



School Food and the Sustainable Development Goals: A pathway to meeting multiple goals and targets



Credit: OCIC/Allan Lissner in partnership with Eel Ground First Nation and Canadian Feed The Children

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Table of contents

1. Introduction	4
The Sustainable Development Goals	4
Paper outline	5
2. Food justice lens on the SDG framework and essential Canadian context	6
Intersectional critiques	6
Literature review snapshot	6
Residential schools - essential Canadian context	8
3. Relevance of school food programs to all the SDGs	9
Considering both goals and targets	9
Proposing a hierarchy of impact	10
How school food programs are meeting 14 specific SDG targets	11
Indirect impact on remaining 8 goals	19
4. Conclusion	21
Coalition for Healthy School Food and the current moment	21
Guiding principles	22
5. References	25
Intersectional critiques	25
Residential schools - essential Canadian context	26
Evidence base	26

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals

Canada remains one of the few industrialized countries without a national school food program. Canada's current patchwork of school food programming reaches only a small percentage of over 5 million students. Only policy coming from the federal government can ensure healthy food for all Canadian school children. In 2019 in the Budget and in the new [Food Policy for Canada](#) the federal government undertook to work towards a national program. [Food Secure Canada](#) (FSC), and the [Coalition for Healthy School Food](#) (CHSF) which it hosts, advocate for a universal healthy school food program. This paper looks at school food in Canada in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Canada, along with all other member states of the United Nations, is committed to meeting the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Launched in 2015, the SDGs bring together rich, middle-income and poorer countries and provide a roadmap to advance the health of people and the planet. Each goal is accompanied by associated measurable targets. The goals address social, economic and environmental challenges and are designed to be interlinked and indivisible to enable transformative change. However, since the goals are so wide-ranging and were negotiated so that every country could agree

to them, they will be implemented differently in each country depending on context and which goals each country prioritizes.

This paper is an initial scoping of how well-designed school food programs can contribute to all 17 SDGs. It has been developed to inform future thinking and conversations on school food and the SDGs and to better enable policymakers and practitioners in Canada to:

- Understand how different school food programs can help advance the SDGs;
- Advocate for investments in comprehensive school food initiatives; and
- Design school food programs so that they move forward the multiple economic, social, environmental and health objectives of the SDGs.

This paper sets out how “well-designed” school food programs can advance multiple SDGs and their associated targets. By “well-designed”, we mean programs aimed at achieving measurable economic, social, environmental, equitable, cultural or other gains. The Coalition for Healthy School Food has articulated a set of [guiding principles](#) based on best practices that can ensure school food programs live up to their full potential. In future research, the Coalition

will more fully explore the synergies and trade-offs between different school food programs and funding models, as well as the policy choices that would offer maximum impact towards different, specific targets.

Meeting the SDGs is a non-partisan, time-bound Canadian commitment. We have less

than 10 years to meet these goals. Food Secure Canada is working with the Coalition for Healthy School Food to develop concrete policy and program recommendations for a national healthy school food program. Outlining how such a program would help Canada to meet its SDG commitments is part of this work.



Photo credit: Fresh Roots

Paper outline

Food Secure Canada is committed to embedding an anti-racist and decolonising lens in all of its work, and these perspectives are not explicit in the SDG framework. Therefore, this analysis begins with a snapshot of the global critiques of the SDGs from an anti-racist and decolonising lens as well as other intersectional perspectives. This paper acknowledges the shameful history and ongoing impact of residential schools in Canada and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and highlights lessons from Indigenous-led school food programs.

This paper then articulates the potential for school food programs in Canada to contribute directly or indirectly to meeting all of the 17

SDGs. It highlights evidence and examples of how well-designed school food programs can help Canada directly achieve 9 of the SDGs and 14 of their associated targets. The evidence used is drawn from Canadian school food programs, best practices in other countries and international research.

This paper concludes by recommending that Canada advance its commitment to develop a national school food program in line with the Coalition for Healthy School Food's [guiding principles](#) so as to develop a well-designed program for Canada and advance its SDG commitments.

Full references are available at the end of the paper.

2. Food justice lens on the SDG framework and essential Canadian context

Intersectional critiques

Since the 17 SDGs were first adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, organizations across the globe have highlighted the need for the goals to be analysed and implemented using the principles of reconciliation, decolonization, racial justice and broader food justice. The SDG framework has also been critiqued from other perspectives, including de-growth, ecological and feminist perspectives. The SDG framework has also been criticized over its lack of integration of a human rights approach to food (Pol & Schuftan, 2016) and the focus on market-based interventions rather than an overall restructuring of systems that created the need for the SDGs in the first place.

