

From Policy to Plate: Bridging School Food Policy and Practice in Canada

What We Heard Report

Reflections from a Knowledge Exchange, as part of the Nourishing Futures Forum

SUMMARY

On June 4, 2026, as part of the Canada-wide School Food for All: Nourishing Futures Forum, in Montreal, organized by Farm to Cafeteria Canada, the Coalition for Healthy School Food, Équiterre and the Collectif québécois pour une saine alimentation scolaire, we hosted a cross-sectoral knowledge exchange with 51 leaders across federal and provincial governments, civil service departments, non-governmental organizations, school boards, and grassroots community organizations.

The objective was to facilitate meaningful discussions across three domains relevant to Canada's rapidly evolving school food landscape, with a focus on bridging policy and practice. The reflections below capture key insights shared in the exchange, providing direction for future research, policy design, and advocacy.

REFLECTIONS FROM SCHOOL FOOD LEADERS

i) Implementation & Operations

- Strong interest in local procurement, diverse menus, and food literacy initiatives
- Recognition of the reliance on volunteers, and the need for training, paid staffing, and professional supports
- Major gaps in infrastructure (kitchens, storage, equipment) and limited time, funding, and capacity to implement programs effectively

ii) Equity & Community Engagement

- Growing attention to equity in school food programs and increased access for students with strong examples of community-driven and Indigenous-led initiatives
- Cultural relevance of food remains a major gap (menus, knowledge, preparation capacity)
- Equity is often discussed but not fully embedded in practice
- Strengthen community engagement and relationships (including storytelling and shared learning)

iii) Policy & Governance

- Need for improved coordination across government jurisdictions and offices, particularly concerning funding practices, program standards, and quality improvement
- Need for realistic, robust monitoring, evaluation, and reporting to support program quality and accountability, ideally including a national data infrastructure
- Systems to share promising practices across Canada can help reduce barriers and support long-term sustainability

LOOKING AHEAD

To bridge school food policy and practice in Canada, there is a need for coordinated, long-term investments in the people, infrastructure, and partnerships.

Including:

- Strengthening workforce capacity, improving school-level infrastructure, aligning policies with on-the-ground realities
- Upholding community voices to ensure programs are equitable, culturally responsive, and adaptable across diverse school contexts
- Realistic and robust monitoring, evaluation, and reporting systems that support program quality, continuous improvement, and accountability

ABOUT US

The Joannah & Brian Lawson Centre for Child Nutrition at the University of Toronto is dedicated to improving lifelong health through child-focused nutrition research and education. For more information or to connect with our team, please visit our website at childnutrition.utoronto.ca or contact us at childnutrition.research@utoronto.ca

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