

CANADA NEEDS A NATIONAL SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM

When children go to school hungry or malnourished, they have a hard time learning. That's a violation of their rights under a number of international conventions Canada has signed, and it's a waste of society's educational resources. Since malnourishment cuts across income classes, and can be the result of neglect and ignorance as well as poverty, we need a universal program that gets nutritious meals to all students who need them. School boards, provincial and local governments and the voluntary sector can all help to solve this problem, but only the federal government can take a leadership role in assuring that children get adequate nutrition all across Canada—a goal that should rank high on any Children's Agenda.

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Les enfants qui chaque jour arrivent à l'école affamés ou mal nourris éprouvent des difficultés d'apprentissage. Cette situation, en plus de violer des droits reconnus aux enfants par diverses conventions internationales auxquelles le Canada a souscrit, constitue un déplorable gaspillage des ressources pédagogiques dont dispose notre société. Or la malnutrition, parce qu'elle prend sa source dans la négligence ou l'ignorance aussi bien que dans la pauvreté, frappe les familles sans égard à leur niveau de revenu. Il faut donc mettre sur pied un programme universel, capable de procurer des repas nourrissants à tous les élèves qui en ont besoin. Certes, les commissions scolaires, les conseils scolaires, les gouvernements locaux, les gouvernements provinciaux ainsi que le secteur bénévole ont tous un rôle à jouer dans la solution de ce problème. Mais seul le gouvernement fédéral peut exercer en ce domaine un rôle rassembleur, pour faire en sorte que tous les enfants du pays reçoivent une alimentation saine et suffisante. Cet objectif devrait constituer une priorité pour tout Programme d'action nationale pour les enfants.

In Canada, as elsewhere, one of the most pernicious effects of child poverty and neglect is that children can go to school malnourished or even hungry. As is well documented in the research literature, malnourished children commonly suffer from fatigue, lack of concentration, poorer attitudes to school, and difficulties in problem solving, memory, and verbal fluency. The result ultimately is lower educational performance, diminished employment and economic prospects, and unfavorable long-term outcomes. The Canadian government certainly is not indifferent to the problem of child deprivation. It is in the process of advancing a new National Children's Agenda that includes stronger measures to meet the basic needs of children. Among these measures are ones to promote child health and children's success at learning, and to work toward an environment in which children can be more socially engaged and responsible. What is missing from the Children's Agenda, however, is a national program to meet the nutritional needs of children through support for meal programs in Canadian schools.

The purpose of this article is to review the problem of inadequate nutrition for Canadian children and to make the case for schools as providers of meal programs. We argue that this would be in keeping, not only with the children's needs, but also with their basic rights as described in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Because Canada signed and ratified the *Convention*, we are obligated to implement the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's development. This right includes the provision of basic nutritional needs. Given the reality that many Canadian children suffer from inadequate nutrition, it is obvious that this right has not yet been secured. To deal with the problem, the federal government, in partnership with provincial, territorial, and aboriginal governments, needs to show leadership in overseeing the development of a new nationwide meal program for children in schools. We do not suggest that such a program would in itself solve the problems of child poverty or child neglect. But it would help to meet the immediate nutritional needs of many Canadian children during the school year and it

would therefore be an important step in keeping Canada's commitment to children under the UN convention.

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In the early 1990s, Canada made an important policy promise to children. It officially agreed not only to recognize but also to implement the fundamental rights of children, including their fundamental right to basic economic well-being. This promise was made when the Canadian government signed the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1990 and when Parliament and the provinces (with the exception of Alberta) ratified it in 1991. Under Article 27 of the *Convention*, Canada recognized and agreed to put into effect the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development. In doing so, we agreed to provide material assistance and support programs where necessary, but *particularly with regard to nutrition*, as well as clothing and housing. Moreover, under Article 4 of the *Convention*, we promised to implement the economic rights of children to the maximum extent of our available resources. And finally, under Article 3, Canada pledged support for the principle that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. It is inconceivable that allowing a situation in which children are at risk of inadequate nutrition or hunger would be in the best interests of children.

