

Students lack healthy food options

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Canada is the only westernized nation without a national, federally funded school food program, and students are paying the price.

Creating a national school food program could address multiple problems facing Canada's youth, from soaring obesity rates to poverty and even to learning challenges.

In the past 25 years, the number of overweight and obese Canadian youth has doubled. School life subjects children to a minefield of toxic food – pop from vending machines, fast food in cafeterias, and assorted junk at nearby pizzerias, burger joints and convenience stores.

That inadequate nutrition will lead to a tsunami of health problems in adulthood.

"There's a childhood obesity epidemic, which is a precursor to adult diabetes and serious disease," says school nutrition expert Paul Veugelers, a professor at the University of Alberta. "We're looking at a very big public health problem, and it will get worse and worse."

Studies by Veugelers and others show that poor nutrition can create a slew of learning challenges for youth: inattention, poor self-esteem, irritability and aggression, leading to lower literacy rates and absenteeism.

The reason Canada has not developed a national school food strategy (or even a co-ordinated provincial and territorial program) is that no single ministry takes responsibility for food, according to Debbie Field, executive director of FoodShare. The non-profit organization supports some 300 student nutrition programs in Toronto with a largely volunteer workforce and patched-together funding from Toronto Public Health and other community agencies.

"The reason food is so hard to understand," says Field, "is that it crosses all jurisdictions – health, education, agriculture, transportation, environment, social assistance. And it falls between the cracks."

Many leading food thinkers, such as federal Liberal health critic Carolyn Bennett, want to see a national school food program as the centrepiece of a national food policy for Canada, not just because the need is so acute, but also because school food can teach policy makers how to harness the power of food to improve health, the environment, agriculture, local



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Two years ago, the students took over the lunchroom and its equipment to teach each other how to cook healthy meals at the School of Experiential Education, near Islington Ave. and Dixon Rd., in Toronto.

economies ... the list goes on.

The teens at the School of Experiential Education, in Toronto, certainly "get" the multi-faceted power of school food.

The day I dropped by, eight teenagers were making lunch for their fellow students in an open kitchen overlooking the school dining room. With no adult supervision or Gordon Ramsay-esque tantrums, the youths calmly worked together to cook, from scratch, that day's menu: a leafy green salad, chicken or refried bean fajitas topped with grilled veggies, and fresh fruit salad.

"They're going crazy with this," marvels office administrator Wendy Scott, who buys the groceries for the menus students plan – ratatouille, curries, stir-fries. They also planted a garden and use the "100-metre" heirloom organic produce in their lunches.

Two years ago, the students nudged their teachers aside to take over the lunch program, supported by FoodShare. The teachers had cooked rice and beans too often. Now teams of 30 student volunteers, ranging in age from 15 to 20, choose and prepare varied healthy meals – and teach each other to cook them.

But increased food literacy is just one educational benefit for the students.

They also learn something about civic engagement, that they can take control and create a healthier food environment.

The young chefs told me that the free school meal is essential to helping students overcome huge obstacles to eating well – parents' and teens' work lives too hectic to pack a nutritional lunch, not enough money to buy a lunch (38.7 per cent of food bank clients are children, according to the Canadian Association of Food Banks), and always the wasteland of fast and/or junk food that surrounds schools. "We cook with love," says Elisabeth McIlroy, 15. "School used to be a place where I'd eat unhealthy stuff."

The kids also enjoy sitting down to a family-style meal with fellow students and teachers. "No one goes off in their own group any more," says Zachary Lovering, 18. "We get to know each other better. Eating is one of the most personal things you can do together."

Spencer Alderson, 19, who spearheaded the student-run initiative, has now stepped back to concentrate on his studies, with the help of a healthy lunch. "It makes a huge difference," he says. "I'd say this is a necessity."

Parents and teachers in Nova Scotia realized that taking similar responsibility at just one school can change provincial policy. Concerned about rising obesity rates and the sedentary lifestyles of students, Port Williams Elementary School eliminated junk food from its cafeteria and unhealthy food from school fundraising ventures while launching an after-school activity program. With the school "role-modelling" healthy food, the lunches brought from home also improved.

With funding from the Canadian Diabetes Strategy, the school board hired parent Caroline Whitby, a former phys. ed. teacher, to create the Annapolis Valley Health Promoting School Project, eventually introducing the model to 42 schools.

The program caught the attention of school nutrition expert Veugelers. He assessed the weight and fitness levels of 5,200 Grade 5 students across Nova Scotia: nearly 33 per cent were overweight and 9 per cent were obese. But his study showed significantly fewer students at the Health Promoting Schools, who ate healthier and were more active, were overweight or obese – 17.9 per cent and 4 per cent respectively.

And the provincial Department of Health Promotion and Protection, embracing the concepts Whitby and her gang of parents and teachers had initiated more than a decade earlier, developed Canada's first province-wide school food and nutrition

policy.

Still, that policy is light years away from what Canada could achieve with funded school meals.

Scotland offers a prime example. On a visit there, I met the architect of a unique school-food procurement plan that has been adopted nationally to guide government purchasing.

Robin Gourlay, who's responsible for 8,000 school meals a day in East Ayrshire, developed a Social Return on Investment policy to assess supplier bids. He awards 50 points on cost ("when you're spending the public purse, you have to be careful") and the other 50 on food quality and nutrition, and "what procurement might achieve for the community," such as environmental, economic and social benefits.

An independent study showed that for every dollar spent, that procurement strategy returned between three and six in social benefits to one of the country's poorest districts.

Now, 90 per cent of the ingredients used to cook school meals are fresh and unprocessed, 70 per cent are sourced locally and 30 per cent are organic.

Using local suppliers has pumped the equivalent of \$500,000 (Canadian) into a region hit hard by unemployment, improved the fortunes of small-scale farmers, and reduced the carbon footprint of each school by about 38 tonnes a year. As for the impact on school meals – so long, fish sticks. Students enjoy three-course lunches starting with a hearty vegetable soup, three options for a main such as grilled salmon, pork steaks or vegetarian shepherd's pie, and often a fruit-based dessert.

Scotland's national school food program subsidizes the meals by 25 per cent, so they cost about \$3 for an elementary school meal and \$4.50 for secondary. Poorer families pay half. Children also receive a breakfast (about \$1.40, or free).

Gourlay, who has a catering background and a passion for social justice, is aware school meals are the only access to proper nutrition many students have. That makes it even more important that his procurement policy, which adds about 10 per cent to food budgets, helps "change the thinking on school food as cheap food."

Ultimately, Gourlay says, improving school meals is about addressing what he called Scotland's "cultural problem" with food.

"We think we can eat and drink as much as we want because we're strong and hardy. But we have all these health problems. We need to value food more, not just as fuel, and introduce that to kids in school. Hopefully, that lesson will follow them through life."

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