Before moving to a detailed analysis of school food and the SDGs, this paper will give a snapshot of these critiques. This will continue to be an ongoing journey for FSC, as well as everyone else applying the SDGs, to understand these critiques and how they apply to food systems work that is linked to the SDGs.



Literature review snapshot

The following offers a snapshot and summary of an ongoing literature review about the SDGs and intersectional critiques that has informed this paper:

Praise:

- Broadly, the SDGs have been praised for their strategic relevance in bringing about transformative change towards sustainability (Struckmann, 2018), for including civil society groups during the development phase, and for being applicable to all countries. This is unlike the more colonially framed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that preceded the SDGs and only applied to the “Global South” or low and middle-income countries). The SDGs have also been praised for recognizing systemic issues (Consortium on Gender, Security, and Human Rights, 2017).
- The SDGs have been praised for their intersectional dimensions towards development, bringing together many social, and environmental issues. For example, the SDGs have been praised for having a standalone goal dedicated to addressing gender and women’s rights issues, (Consortium on Gender, Security, and Human Rights, 2017).
- The goals have been praised for

representing “an opportunity to eliminate poverty and improve the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples through action on the social determinants of health, while proactively curbing some of the negative impacts of globalization on the planet for future generations” (Odulaja & Halesth, 2018).

Criticisms:

- The language used in the Goals has been considered by some as being watered down, abstract, or politically cautious and thus ineffective and an impediment to any real change (Consortium on Gender, Security, and Human Rights, 2017; Sengupta, 2018).
- One review criticized the framing of poverty as a “narrow, income-based, individualistic perspective” rather than a human rights issue (Odulaja & Halesth, 2018).
- Other criticisms have included the need for standalone goals for Indigenous Peoples and the silence of the agenda on specific Indigenous issues (Odulaja & Halesth, 2018) and an individual rather than community focus.

- There is concern about how the goals are “disturbingly silent about eradicating the causes and effects of racism and racial/ethnic discrimination” and that “racism and racial/ethnic discrimination will continue to function as structural and systemic barriers to sustainable development if they are not addressed” (Integrating the Elimination of Inequalities due to Racism into the Framework of the UN Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda: 1 Recommendations from Civil Society, 2015).
- The SDGs have been criticized for their prioritization of the economy over the environment. The goals aim to protect the environment while maintaining economic growth for private actors “the SDGs rely mainly on those institutions responsible for unsustainable resource use, and partly propose measures that even reinforce current trends towards less sustainability” (Eisenmenger, et al., 2020). This takes place as opposed to “seeking redistribution of gross global and national inequalities in wealth and income” (Consortium on Gender, Security, and Human Rights, 2017).



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Residential schools – essential Canadian context

School food in Canada cannot be mentioned without centering the shameful history and role of food in the residential school system. For more than 100 years, ending only in 1996 when the last school closed, the residential school system worked towards the “cultural genocide ... of Aboriginal peoples” as determined by the 2015 Report of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) (TRC). Owen (2015), summarized evidence from the TRC on how food was used as a weapon in the residential school system. Residential schools explicitly tried to break children’s love of traditional foods and tried to substitute western foods. Food provided was not sufficient for the developmental and nutritional needs of children. Many children were left sick and starving from the foods they had to eat and some had to resort to (justifiable) theft or illicit favours to prevent imminent starvation. Nutritional experiments were also carried out on children in the residential system. For those who survived the residential school system, the system also led to a long-term loss and unfamiliarity with traditional foods and food gathering practice as a result of the displacement and trauma.

Accordingly, a national school food program must not only diligently ensure the mistakes of the past are not repeated, but recognise Indigenous food sovereignty, and be a pathway of reconciliation for First Nations, Métis and Inuit children, on and off reserve.

The Canadian Federal Government (the SDGs signatory), as opposed to Provincial and Territorial governments, is directly responsible for financing on-reserve First Nations services including education and health. Since 2016, [Jordan’s Principle](#) - a child-first needs based principle - provides the legal basis for all First Nations children to have equitable access to government services that promote their health and well-being.

