting local and sustainable food production.

Program Design Recommendations

OCSTA recommends that any federally supported policy/program to provide food (breakfasts, meals, snacks) must have the following minimum requirements:

- In discussion with local school boards, be available at every publicly funded Catholic school;
- Accessible;
- At no cost to the student (or their care provider), school or board;
- Offered in a manner that is stigma-free; and
- Support local food producers.

It should have these minimum requirements but also allow for operational flexibility. To ensure successful and equitable implementation of the program, funding must cover all additional costs, including administrative supports, and must be sustained throughout the life of the program. An equitable, universal, fully funded program would resolve inequities and inconsistencies, and offer a solid foundation for all students. We agree with the concept that meals must be culturally adapted and appropriate for each community.

OCSTA believes that funding allocations need to consider related capital costs. This could include new, or upgrades to, food preparation and handling areas, equipment, and related infrastructure. As you may be aware, many of our Catholic schools, including their kitchens and other programming spaces, are used by community partners outside of the regular school day. Additionally, a National School Food Policy should consider how students may need year-round access to the program including during winter and spring breaks and the summer.

The Ontario Context

We all know that poverty is a real and growing issue for many families who cannot regularly afford to make and eat daily meals and snacks that align with Canada's Food Guide. *Opportunity for All – Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy* recognizes that food insecurity, low numeracy and literacy and low youth engagement are benchmarks of the Canadian poverty crisis and directly impact a child's dignity, inclusion opportunities and health outcomes. It is also important to note food insecurity, poor eating habits, and other food-related challenges can impact children from all

socioeconomic demographics in a variety of different ways. However, we can recognize the direct relationship between healthy nutrition and academic achievement and well-being. Children who are not hungry are more prepared to learn and participate in our classrooms and co-curricular activities.

Presently in Ontario, there are a great number of nutrition programs operating in Catholic schools. Some are supported by our Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services, and Ministry of Health and its' local Public Health Units, while others are funded privately or through local non-profit agencies. Some rely on the generosity of one-off donations or with funds received in contests to operate. To take one example from one of many boards, in Kingston the 'The Food Sharing Project' is really struggling financially in keeping up with the demand of food to local schools. This need has increased so greatly coming out of the pandemic.

It is a fact that some schools have better access to resources, charitable programs, and parental support than others do, in terms of both time and funding. Boards that have established charitable programs have them set up as arms-length groups with dedicated and paid staff to coordinate and operationalize nutrition programs at a board-wide level. At the individual school level, different programs are in place that make sense for local communities. Many schools have developed breakfast, snack, and lunch program partnerships with local businesses, agencies and clubs to ensure the provision, preparation and serving of nutritious food. These are initiatives that, while essential to student health and well-being, are not always possible for schools to manage within their existing resources.

Since the schools know their students best, they are also able to customize programs to reflect the diversity of the school population in the type of food offered and community involvement. Some examples are accessible bins/baskets with free snacks near main doors and in cafeterias, as well as in all classrooms.

Partnerships with local Agencies

We suggest the government consider the many successful partnerships already in place.

In Ontario, a potential area for stronger links is between school boards and their local public health units. These two entities already connect on many relevant issues and the nutritional education component could be enhanced.

Partnerships should also consider efficient and cost-saving procurement of nutritious food and snacks. Our members noted that buying individually wrapped or single use products is much more expensive than buying larger quantities that are then split into more appropriate serving sizes and re-packaged locally.

Next Steps

Given the widespread need across Ontario, and indeed Canada, and the extraordinary diversity of approaches school boards/districts take in forming partnerships to support those in need, there is a strong need for the federal government, in partnership with provincial ministries and school

boards/districts, to commit to a National School Food Policy. Saying that, we strongly urge that any program provide sufficient local autonomy and flexibility.

A national policy would set a standard both for securing food for schools as a fundamental human right and ensuring that right is delivered consistently, sustainably, and within a context of transformative action to end poverty, improve students' health and achievement outcomes. The federal government should provide an update to all stakeholders on their proposed timelines so that information can continue to be shared about this important initiative.

We look forward to engagement with you on this important initiative for the children and youth of our country.

Yours Very Truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Daly', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Patrick J. Daly
President

cc: Ontario Minister of Education, Hon. Stephen Lecce