Canada's commitment to providing for the economic rights of children was given official expression in other ways. In 1989, recognizing the problem of child poverty and deprivation in Canada, the House of Commons unanimously passed an all-party resolution to seek to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000—the year now upon us. And in 1990, as a follow-up to the UN convention, Canada made a commitment through a resolution of the World Summit for Children to give greater priority to the economic needs of children. In the resolution, Canada and 71 other countries endorsed the principle of “first call for children,” according to which the basic needs of children are to be given much greater attention in the allocation of a state's resources in hard times as well as good.

It is ironic, and tragic, that since the signing of the UN convention and the endorsement of the principle of first call for children, the problems of child poverty and economic neglect have worsened in Canada. One regrettable outcome has been children going to school either hungry or without adequate nutrition.

To be fair, the federal and provincial governments have taken a number of positive measures to try to reduce child poverty. In 1992, the federal government revised and upgraded the system of child tax benefits to provide more financial support to families with children. To deal with the problem of non-custodial parents who fail to make child support payments, all provinces established enforcement agencies to collect child support and to assist parents in enforcing agreements without legal representation. In addition, Ontario and Nova Scotia decided to lift driver's licenses and other provincial licenses from those who defaulted from support payments. The federal government allowed for the suspension and refusal of passports and all types of federal licenses from defaulters. It also adjusted the income tax system so that child support payments would no longer be taxable in the hands of the custodial parent. Instead, payers of child support would no longer be allowed to deduct support payments from their income.

In 1997, following a series of federal-provincial negotiations, the federal government announced a new child benefits system (to take effect in 1998). The benefit for lower-income families with children was raised significantly (as it was again in 1999), and a reinvestment strategy was put in place for the provinces. Under this system, provinces were able to take the extra amount of child tax benefit from the federal government that was to go to families on social assistance and reinvest the money in programs deemed worthy to serve the needs of children. Some provinces reinvested the money in child care or parenting education programs (e.g., Quebec), while others kept the extra money in social assistance (e.g., Newfoundland).

But despite these initiatives, child poverty has persisted. Indeed, the rate of child poverty, calculated as the per cent of children living in poverty in comparison to the overall number of children, generally increased during the 1990s. (The calculation of poverty is based on Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off line, at which a family spends more than 55 per cent of its income on food, clothing, and shelter). As noted in the 1999 report card by Campaign 2000, the rate of child poverty was 15 per cent in 1989, 18 per cent in 1991, 21 per cent in 1996, and 20 per cent in 1997. From 1989 to 1997, the number of poor children in Canada increased by 49 per cent, from 936,000 to 1,397,000. By 1997, the provinces with the highest rates of child poverty

were Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Manitoba, while those with the highest rates of growth in child poverty were Ontario, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia.

While most poor children still live in two-parent families, a growing number live in single-parent families. Between 1989 and 1997, the rate of growth of child poverty in single-parent families was 61 per cent, compared to 45 per cent in two-parent families. A disproportionately high number of poor children live in families where parents are 30 years old or less, in families with just high school or even less education, and in native families.

As a matter of logic, child poverty need not lead to the malnourishment or hunger of children. In fact, in Canada it usually does not. Most families are able to put the nutritional needs of their children first, despite scarce economic resources. However, for some children, poverty is an important risk factor for inadequate nutrition or even hunger. In an environment of economic stress, some families cannot or do not provide for the basic needs of their children.

For obvious reasons, data on the extent of child hunger or of inadequate nutrition across Canada are lacking. Given the reluctance of children to report on the problem, it is very hard for

researchers to determine its extent. But, as reported by the Canadian Living Foundation in *A Fact Finding Summary of School and Community Nutrition Programs for Children* (1998), studies in Ontario and Nova Scotia have indicated that five to ten per cent of children come to school without any breakfast at all, and 40 to 50 per cent without an adequate breakfast.

