

Promoting Healthy School Food Environments: A Universal School Food Strategy for Alberta

March 2016

Issue:

Creating healthy food environments for all Albertans remains a significant challenge. Many young Albertans do not have consistent access to healthy food and many of the settings where children spend their time offer foods that are energy-dense and nutrient poor (1). Consequently, childhood overweight and obesity is a significant problem in our province and many Canadian children are not eating the recommended number of fruits and vegetables each day (2, 3). In addition to these population health issues, Alberta faces wider challenges such as increasing corporate control of the food system (4).

Ensuring all Albertans have access to healthy food requires systemic and comprehensive approaches that consider ecological, social, educational, and economic components (5). Researchers assert that public institutions, such as schools, can play a role in this comprehensive approach by creating environments that support healthy eating habits among young people (5, 6). To date, many schools across Alberta have implemented programs, policies, and initiatives to improve the school food environment. However, these activities are often ad-hoc, voluntary in nature, and/or lacking sustainable funding (7). As a result, the effectiveness of such activities varies, and many students across Alberta are not benefitting.

To address gaps in school food policies, programs, and initiatives across the province, the Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention (APCCP) and Alberta Food Matters (AFM) are calling for the development of a Universal School Food Strategy (USFS) for Alberta. Through a USFS, the provincial government should:

- Make healthy meals and/or snacks and beverages available to all school-aged children (K-12)
- Provide comprehensive food education, including student involvement in growing and preparing food
- Eliminate unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children in schools
- Foster relationships between schools and local food producers, and consider the development of local food procurement policies when feasible
- Monitor and evaluate school food policies and initiatives across Alberta

A USFS should aim to benefit all K-12 students across Alberta and build on evidence-based initiatives already in place within Alberta schools. With that said, a USFS must be developed with the recognition that schools have different assets and experience different obstacles to promoting healthy school food. Thus, levels of support and strategies to ensure access to healthy school food should be tailored to meet these diverse needs (5). Development and implementation of a USFS could follow an incremental approach and should involve engagement across the education, health, and agriculture sectors.

Benefits to Taking Action:

- The World Health Organization has identified schools as an important setting for global action to promote public health and end childhood obesity (8). Indeed, the World Health Organization's 2016 Final Report of the Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity recommends that settings such as schools work to create healthy food environments as part of a comprehensive approach to improve young people's intake of healthy food and reduce their intake of unhealthy foods (9).
- School food policies and initiatives, such as nutrition guidelines and fruit and vegetables subscription programs, have demonstrated positive impacts on students' dietary intake of fruit and vegetables, particularly when paired with an educational component (10). In addition, connecting schools to local food through initiatives like Farm to School may have a number of positive benefits, such as improving fruit and vegetable consumption and increasing knowledge about food, growing and agriculture, as well as building community connections with local producers (11).

- Providing access to healthy food in school settings through meal and snack programs can support student performance at school. Research suggests that the provision of school breakfast can have a positive impact on student learning outcomes (12-14) and that diet quality is important to academic performance (15). If implemented, initiatives such as meal and snack programs should be universally available to all students at the school level to prevent the stigma that can arise from targeting participation based on socio-economic status (16).
- Food and beverage marketing has a significant influence on children's food and beverage preferences and consumption (17-19). Removing the influence of unhealthy food and beverage marketing in settings such as schools (i.e. score boards, sponsorships) can support healthy eating patterns in children and may contribute to reduced obesity risk over time (20).
- Increasing the proportion of locally grown food available in school settings has the potential to create new markets for farmers (21) and reduce the environmental impact of food production (22). It may also help to reduce the distance food travels from where it is produced to where it is consumed (23).
- Monitoring and evaluation of school food policies and initiatives in Alberta is essential to gauge implementation of provincial strategies for healthy diets and their impacts on population-level eating behaviours and body weights (24).

Considerations:

- Development of a USFS could support school food initiatives already in place across Alberta. During the 2014/2015 school year, the APCCP surveyed school principals to understand their perceptions of the school food environment. The survey was sent to 1350 principals across Alberta and 363 principals completed the survey (27% response rate). Findings from this survey suggest that while many schools across Alberta have taken significant steps to promote healthy school food and beverages, schools may require additional resources and financial support in this area (7). For example, 50% of survey respondents indicated that long-term funding is not available for food programs and/or initiatives at their school and 62% of survey respondents indicated that hunger relief in their school is addressed through the provision of emergency food by teachers (7).
- There is public and policy-influencer support for action to promote healthy school food environments in Alberta. According to a 2014 survey administered to 1,200 people in Alberta, the majority of respondents support mandating policies for school nutrition programs (92%), as well as prohibiting advertising and the promotion of unhealthy food and beverages to children under the age of 16 (75%) (25). Further, a 2014 survey of policy-influencers indicates that 93% support mandating policies for school nutrition programs, 87% support mandating priority space for healthy foods and beverages in schools, and 88% support restricting the sale of sugar-sweetened beverages in schools (25).
- Cost is a barrier to the implementation of a USFS. In recent years, many schools across Canada have experienced inadequate funding, which has, consequently, provided opportunities for the private sector to market unhealthy food in school settings (26). To fund a USFS, the Government of Alberta is encouraged to implement a levy on sugary drinks in the province. Sugary drinks offer no nutritional benefit and their consumption is linked to serious health risks (27, 28). Considering this, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, Dietitians of Canada, and the Canadian Senate have put forward recommendations for a tax on sugary drinks (3, 29, 30). Research indicates that a national 50 cent per litre levy on sugary drinks could generate up to \$1.8 billion in revenue each year (27, 28), which amounts to approximately \$158 million annually for the province of Alberta, accounting for a 20% decrease in consumption due to taxation.
- Investing in prevention makes economic sense. Research indicates that a \$1 investment in prevention can result in \$4-5 cost savings (31).

APCCP Priorities for Action:

- Advocate for healthier food environments in school settings across Alberta and support the call for a Universal School Food Strategy.
- Advocate for a 50 cent per liter levy on sugar-sweetened beverages to fund school health promotion initiatives.

Next Steps:

- The APCCP will continue discussions with appropriate provincial government health, education, and agriculture officials to determine the appetite for and perceived feasibility of a Universal School Food Strategy for Alberta.

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