Currently there are many school food initiatives that promote Indigenous food sovereignty being operated by Indigenous communities. At the *Cultivating Change* event in November 2020 the session on [Lessons from Indigenous led school food programs](#) was an opportunity to learn about some of them. There is a universal nutrition service to provide students with good food (including traditional foods) across 14 First Nations in the Yukon financed through Jordan’s Principle (Goodridge, 2020). Natoaganeg School, Eel Ground First Nation, New Brunswick, runs a program Kelulk Mijipjewey - We Eat Good Food, that provides students not only with good food but also comprehensive food related education such as preparing and serving food, and tending school gardens (Goodridge, 2020). These initiatives among others have been led by Indigenous peoples and are informed by the traumas of residential school survivors. Any national school food program in Canada should

support Indigenous food sovereignty over the operation of school food programs and provide Indigenous communities with the resources needed to lead their own food programs.

3. Relevance of school food programs to all the SDGs

Considering both goals and targets

In Canada, the Coalition for Healthy School Food, other civil society advocates, practitioners and academics have made compelling [evidence-based](#) arguments for increasing investment in school food programming. However, in Canada there has not been much public analysis of how school food programs could advance its progress towards meeting the SDGs. This paper begins to close this gap by mapping the benefits of school food programs to the goals and a selection of relevant targets.

Whilst taking into consideration the robust critiques of the framework, the goals themselves and their targets can offer useful high-level and ambitious policy direction as well as more specific, measurable outcomes to track progress towards meeting the goals. Therefore, this paper considers the relevance of school food programs to individual targets as well as goals.

The preamble of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) explains that the SDGs are intended to be “*integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of*

sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental.” This recognises that the goals cannot be attained individually or in isolation. This is a powerful concept that resonates strongly with an intervention like school food that is inherently multi-dimensional.



Proposing a hierarchy of impact

This paper's analysis began with a survey of all 17 goals and 169 targets to which school food programs in Canada might contribute. The authors then reviewed the evidence of the benefits of school food programs and concluded that school food programs have the potential to contribute either directly or indirectly to targets related to **all** of the SDGs.

The evidence suggests that school food programs can be a highly relevant and direct intervention to achieve 9 goals and 14 of their associated targets. The goals can contribute and less directly but still meaningfully to the remaining 8 goals.

Looking first at the 9 goals, school food programs can directly contribute to meeting Goal 1 (No poverty), Goal 2 (Zero hunger), Goal 3 (Good health and well-being), Goal 4 (Quality education), Goal 5 (Gender equality), Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth), Goal 10 (Reduced inequalities), Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production) and Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). The sections below detail how well-designed school food programs can achieve these goals and help to meet specific relevant targets.

School Food Programs are directly relevant to meeting nine Sustainable Development Goals



and indirectly relevant to meeting the remaining eight Goals



How school food programs are meeting 14 specific SDG targets

This section describes the direct impacts that current Canadian and global school food programs have on meeting 14 of the 169 SDG global targets, associated with the 9 directly relevant goals listed above. The summaries draw from a wide range of compelling evidence and examples. Sources are listed in full in the reference section on page 25.

Since the fulfilment of the SDGs and their targets are indivisible and interrelated, there is much repetition and overlap among the ways that well-designed school food programs can impact different goals and targets. For example, food literacy within school food programs can educate the next generation about a number of aspects relating to sustainability, health and well-being, which are highlighted across a number of targets. In the summaries below, we have aimed to avoid a lot of repetition and have instead articulated a wide range of impacts.

School Food Programs are highly relevant to meeting fourteen SDG targets



GOAL 1 - End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Target 1.2 *By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions*

Although school food programs do not directly address the primary economic causes underlying the food insecurity dimension of poverty in Canada (Haines & Ruetz, 2020; Ke & Ford-Jones, 2015), there is global research which would point to the many ways in which they can help to mitigate poverty including by: transferring the value of the food provided at school to the household (FAO & WFP, 2018; Fletcher & Frisvold, 2017); supporting student learning through adequate nutrition and reduced hunger which can improve academic outcomes (Global Panel, 2015; Haines & Ruetz, 2020); and enhancing food skills (Haines & Ruetz, 2020). These benefits are thought to create a chain effect to help break the cycle of poverty (Global Panel, 2015). However, direct interventions to reduce poverty should focus on reducing economic constraints on households experiencing poverty and financial deprivation (Ke & Ford-Jones, 2015; Tarasuk 2001).

