

School food advocates hopeful program will survive fall budget cuts, but say Ontario falling short of 'all in'

Despite receiving the largest share of the promised \$1-billion over five years, Ontario ranks second last in provincial spending per student on school food programs.

BY STUART BENSON

With the federal school food program now in its second year, and its first with all 13 provinces and territories on board, advocates say Ontario is falling short of the spirit of its agreement, despite receiving the largest share of the national lunch money.

Debbie Field, a co-ordinator with the Coalition for Healthy School Food, told *The Hill Times* that while Ontario Premier Doug Ford said his government was “all in” on the national school food program, the province is lagging behind much smaller regions in how much it is willing to pitch in to ensure its much larger population of elementary and secondary students won’t go to school hungry.

Last November, Ontario became one of the first four provinces to sign on to the new national school food program, first announced in the April 2024 budget. Ontario inked a deal to receive \$108.5-million over three years, the largest share of the \$1-billion allocated to the program.

This year, Ontario will receive shy of \$45-million from the federal government on top of the more than \$28-million the province invests in its own provincial Student Nutrition Program (SNP), and an additional \$4.4-million toward its First Nations Student Nutrition Program. The Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association also receives more than \$3.4-million from the province’s Ministry of Health to deliver produce to schools in Northern Ontario, for a total provincial investment in school food programs of more than \$36-million for the 2025-26 school year, which the province says will provide healthy food to more than 800,000 of its students.

Municipalities in the province also contribute more than \$26-million to local programs.



If Prime Minister Mark Carney, right, and Ontario Premier Doug Ford want to ‘build Canada,’ prioritizing healthy school food with greater investments ‘is the smartest decision they can make,’ says the Coalition for Healthy School Food’s Sarah Keyes. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade



Debbie Field, a co-ordinator with the Coalition for Healthy School Food, says the program isn’t just an issue of affordability, but of national ‘food sovereignty.’ *Photograph courtesy of LinkedIn*

However, the vast majority of that funding is invested by the City of Toronto, which increased its funding by nearly \$6-million in its 2025 budget to \$25.2-million.

Field said that while the province’s investments are to be applauded, there is much more progress Ontario can be making to meet the spirit of a truly universal school food program.

Despite receiving the largest amount of total funding from the federal government, the coalition’s analysis of provincial and territorial funding found Ontario near the lowest in spending per student.

Split amongst the province’s roughly 2.08-million student population, Ontario’s funding commitments amount to \$17 per student, or just shy of \$0.10 per day. Combined with the federal funding it receives, that number rises to \$39 per student, or just shy of \$0.21 per day.

Only Saskatchewan has a lower ratio, spending \$1.3-million



Sarah Keyes, the coalition’s Ontario lead, says the province should ‘step up’ its investment to at least a comparative per-student commitment made by similarly large provinces. *Photograph courtesy of LinkedIn*

on its provincial program, or \$7 per student, but rising to \$37—for a total of \$0.19 per day—when combined with the \$6.1-million it will receive from the federal program this year.

In comparison, British Columbia’s \$71-million in provincial investments has it spending \$0.63 per day for each of its nearly 600,000 students, rising to \$0.77 when combined with the nearly \$16-million it receives in federal funding.

Quebec also spends nearly double Ontario’s investment, with almost \$65-million invested in its program this year, amounting to \$65 per student, or \$0.34 per day.

The Atlantic provinces boast the most significant relative spending, with Nova Scotia spending more than double Ontario’s investment with \$81.7-million, and Newfoundland and Labrador spending \$39-million on its program, amounting to roughly \$626 and \$600 per

student, or \$3.30 and \$3.16 per day, respectively.

Sarah Keyes, the coalition’s Ontario chapter lead, said that while the federal government had attempted to steer clear of including any expectations for provinces to match or increase their own funding by any specific amount, “they committed to the vision and principles of a national, universal program” when they signed their individual agreements.

Keyes noted that—unlike other provinces—Ontario is long overdue for a cost-of-living increase to its program, which she says the coalition calculates would have amounted to roughly \$15-million more in provincial funding this year.

Alongside purchasing more healthy food for Ontario students, that money would be best used to improve local procurement and increase food literacy programs, which she said the current budget “just does not have enough money to do all those things that will help us achieve the program’s long-term vision.”

“We’ve got the federal money, and now is just such a good opportunity for Ontario to leverage and build on that ... if Premier Ford really wants to build a strong Ontario, making school food a priority is one of the smartest decisions that his government can make.”

In response to *The Hill Times’* request for comment, Ontario’s Children, Community and Social Services Minister Michael Parsa’s office noted that the province’s more than \$32-million investment across the SNP and First Nations’ Student Program, and the additional funding and agreements with the federal government,

municipalities, and provincial charities allow its programs to run in more than 80 per cent of its publicly funded schools.

“We will have more to share on how our government is working to help more students get the healthy start they need to learn, grow, and succeed in the near future,” wrote Chris Clarke, Parsa’s director of communications.

Field said that alongside encouraging Ford to increase his province’s commitment to healthy school lunches, she has also been encouraged by Prime Minister Mark Carney (Nepean, Ont.) and his commitment to the program since taking office.

“This time last year, we only had one province, and we were worried about the potential wipe-out of all the gains we made in the budget announcement,” Field said. “Here we are now with 10 provinces and the territories with agreements, and a commitment to make it permanent.”

In the Liberals’ election platform, Carney promised to make the national school food program permanent, and to allocate \$20-million per year to a “Buy Canadian in School Foods Program.”

The coalition included both of those campaign promises in its pre-budget consultation submission, and additionally called for the current federal funding to nearly double to match the provinces and territories’ combined yearly investments.

While Field said she hasn’t had the opportunity to speak with Carney since he was elected, she said she hopes he understands that ensuring all students have healthy food to eat is also a “Canada-building exercise.”

“This isn’t just an affordability issue, it’s a food sovereignty issue,” Field said, noting that the majority of food Canadians eat is still sourced from outside of the country.

“Imagine all of the benefits to the Canadian agricultural sector if every student is eating bread and fruit made in their own province,” Field said. “That’s the opportunity that I hope Premier Ford and Prime Minister Carney see this as.”

In a statement to *The Hill Times*, Secretary of States for Children and Youth Anna Gainey (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce-Westmount, Que.) reaffirmed her government’s commitment to making the program permanent and to “prioritize Canada-made food as much as possible.”

“The Government of Canada is working with provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners to enhance and expand access to school food programs across Canada,” the statement reads. “Any and all details of the budget will be known in due course.”

Last month, Finance Minister François-Philippe Champagne (Saint-Maurice-Champlain, Que.) said the government would table this year’s budget in October, with letters issued to cabinet ministers last July tasking them with finding 15 per cent in spending reductions by the 2028-29 fiscal year.

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