But whether the figure is 10 per cent or five per cent or one per cent, the nutritional needs of at least some Canadian children are not being met. That at least some children do come to school malnourished or hungry has been noted periodically by teachers and school boards. For example, the Nova Scotia School Boards Association reported the problem in its 1999 *Child Poverty Report*. Teachers and school boards express concern because students who come to school hungry or malnourished have a much harder time concentrating and learning. Such students are more likely to miss school, drop out, or receive lower grades. The country as a whole should be concerned with this problem because, apart from failing to provide for basic needs, the effect is to contradict the principle of equal educational opportunity.

Poverty and economic stress are one source of the problem. Some children are malnourished because their families lack the means or ability to provide adequate nutrition on a consistent basis. But other factors may be responsible as well. For example, some children may be malnourished because very limited family income is used by parents for purposes other than providing for their children. Parents may be dealing with problems such as gambling or substance abuse. Or income may not play a role at all. Children in families at any socio-economic status may be malnourished as the result of neglect, a hurried life style or simple ignorance of children's daily nutritional requirements. In families where there is parental neglect or ignorance, food may be provided to children in sufficient quantity, but nutrition may be seriously lacking. Furthermore, in a fast-paced society, where hurried parents are extremely busy and work long hours, time may not be set aside for breakfasts and proper meals. Thus a lack of nutrition and proper meals may be due to a number of factors aside from poverty. The challenge is how to reach children directly so that their need for and basic right to adequate nutrition will be secured.

The traditional response to child deprivation has been to target low-income parents for finan-

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Photo: Canadian Picture Archive

Five-year-old Madison Mckinney at a vigil condemning child poverty, Brockville, Ontario, Nov. 1999

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cial support. Child benefits have been increased and measures have been taken to make child support payments more secure. These are positive steps. But they do not ensure the right of the child to economic well-being and appropriate nutrition. The effects of parents' neglect or ignorance or hurried life style remain.

Historically, the role of the public school was the provision of instruction. Increasingly, that role has been expanded to address issues that interfere with the child's motivation or ability to learn. Such changes have come about gradually and in a fragmented fashion in response to changes in family life and societal functioning.

There is little question that the mandate of the contemporary Canadian school has been expanded to include strategies designed to promote the overall positive development of children. Many schools across the country include programs that address the child's social and emotional development. For example, there are a variety of conflict resolution and peer mediation programs that teach anger management and skills for solving social problems. There are other social-skills training programs, such as the Lions-Quest Program, that address problem-solving, peer pressure and anti-social behavior. In addition, there are a variety of programs such as smoking prevention and cessation, alcohol and substance abuse, and sex education.

A few schools across the country have adopted the model of the "full-service school." Full-service schools provide one-stop shopping for the developmental needs of children: The schools have on-site services for health promotion, juvenile justice, mental health, family and employment counseling and so forth.

Programs such as these have been added to the basic school curriculum because of the recognition that the school cannot achieve its mandate of instruction without attention to the child's overall well-being. Increasingly, the school has become the focal institution for the provision of the needs of the whole child, not just the child's educational needs. Societal changes in family and employment patterns have created stressful circumstances that adversely affect parenting and make it difficult to meet the child's developmental needs. Changes in beliefs about family and family structure have led to growing numbers of dual-career parents, young teen parents, and single parents. Changes in the economy have resulted in high levels of unemployment and underemployment, and a constant threat of unemployment.

Effective parenting under such stress is difficult.

The core problem for parents in stressful circumstances is providing adequate care, socialization, and support of their children. Their children, in turn, are at risk for the long-term problems that are the correlates of inadequate care.