Target 1.3 *Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable*

School food programs are considered by

the World Bank to be the “most widely used safety net in the world” (FAO and WFP, 2018). The Committee on World Food Security recommends that social protection systems (safety nets) be comprised of integrated programs that support agricultural livelihoods, including school feeding programs that are home-grown and purchase food from local smallholder farms, to promote food security and nutrition (Committee on World Food Security, 2012). Although the right to food is included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Canada, many Canadians still experience food insecurity, especially racialized communities (Taylor, 2019). When it is universal, the school food program is a social protection system that reaches all children in all communities. However, although public schools in Canada have the stated goal of being accessible to all, there are gaps including the children of those who are undocumented, homeless, live in isolated rural communities or in Indigenous communities where schools are inadequate, and children who have been excluded or are homeschooled (Armanyous & Hudson, 2019). A truly universal safety net would address the situation facing all children and youth.

GOAL 2 - End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Target 2.1 *By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food*

all year round

School food programs have the potential to reach students across household income levels to end hunger for all students during the school day (Global Panel, 2015). School meals could not only provide food to hungry students, but provide more nutritious meals than those typically brought from home by students from all backgrounds, ensuring equitable access to nutritious food for all students (Caruso and Cullen, 2015). A pilot student nutrition program in Greece showed a reduction in household food insecurity, with the greatest effects on students who were more food insecure at baseline and participated for longer (Petralias et al., 2016). The Healthy School Lunch Program in Prince Edward Island is a universal school food program that implements a pay-what-you-can model to ensure equitable access for all students (Healthy School Lunch Program, 2020).

Target 2.3 *By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets*

and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment

Globally and in Brazil, evidence shows that when school food programs are linked to local agricultural production, they can create predictable, structured markets for small farmers, reduce their investment risks and provide them with a regular source of income (FAO & WFP, 2018; IPC-IG, 2013). In Brazil, legislation states that school food programs must purchase at least 30% of their food from small family farmers, resulting in more money going to these farmers [approximately US\$500 million when all programs are complying (IPC-IG, 2013)] and better, healthier food in schools (Kimmitt, 2016).

Target 2.4 *By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality*

As part of Scotland’s green recovery strategy, school food programs purchase local and sustainable food, which shortens their food supply chain (Duley, 2020). In British



Photo credit: Show Kids You Care

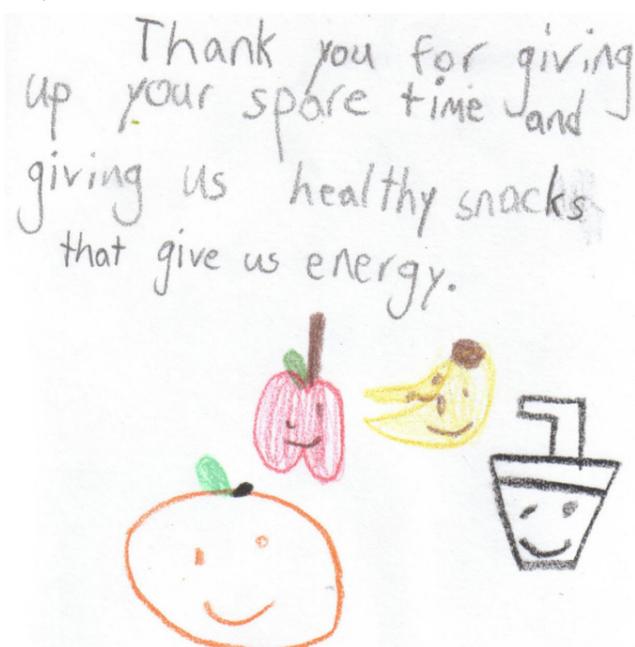
Columbia, sustainable regional food systems are supported through the Farm to School BC Network which supports schools to source local food through farmer relationships, schoolyard farms, and harvesting wild or traditional foods (Farm to School BC, n.d.). In terms of economic resiliency, a Canadian analysis showed that 62,000 food service workers could be employed by a national school food program, allowing for re-employment of many food service staff and chefs who were hit hard by the impacts of COVID-19 (Ruetz et al., 2020).

