



The Young Canadians Roundtable on Health

PREPARED FOR

Coalition for Healthy School Food

PREPARED BY

Hiba Alyousef, Stacie Smith, Jack Chen, Mariah Burns

October 2021

Introduction

The Coalition for Healthy School Food is an organization that is striving to introduce Canada to a national food program. This will provide students across Canada equal access to the nutrition they need to support their social, cognitive and physical development and wellbeing. The objectives of the provincial focus groups conducted in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and British Columbia is to 1) understand what youth think about school food programs and 2) to understand what youth think their preferred school food program will look like; this will include understanding youths' vision for a national school food program, as well as hearing the youth perspective on how the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic has restricted access of school food programs and impacted the health and wellbeing of students. The target population for this study are youth aged 12-18 attending School in Canada. This aligns with the goals and objectives of both the Young Canadians Roundtable on Health and the Coalition for Healthy School Food. The Young Canadians Roundtable on Health, started by the Sandbox Project, gives voice to the youth for child and youth health advocacy, as well as provides opportunities for youth to participate in leadership positions within community and structural levels. Making room for youth voices and actions when advocating for youth health issues is key to providing proper solutions that will aid youth.

Summary

The Young Canadians Roundtable on Health is a network of engaged youth advocates. We know the power of young people's voices, and we know that we have the potential to be key drivers of policy change in Canada. When it comes to food security for children and youth, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened – and further exposed - Canada's inequality.

As outlined by [Food Secure Canada](#) and the [Food Policy for Canada](#), four of the Sustainable Development Goals apply to food systems in Canada: Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), Goal 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption) and Goal 13 (Climate Action). At this time of major societal change brought on by the pandemic, we see a vital opportunity for youth to help shape Canada's food policy and contribute to a more equal Canada.

This project allowed us to hold conversations with youth in British Columbia, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick about their experiences with school food, and how a national school food program would impact their lives. Through this project, we hope we can make an important contribution by amplifying the voices of youth: both their experiences and their ideas for how Canada can deliver the best school food programs. The Young Canadians Roundtable on Health is grateful for this opportunity to bring this traditionally underrepresented group to the food policy discussion table.

Nova Scotia

The Nova Scotia (NS) focus group for the Coalition for Healthy School Food (CHSF) took place on August 11th and consisted of 4 youth participants. The age of the participants ranged from ages 12 to 18 years, coming from the following communities: Bridgetown, Dartmouth, Glace Bay, and Amherst. This group had a lower number of participants, compared to the British Columbia (BC) focus group.

Key takeaways from the focus group can be broken down into three sections being: 1. current school food programs, 2. the influences of COVID-19 on current school food programs and, 3. the future of school food programs.

Current School Food Programs

Focus groups participants collectively experienced breakfast and lunch programs in both middle school, and elementary school. The breakfast programs offered some breakfast food, such as fruit and cereal, with food portions being small and prices being

high for both breakfast and lunch programming. Allergies and dietary restrictions were the main contributor to why the prices were higher for lunch programming.

The Influences of COVID-19

Focus group participants emphasized the negative effect COVID-19 has had and continues to have on pre-existing food programs. Students were not able to make their own food and meals; there was no opportunity to customize the food they were eating as they were before the pandemic. The food served was also prepackaged more often, smaller in portion size and less healthy. Finally, the cafeteria closure forced students to eat outside because of the pandemic, even if the weather was not ideal.

The future of school food programs

In the future, a need for a program that does not exclude individuals who require its services is crucial. The group members recommend a diverse option of food to account for individual restrictions, religious restrictions and allergies. The youth also suggested that they would like to be involved in the assistance of preparing the school meals. This would allow them to learn basic cooking skills, as well as learn how to live a healthy lifestyle by being educated on healthy eating options and ideas. The group members all agreed there should be a system for students to provide feedback on the food programs. As a result, their voices would be amplified, and those with lived experiences could provide suggestions for services that would have a lasting impact.

Throughout the NS focus group, there were common themes of allowing students to assist in the preparation of school means, revamping the foods offered within the school food programs and the amplification of student's voices. Ultimately, the school food programs in NS have room for improvement as they do not hit Goal 2 (Zero hunger), Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), Goal 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption) and Goal 13 (Climate Action) of the SDG goals. The lack of stability in the food services offered at schools paired with the failure to teach students how to prepare basic healthy, nutritious meals are contributing factors that create barriers for Canada in reaching these SDG goals.

British Columbia

The British Columbia (BC) focus group for the Coalition for Health School Food (CHSF) was held August 12th, 2021, consisting of approximately 14 participants. Ages of participants ranged from 12 to 18 years old. This focus group had high participation compared to the groups in Nova Scotia (NS) and New Brunswick (NB). The reasons for the differences in participation is unclear but is an important factor to emphasize.

Key takeaways from the focus group can be broken down into three sections being: 1. current school food programs, 2. the influences of COVID-19 on current school food programs and, 3. the future of school food programs.

