



Intelligence MEMOS

From: Rosalie Wyonch and Abby Sullivan

To: Canadians concerned about school nutrition

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Re: **LET'S TARGET SCHOOL MEALS TO THOSE WHO REALLY NEED THEM**

In many parts of Canada and around the globe, elementary and high-school students gain access to nutritious foods via school-based student nutrition programs. Funded by governments, corporations, foundations and the public, these programs are designed to ensure school-age children have access to the necessary nutrition they need to learn.

Canada is the only G7 nation without a national student nutrition program. Our recent C.D. Howe Institute [report](#) investigates potential short- and long-term effects of student nutrition programs through a rigorous assessment of available studies from Canada and other developed nations and an analysis of the effects of a school nutrition program in Toronto. Despite nutrition programs being a century-old policy that has existed in various forms in many countries, there is a rather surprising lack of consensus in existing research about their effects.

School nutrition programs have multiple objectives: ensure children consume enough energy, minimize the percentage of food-insecure children through free or subsidized meals, reduce childhood obesity and improve nutrition and overall health. With diverse objectives and disparate methodologies and metrics deployed to assess their impact, and with program structures differing from country to country, the lack of consensus in the literature becomes understandable. In addition, we found that there are persistent challenges in provisioning high-quality student nutrition programs, many of which stem from inconsistent access to the necessary resources.

The fundamental goal of school nutrition programs is to feed hungry children. There is quite strong evidence of the benefits of eating breakfast over not doing so, but evidence of the effect of breakfast programs in terms of wider goals of student performance and health is mixed and inconclusive. Moreover, the success of any nutrition program depends on the logistics and execution of the program. These insights lead us to conclude that:

- Nutrition programs do have the short-term benefit of relieving students' hunger, they are unlikely to have large impacts on food security or childhood obesity in the overall population.
- More specifically, the benefits of nutrition programs are most apparent in low-income and otherwise disadvantaged populations; there is no consensus that they have clear benefits for all students. They are most successful, however, when they are offered to all students free-of-charge.

These seemingly conflicting conclusions can be balanced: nutrition programs should not be offered universally at all schools, but where they are offered they should be universally available to all students within the same peer group. The temptation to expand a program to cover more students at the expense of improving the program for those already receiving it should be resisted. Scaling up a nutrition program that does not meet nutritional standards consistently or that suffers from systemic operational challenges almost certainly would be of little benefit to students generally. Instead, the program should remain targeted at the most at-risk children, who are most likely to benefit, until it is functionally scalable.

There is insufficient evidence to strongly support or to refute the claim that nutrition programs are effective at addressing the challenges of food insecurity or childhood obesity or at improving students' learning ability. Instead of trying to implement a one-size-fits-all solution to the complex and nuanced policy problems to which nutrition programs have been linked, more progress could be made by targeting different policies to specific goals. A Canada-wide universal student nutrition program would be costly – about \$1.4 billion annually – the same resources likely could be used more effectively by targeting policies at the problems they are intended to solve.

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