GOAL 3 - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Target 3.4 By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being

Well-designed school meal programs in Canada offer a unique setting to influence the diet choices, health behaviours and nutrient intakes of children and mitigate risk for chronic disease later in life. Children spend over a decade of their lives in school and their food habits can be more easily influenced than those of adults according to global research (Oostindjer et al., 2016). In the United States, it has been shown that

students who participate in school meal programs consume more milk, fruit, and vegetables during meal time and have a better intake of calcium and fibre (CDC, 2018). In Canada, “There is significant evidence that food and nutrition health interventions in schools have provided many benefits for students [including] enhanced health and wellness, the potential for a healthy adulthood, heightened learning potential, and improved academic outcomes” (Hoyer and Do, 2020).



GOAL 4 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Target 4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes”

Well-designed school food programs have beneficial impacts on student learning and academic success, especially for students who are from families with lower socioeconomic status according to evidence from the United States and England (Anderson et al., 2017; Kitchen et al., 2013). Participants in the OPUS School Meal Study in Denmark showed improvements in reading

performance and reduced errors related to inattention and impulsivity (Sørensen et al., 2015) while other results from the United States show that when school children have access to school breakfasts, there is a significant improvement in their ability to pay attention, alertness, and performance on math, reading, and other standardized test scores (Brown et al., 2008).

Target 4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development

School food programs that include curriculum pertaining to food and nutrition literacy can help to educate students on sustainability. Students who participate in The Screaming Avocado Cafe at Stratford Northwestern Secondary School in Ontario report that they learn where their food comes from and they are able to appreciate it more by participating in the student-run cafe that involves students in the preparation of meals from the ground up, starting with the ingredients they grow in their garden (Wagner, n.d.). At Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, California, The Edible Schoolyard Project gives students the opportunity to be learners as well as farmers, cooks, and teachers while exploring how culture and identity shape their access

to and personal relationships with food (Edible Schoolyard Berkeley, n.d.).

GOAL 5 - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Target 5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate

Canada’s Gender Equality Goals include equal sharing of parenting roles and family responsibilities and this has become an ever more prominent policy goal and budget priority. However, social norms continue to place the responsibility for domestic work and family care mainly on women (Government of Canada, 2018). A National School Food Program could address this disparity in two ways; first, by giving parents the opportunity to outsource the cost and preparation of at least one meal per day for their children to school food as evidenced globally (Oostindjer et al., 2016); and second, by incorporating gender-neutral and gender-stereotype free nutrition and food skills curriculum to promote greater food and domestic responsibility and equity in children as shown in Canada (Slater et al., 2012).

GOAL 8 - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and

decent work for all

Target 8.1 *Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries*

Although we argue here that school food programs can contribute to economic growth (a contested concept as explained in the criticisms above), the language of target 8.1 does not capture the sustainable, climate friendly nature of these jobs in school, on-farm and in local processing. These “decent jobs” sit well within both caring economy, economic justice and Build Back Better frameworks. A Guelph University study posits that if 30% of spending on a national school food program in Canada was spent on local food purchases, \$4.8 billion could be added to the local economy and 207,700 new jobs could be created (Ruetz & Fraser, 2019). The same study highlights that internationally, school food programs have an impressive return on investment: every \$1 invested bought a \$3 to \$10 economic return from improved health and education among children and increased productivity as adults. Roots to Harvest in Canada document how locally-sourced, freshly cooked food in a school cafeteria benefits workers and farmers (Roots to Harvest, 2017). In Quebec, healthy and affordable school food is being advanced through the social economy. La Cantine pour tous is a network that brings together community organizations, social integration enterprises and collective

organizations providing healthy meals to participating schools on a pay-what-you-can model for parents, which has rapidly expanded its services (Novae, 2021).

GOAL 10 – Reduce inequality within and among countries

Target 10.2 *By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status*

By providing meals and curriculum focused on cultural diversity, school food programs provide opportunities for students to learn about diverse cultures and practice their own cultures, as shown in the United States (National Farm to School Network, 2020). The Kapapamahchakwew - Wandering Spirit School in Toronto’s vision is “self-determination through Indigenous education” and it provides programming rooted in Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous Food Sovereignty (Senk, FSC 2020). The Suwa’lkh (new beginnings) school is an alternative school for “youth with ancestry, underserved youth and youth who do not fit in the regular school system” (Oron, FSC 2020) and they use learning styles from first peoples ways of knowing and being in their food programs including their native plant propagation and salmon in the classroom programs. The Natoaganeg First Nation School program provides all students with two meals per day and focuses on the provision of traditional foods as well as programming, such as Mi’kmaq Mondays where students

are encouraged to wear regalia, to promote health and healing while helping students to re-claim their identity (Canadian Feed the Children, 2015; FSC 2020). BGC of East Scarborough has embedded anti-racist practice in its school meals programming, including food literacy focused on culturally appropriate foods, and working to dismantle embedded and internalised oppression around food and agriculture (Sawyers, FSC 2020).

