

Policy Critique Essay: Food Assistance Programs in Schools

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SOCS74010: Social Policy and Engaged Citizenship

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November 11th, 2025

Everyone needs to eat, despite that food insecurity remains a major issue plaguing our country. About 2.3 million Ontarians (16% of the population) face some form of food insecurity, which also equates to one in every five children (Public Health Ontario, 2023, para. 3). It is to be expected that when an issue such as this runs so deeply into our population that the government would introduce some measures to mitigate it. With one in five children facing food insecurity (Public Health Ontario, 2023, para. 3), you might expect the government to invest in food supports in the places children spend most of their time, at school, but do they? The short answer is kind of, but no government does it particularly well.

Why should we care? People are starving everywhere. Why focus on children in school? While hunger is obviously a problem for people of all ages, it presents extra risks for children. A lack of access to food leads to an increased risk for cognitive and developmental delays as well as increased reports of behavioural problems (McKay et al., 2025, pp. 1-2). Furthermore, food insecurity typically leads to an increased reliance on unhealthy “convenience foods”, which leads to worse health outcomes, higher rates of obesity, and less physical activity in children as young as kindergarten-aged. Research also indicates that any level of food insecurity leads to worse learning outcomes. Initial math scores at the beginning of school are lower than those of their fully food secure peers, and the increase in math scores over the course of the school year is lower than that of their fully food secure peers (Winicki & Jemison, 2003, pp. 151, 154). Food assistance can take many forms, with many people's first thoughts being community-based programs, such as food banks and soup kitchens. While these programs can help, they are largely ineffective at addressing food insecurity.

Furthermore, parents in food-insecure families are more likely to skip meals to allow their children to eat; thus, any program that aims to ensure food-insecure children are fed must target the children, allowing the parents to not have to skip said meals just to ensure their children are fed (McKay et al., 2025, p. 2).

Food assistance in schools is an area of policy handled by every level of government. The school boards of the Waterloo region represent the municipal government and have their own food assistance program. Although the school boards are not the ones who deliver the programs, they instead pay outside organizations to deliver food. The Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) officially has three food assistance partners: Nutrition for Learning (N4L), the May Court Club of Kitchener-Waterloo, and Food4Kids Waterloo. N4L and May Court Club need no registration and deliver boxes of food to schools throughout the region. N4L delivers food on a weekly basis, while the May Court Club delivers in “emergency scenarios” based on requests from the school. Food4Kids Waterloo is a registration-based program that provides food for food-insecure children during weekends and when school is on break (WRDSB, 2024, para. 1-13). The Waterloo Catholic District School Board also makes use of N4L (WCDSB Admin, 2024, para. 1-3).

The provincial government also has a food assistance program, mostly. The Ontario government operates the Student Nutrition Program and the First Nations Student Nutrition Program (for brevity, both will be referred to collectively as the SNP). This program, funded to the tune of \$37.5 million, has served roughly 800,000 students across Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2025b, para. 1). The SNP does not distribute food directly but instead contracts out the work to community partners to deliver the

food (Government of Ontario, 2020, para. 1-3). The Waterloo region falls under the jurisdiction of SNP Central Ontario, with the YMCA of Three Rivers serving as the lead organization (Government of Ontario, 2020, para. 9). Although the YMCA acts as the “lead organization,” they are not the main distributor of food for Waterloo schools. They simply act as the “leaders” of the program, and support local community partners (CWR Student Nutrition Programs, 2022a, para. 1). The community partner that receives the most support from the SNP here is the Waterloo region is none other than N4L (CWR Student Nutrition Programs, 2022b, para. 4).

The federal government has their own program similar to the SNP, the National School Food Program (NSFP). The NSFP was introduced to the tune of one billion dollars in 2024 and seeks to support preexisting and newly created food assistance programs (Stechyson, 2024, para. 1, 5, 11-12). The program was made permanent with the latest budget introduced by the government, and while good, it is important to note that the budget only guarantees continued funding, which leaves some communities with far less than others (Wong, 2025, para. 1-6).

The primary issue with food assistance in Canada is that it is a patchwork system that, in some places, provides high-quality, full meals, while others receive nothing at all. Take Toronto, for example, some schools in Etobicoke have scraped together enough funds to run before-school breakfast clubs for anyone who wants them. However, there is not enough funding to run this program in every Etobicoke school, let alone every Toronto school. Furthermore, the funding currently received is insufficient to operate the breakfast club in the schools where it is implemented, as it is kept afloat by food banks and grocers willing to provide donations and discounts (Wong, 2025, para. 1-6). Here in

KW, the situation is not much better. N4L and the May Court Club may provide food for schools, but they do not provide meals for schools. They provide emergency boxes (WRDSB, 2024, para. 1-3), while this will provide students with something, it is not a replacement for a warm breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

There is also a general lack of follow-up with these programs. While various governments are quick to tout the number of people accessing their programs, they rarely dig any deeper and provide very few concrete ways they seek to increase access to fulfilling meals. When the Government of Ontario (2025b) announced that they were increasing funding to the SNP, they pointed to how their plan would feed 800,000 students and deliver over 140 million meals across the province (para. 1). As well, the Government of Canada (2024) points out the urgency of the need for a school food assistance program in this country (para. 20). While these are admirable policies neither mention how patchwork the systems they created are. The Government of Ontario makes no mention of how those 140 million meals do not look the same from school to school (Wong, 2025, para. 1-6), and while the Government of Canada states it is urgent to provide a school food assistance program, they do not provide much of a plan to establish these assistance programs aside from simply dumping over 200 million dollars a year into the provinces (Wong, 2025, table. 1). A road map like the EYCC Service Plan created by the Region of Waterloo would be ideal. The EYCC Service Plan does not shy away from the issues faced by both parents and early learning centres in the Waterloo region, and it also provides a concrete and realistic roadmap for addressing those issues (Region of Waterloo, 2022, pp. 71-78). If the Canadian and Ontarian

governments are as dedicated to addressing food insecurity as they say they are, then they need to provide their own service plan.

So then, how can the patchwork system be fixed, and food assistance be more equally distributed across the province? To improve the food assistance programs, the government should move to emulate the free school lunch program recently established by the Minnesota government. In 2023, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz signed a bill into law guaranteeing free school meals to children in Minnesota schools, including every public school and over 300 private and charter schools (Duxter & Swanson, 2024, para. 8-10). Families in Minnesota now save, on average, \$1,000 per child, and the state saw a 40% increase in the number of children eating breakfast before class (Cummings, 2025, para. 2-3). The state spends around \$267 million per year to feed its students (Duxter & Swanson, 2024, para. 5). Minnesota has about a third of the population of Ontario (5.7 million people for Minnesota (Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, 2021, para. 15) compared to 16.2 million for Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2025a, para. 1)) if we assume a flat increase of cost it would cost the Ontario government approximately \$800 million to implement a province wide school lunch program, a far cry from the ~37 million being spent now (Government of Ontario, 2025b, para. 1). While this may seem expensive, it is necessary to address the issue. Despite costing \$80 million over budget (Duxter & Swanson, 2024, para. 1), the Minnesotan system has been fiercely defended by schools and parents alike for its cost for families and success at ensuring no child goes hungry (Cummings, 2025, para.1-4).

Everyone needs to eat, despite that food insecurity remains a major issue plaguing our country. Our governments have plans to address these issues, but these

plans are clearly insufficient and lack concrete roadmaps for ensuring that no child goes hungry. It is recommended that, for the sake of our children and our families, Ontario, and Canada as a whole, seek to implement a free-at-point-of-service school lunch program.

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