Schools are in a unique position to fill in the gaps in parenting and improving the lives of children. Schools can alter the developmental pathway of the at-risk child. Indeed, programs such as those described above have enabled schools to improve children's social behavior and ability to learn. Evaluation data are unambiguous in showing that the more children's social and emotional needs are met within the school, the greater their academic success, and the lower the likelihood that they will quit school—with its common consequence of welfare dependency. And yet, such programs are offered only in a fragmented manner. And few address child hunger, which is a fundamental and common barrier to learning.

Meal programs in all schools would have a number of benefits. The most important is that nutritious meals at school would overcome the problems of hunger or poor nutrition faced by so many children. If children's basic nutrition needs were met in schools, the educational disadvantages faced by hungry children would be reduced significantly. Children's ability and motivation to learn would be improved. Classroom behavior would be more positive.

Coming together for meals also provides an opportunity for social interaction among adults and children of different ages, a rare event in our age-segregated society. Older children and adults provide role models for younger children, and the opportunity to help (e.g., with table-setting and -clearing, serving, or assisting children with disabilities) provides a potential source of efficacy and self-esteem for all children. Meal programs in schools are also important symbolically. The message to children is that the school is a caring place that provides social support. The perception of support at schools impacts positively on educational and career aspirations, and compensates for limited support in the home. Finally, school is where children are. Systematic cross-country school meal programs would preclude stigmatization of areas or families, would ensure all children's nutrition needs were met, and would decrease the likelihood that students would drop out.

The federal government is the logical candidate to assume leadership in building a new nationwide meal program for children in schools. It has responsibility both for looking after the basic needs of all Canadians regardless of region or social status, and for harmonizing Canada's efforts in implementing the rights of children under the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Federal action would be in the interests of reaching children directly, thus ensuring the provision of their basic needs and rights, as well as advancing the important value of equal educational opportunity. Federal action would also help save the country embarrassment. In 1995, after receiving Canada's 1994 report on compliance with the UN convention, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child criticized Canada for its failure to take effective measures to deal with the problem of child poverty. The UN voiced such criticism again in 1998, after receiving Canada's report on its compliance with the *Convention on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights*. The same criticism is sure to be made again by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in the year 2000, in response to Canada's second report on its compliance with the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. The federal government needs to show that, at the very least, it is trying to deal with the problem of inadequate nutrition created by child poverty or child neglect. A nationwide school meal program that was part of the new Children's Agenda would clearly demonstrate Canada's commitment in this area. Such a measure would not in itself solve the problem of child poverty or child neglect or even child hunger but it would at least help to provide all children with basic nutrition during the school year.

How is Canada to explain why it remains one of the few developed countries not to have a national meal program for children? National programs of different kinds exist in most countries of Western Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan. In some countries, the programs are universal: They apply to all children and are delivered at no cost. In other countries, programs are targeted at children in economic need and are delivered at some nominal cost. In the United Kingdom, for example, under the *Education Act*, children receive school meals at low cost or at no cost (if they qualify), subject to nutritional regulations. In the United States, under the *Child Nutrition Act*, federal aid is provided in partial support of school meal programs. In Japan, children are

provided with free lunches subject to nutritional standards.

Canada's federal government needs to act, but it also needs to act in partnership with provincial, territorial, and aboriginal governments, and with voluntary organizations. Provinces need to be involved because education is a provincial jurisdiction and school meal programs, if they are to be effective, need the cooperation of provincial education departments, school boards, and teachers. Aboriginal governments need to be involved because child poverty is such a critical problem in native communities. And existing voluntary organizations need to be involved because they have experience with the delivery of the meal programs that do now exist.

An overly bureaucratic system of delivery would obviously not be desirable. The Canadian Living Foundation is now the only national voluntary organization providing support for school and community-based meal programs and for nutrition education programs across Canada. It depends on financial and other contributions from citizens, business organizations, and some municipalities and provinces. While this voluntary system has proved to be creative and skilled, it also is vulnerable to unstable funding and support. In partnership with the other levels of government, the federal government could alleviate that problem.