GOAL 12 – Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Target 12.3 *By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses*

When school food is sourced locally, both plate waste and production waste can be reduced, as shown by research in the United States (Benefits of Farm to School, 2020). Globally, there is evidence that post-harvest losses and wastage are reduced by school food programs that incorporate a farm-to-

school approach (FAO & WFP, 2018). Plate waste was reduced in a farm to school program in the United States due to the higher quality and increase in student liking of local produce (Izumi et al., 2010).

Target 12.7 *Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities*

Brazil’s National School Food program is an excellent example of sustainable public procurement in practice. This program meets four international goals for sustainable food-procurement systems: “(1) creating a market for small-scale farmers; (2) changing market structures so that a larger share of the market price goes to local farmers; (3) promoting a stronger role for local farmers in the supply chain by reducing the need for intermediaries; and (4) ensuring that small-scale farmers produce enough good-quality products to respond to market demand” (Otsuki, 2012). In Alberta, Canada, the Nanātohk Mīciwin (universal school food strategy) program developed by the Ermineskin Cree Nation supports local food production strategies by cultivating strong relationships between schools, community partners, and local food



Photo crédit: Fresh Roots

producers (MESC, n.d.).

GOAL 16 - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Target 16.7 *Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels*

Brazil's school food program shifted food procurement to a localized system and away from a centralized, industrial system over the

past 15 years. This allowed local civil society to be more engaged in governance and policy decisions to improve their livelihoods and sustainability practices (Otsuki, 2012). The Yukon First Nations received Jordan's Principle funding (used to ensure equitable access for First Nations children to government-funded public services) to provide students with two meals per day at school (Fraser, 2019). The Yukon First Nations Education Directorate worked with the individual Nation communities to determine what their needs were and get them access to relevant services such as; harvesting traditional foods; upgrading facilities and equipment; pay for cooks; and purchase and transport fresh food into the communities (Fraser, 2019).



Photo credit: Show Kids You Care

Indirect impact on remaining 8 goals

Less directly, but still meaningfully, school food programs can contribute to meeting the other 8 goals.

- **Goal 6 (Clean water and sanitation)** includes a target to achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all, which is yet to be achieved for all [Indigenous communities](#) in Canada. Access to safe drinking water is a prerequisite for a healthy diet, and for holistic school food programs that include garden and community food production and preparation. Food literacy programs educate children to understand why water access and management is vital, including this example of salmon in the classroom from the [Suwa'lkh School](#) in British Columbia.
- **Goal 7 (Affordable and clean energy)** includes a commitment to more sustainable energy use. As [Farmers for Climate Solutions](#) explain, making Canada's farms a green energy powerhouse is a top policy priority towards making food production sustainable. School food programs that commit to sourcing all or some of their produce from sustainable farming help to create demand that supports farm transformation.
- **Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure)** includes targets to build and retrofit sustainable and inclusive infrastructure. Building or retrofitting school kitchens and gardens to be sustainable and fully accessible can contribute to this goal, as can providing a reliable market so that small and local food processors can grow.
- **Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)** includes targets around green space, building inclusive and sustainable urbanization, and supporting economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas. Urban school garden projects contribute to the first two targets, and initiatives like those championed by [Farm to Cafeteria Canada](#) create links between schools and local farmers to support the third.
- **Goal 13 (Climate Action)** can be supported by school food programs in a number of ways including modelling menus that are healthy for children and the planet, teaching about the impact of our food choices on greenhouse gas emissions, teaching about and reducing food waste, providing a market for sustainable, climate-friendly agricultural produce, and teaching about how to grow food sustainably.
- **Goal 14 (Life below water)** includes a

target about sustainable fisheries which school food programs can support through their food purchasing decisions, as well as food literacy.

- **Goal 15 (Life on land)** includes land use and biodiversity protection targets that school food programs can support through their menu choices, school garden projects and through aspects of food literacy.

- **Goal 17 (Partnerships for the goals)** is about global partnerships. It is interesting to note that Canada highlighted its longstanding support to the World Food Program's school meals feeding programs in its 2018 Voluntary National Review of progress towards meeting the 2030 Agenda.