Current School Food Programs

Focus groups participants collectively experienced breakfast and lunch programs in both middle school, and elementary school. The breakfast programs offered basic breakfast foods like bagels, toast and cereal and had no restrictions on attendance. Some students emphasized the lack of accommodating food options for lunch and breakfast programs. For example, some lunch programs required a payment to receive food, therefore if a student could not afford the fee, they would not receive lunch.

The Influences of COVID-19

Focus group members emphasized the negative effect COVID-19 has had and continues to have on pre-existing school food programs. Key barriers mentioned amongst the group are the closures of school cafeterias and changes of class-times. The cafeteria closures made some students feel like they lost a main food source, and consequently experienced distress knowing they may lose access to consistent meals. For some students, school offered programs may be the only guaranteed time where they will have access to food. Additionally, the group highlights how class times adaptations created to follow COVID restrictions seemed based on the assumption that everyone had access to food because there were no food services offered. Therefore, some youth mentioned feeling like they would go hungry if they had forgotten food or forgotten to eat.

The future of school food programs

In the future, a need for a program that does not ostracize individuals who require its services is pertinent. The group members recommend a diverse option of food to account for individual restrictions, religious restrictions and allergies. The youth also suggested the integration of educational components into school food programs. The program should include teachings about seeds and growing plants as well as farm to table educational aspects to eliminate the fog between farming and how the food gets to the plate. Alongside the educational factors should be the integration of local food and local Indigenous food practices. To execute these suggestions, some youths suggest an increase in fundraising to provide food insecure individual's access to nutritious food and the ability to create healthier menus. The group members all agreed there should be a system for students to provide feedback on the food programs. As a result, their voices would be amplified, and those with lived experiences could provide suggestions for services that would have a lasting impact.

Throughout the BC focus group, there were common themes of incorporating educational components, revamping the foods offered within the school food programs and the amplification of student's voices. Ultimately, the school food programs in BC have room for improvement as they do not hit Goal 2 (Zero hunger), Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), Goal 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption) and Goal 13 (Climate Action) of the SDG goals. The lack of stability in the food services offered at schools paired with the failure to teach students about the linkages between farming and food production are contributing factors that create barriers for Canada in reaching these SDG goals.

New Brunswick

The New Brunswick (NB) focus group for the Coalition for Healthy School Food (CHSF) was held on September 22nd, 2021, consisting of 1 participant. The participant is in her sophomore year of high school. This focus group had lower participation compared to the groups in Nova Scotia (NS) and British Columbia (BC). The reasons for the differences in participation are unclear but are an important factor to emphasize.

Key takeaways from the focus group can be broken down into three sections being:

1. Current school food programs in NB
2. The influences of COVID-19 on current school food programs
3. Future recommendation of school food programs in NB

Current School Food Programs

Focus group participants experienced lunch programs in both middle school and high school. The lunch program offers heavily processed food that lacks the necessary nutrition to support productive learning and playing in school. According to the participant, the specific food program she was a part of distributed lunch first for the middle schoolers during the lunch break. Thus, high schoolers often were left with little to no food and the leftovers from the middle schoolers. Furthermore, the participant mentioned that some food programs she had experienced only offer food to students with food insecurity. Without sufficient education on this topic in the curriculum, it might create stigmatization around students receiving the food.

The Influences of COVID-19

Focus group members emphasized the negative effect COVID-19 has had and continues to have on pre-existing school food programs. Key barriers mentioned amongst the group are the closures of school cafeterias and changes in class times. The cafeteria closures made some students feel like they lost the main food source and consequently experienced distress, knowing they may lose access to consistent meals. For some students, school offered programs may be the only guaranteed time where they will have access to food. Our participant also mentioned the loss of communal garden and cooking space due to the lockdown and the exacerbation of food insecurity in vulnerable communities.

The future of school food programs

We see a lot of common suggestions for how to improve the future of our school food programs across participants in different provinces. In the future, a need for a program that does not ostracize individuals who require its services is pertinent. The group members recommend a diverse option of fresh and nutritious food to account for individual restrictions, cultural and religious practices, and allergies. The youth also suggested the integration of educational components into school food programs that teach the progress of farm to table. Alongside the educational factors should be the integration of local food and local Indigenous food practices. Strength comes in unity; thus, our participant suggests an increased involvement with individuals who are passionate about the issue of food insecurity with community stakeholders to open the dialogue about how we can improve upon the current status quo.

Throughout the NB focus group, there were common themes of ensuring affordable and accessible access to the food program for the community, revamping the foods offered within the school food programs and the amplification of students' voices. Ultimately, the school food programs in NB have room for improvement as they do not hit Goal 2 (Zero hunger), Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), Goal 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption) and Goal 13 (Climate Action) of the SDG goals. The lack of stability in the food services offered at schools, paired with the failure to teach students about the linkages between farming and food production are contributing factors that create barriers for Canada in reaching these SDG goals.

Conclusion

Through this project, we hope we can make an important contribution by amplifying the voices of youth: both their experiences and their ideas for how Canada can deliver the best school food programs. We sincerely hope the Federal Government acts on their commitment to implement this much needed program. The Young Canadians Roundtable on Health is grateful for this opportunity to bring this traditionally underrepresented group to the food policy discussion table.