It may be argued that provincial governments, being closer to the people, are the logical candidates to take responsibility for school meal programs, just as they do for education and child protection services. It would be admirable if the provinces did assume leadership and provided support for effective meal programs in schools. As the level of government responsible for education, they are quite aware that inadequate nutrition is a major barrier to learning. But the provinces cannot always be counted on to deliver such programs. Each province has different priorities that may or may not include a commitment to relieving child poverty or child hunger. Some provinces have already taken action. New Brunswick, for example, initiated the Healthy Minds Breakfast Program in 1999, in which partial funding is provided by the Department of Education for the start-up and support of breakfast programs in grades K-5. And provinces such as Ontario and British Columbia have provided limited support for meal programs through the Canadian Living Foundation. But apart from the efforts of indi-

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vidual schools and school boards, provinces such as Nova Scotia and Manitoba have done relatively little. Such variation speaks volumes. The problem is that different provinces have different priorities and fiscal capacities. Only the federal government can provide the leadership for an effective nationwide program.

Granted, it may not be easy for the federal government to act. Under the terms of the new *Social Union Framework Agreement*, new Canada-wide initiatives supported by transfers to the provinces and territories must meet certain conditions. First, the federal government must work collaboratively with all the provincial and territorial governments, convincing these governments that school meal programs are a Canada-wide priority. Second, Ottawa cannot proceed without the agreement of a majority of the provinces. Third, each provincial and territorial government has the authority to determine the detailed design of its program. If most provinces believe that other programs for children and families are a greater priority than school meal programs, it may be difficult for the federal government to act. Against provincial pressures for a wide degree of autonomy in the design of programs, establishing national standards may also be a problem.

And yet, important forces are at work in support of the federal government. First, public opinion is favorable. As reported in 1999 by the polling firm Thompson Lighthouse, 59 per cent of Canadians believe that the problem of child hunger in Canada has worsened in the last five years; 84 per cent believe that schools should take an active role in helping to reduce it; and 85 per cent believe that government also has a part to play. Indeed, as reported in the survey, Canadians believe child hunger is a more important problem than national unity or the deficit. Thus the federal government could find political advantage in a federal program to deal with child hunger. Indeed, opposition by the provinces, in the in fact unlikely event that opposition emerged, could be an important part of that political advantage.

A second factor favouring action is that the fiscal situation is favorable. With its deficit under control, the federal government is in a much better position to use its financial leverage to gain provincial agreement for a national program of potential political benefit to both levels of government. It would be difficult for the provinces not to cooperate. That the federal government knows that conditions in general are favorable

for action on children is reflected in its announcement of the Children's Agenda.

Would a national program be too costly? In fact, it is hard to estimate the costs of the program. Federal funds would be available only for schools that wished to participate. Schools would determine their participation based on an assessment of need by teachers and school officials. Based on the experience of existing programs in individual school boards, only some schools would opt in. Teachers and other officials tend to be reluctant, given the extra energies and time required administering a program. In general, they will support the adoption of a program only when there is a clear need. Thus there is good reason to believe that school meal programs will be established only in areas of particular need.

The federal government has announced that it is committed to major spending on a Children's Agenda. It stands to reason that a portion of that spending should be devoted to assuring children their basic nutritional requirements in schools. This is an investment in the long-term healthy development and education of children. It also is a form of spending supported by a majority of Canadians, as expressed in public opinion surveys.

But apart from utilitarian and political considerations, the most important reason for the federal government to act is to fulfill its obligation to provide for the fundamental rights of children. Children are among the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Rights exist to provide for their basic needs and to shield them from forces such as poverty and neglect, over which they have little control. Canada has recognized this principle by signing the UN convention on children. A new national meals program would be in keeping with the economic rights of the child as described in the convention and with the principle of "first call for children" endorsed by Canada in the World Summit for Children. All children are entitled to basic nutrition, not just children in some families or some provinces or regions of the country. This is a matter, not only of children's welfare, but also of their fundamental rights.

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