4. Conclusion

Coalition for Healthy School Food and the current moment

This paper has explored the evidence and the potential for school food programs to be a pathway for Canada to meet its SDG commitments. It has also reviewed which of the SDGs best build the case for school food programs.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food, hosted by Food Secure Canada, believes that all children should have access to healthy food at school. It advocates for an investment by the federal government in a cost-shared universal healthy school food program that will enable all students in Canada to have access to healthy meals at school every day.

In 2019 the Government of Canada announced that it will work towards a National School Food Program and then included it as a part of the newly launched [Food Policy for Canada](#). The Government is now working to measure the success of the Food Policy using targets aligned with the SDGs. Realising the Food Policy will be strengthened by the recent convening of the Food Policy's first Advisory Council. Other relevant policy documents highlight specific SDG targets including the Canadian Indicator Framework in the interim [Towards Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy](#) and the [Poverty Reduction Strategy](#). Recent progress in Provinces, Territories

and federally show that momentum towards a Canada-wide School Food Program is increasing. For example, in British Columbia, the November 2020 mandate letters to the Education and Agriculture Ministers included directives to advance local school food programs, and in summer 2020 Québec made an investment of an additional \$11 million to support school food for vulnerable youth.

It is very important to note that which specific SDGs and targets are met by school food programs depends on how those programs are designed. A well-designed, comprehensive program will have the most potential to achieve multiple Goals and targets. And the overarching intent of "leaving no-one behind" can only be realised through a universally accessible federally supported program.



Guiding principles

Looking forward, Food Secure Canada recommends that Canada continues to advance its commitment to develop a Canada-wide school food program and that the program be consistent with the Coalition for Healthy School Food's [guiding principles](#) for developing a well-designed school food program for Canada. These articulate that a national school food program should be:

- **Health-Promoting:** Serve tasty and culturally appropriate whole foods, focusing on vegetables and fruit in line with the revised [Canada's Food Guide](#) that models healthy eating habits.
- **Universal:** Ensure that ALL children in a school can access the program in a non-stigmatizing manner. Over time, all children in Canada will participate in a school food program.
- **Cost-shared:** Use federal funding to both expand on current provincial, city, parental and community funding and to initiate new programs in a cost-shared model.
- **Flexible and Respectful:** Successful school food programs reflect the context of the school and region. Ensure that funding supports different food service models, from breakfast to lunch to snacks. Programs should respect local conditions, be culturally appropriate and

locally adapted.

- **Connected:** Build on existing programs, local knowledge, skills and relationships. School food programs can support local food producers where possible and set local and sustainably produced food purchasing targets.
- **Comprehensive:** Promote the values of food literacy and explore how school food programs can be integrated into the curriculum through nutrition and hands-on food systems education.
- **Guided by Canada-wide Standards:** Ensure that programs are guided by Canada-wide nutritional standards, conflict of interest safeguards that prevent programs from marketing unhealthy food and specific products, as well as a framework for consistent Canada-wide program evaluation while at the same time being locally-led and controlled.
- **Committed to Indigenous Control over Programs for Indigenous Students:** Ensure Indigenous Food Sovereignty in a School Food Program for Canada.



In the coming months, Canada will refine its Canadian Indicators Framework and the newly created Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council will advise on what SDG-aligned targets and indicators to use to measure progress towards achieving the outcomes of the Food Policy. It would be strategic for decision-makers and advisors to fully consider how a well-designed Canada-wide School Food Program could be developed and implemented so as to best meet both the Food Policy's objectives as well as Canada's SDG commitments.



Photo credit: OCIC/Allan Lissner in partnership with Eel Ground First Nation and Canadian Feed The Children



Food Secure Canada (FSC) is a pan-Canadian alliance of organizations and individuals working together to advance food security and food sovereignty through three interlocking goals: zero hunger, healthy and safe food, and sustainable food systems.

Food Secure Canada is a founding member and the organizational host of the **Coalition for Healthy School Food**. The Coalition is a network of over 160 organizations from across Canada advocating for an investment by the federal government in a cost-shared universal healthy School Food Program. Such a program would enable all students in Canada to have access to healthy meals at school every day.

In May 2020 Food Secure Canada published its living food policy action plan in the context of Covid-19: [Growing resilience and equity](#). This School Food and the SDGs discussion paper is one of a series of papers that are intended to give a deeper SDG lens on topics referenced in the wide-ranging action plan. This discussion paper builds from the section of the action plan on Advancing a National School Food Program.

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