

York Region Food for Learning is a diverse community partnership dedicated to supporting breakfast and snack programs in schools across the 9 municipalities in York Region.



270 schools throughout York Region offer students daily healthy and nutritious breakfasts and snacks to ensure kids are well-nourished and ready for learning



In 2022-2023 10,975,450 meals were provided to students in York Region - an increase of over 4 million meals from the previous school year.



Ministry of Children, Community & Social Services

Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services provides seed funding of approximately 5% of the program costs (estimated from meals applied data)



Peterborough Child and Family Centres, lead agency for Student Nutrition Ontario Central East, administers these funds. They also administer funding from donors such as Breakfast Clubs of Canada and Grocery Foundation



York Region Food for Learning is a volunteer based committee with representatives from YRDSB, YCDSB, York Public Health and SNOCE who



Schools must provide the balance of funding for food, supplies and equipment through school based fundraising, grants and community donations. This leads to inequity across the region



The estimated average cost per snack (two food categories) is \$1.25 and per breakfast (three food categories) \$2.00. Fruit or a vegetable is a part of every snack or meal.



Access to healthy foods throughout childhood is a recognized contributor to better physical and mental health, higher rates of literacy and lower rates of disease



Student Nutrition is a vital component of the York Region Healthy Schools Program, but due to funding restraints many schools are not able to fully participate

“Student Nutrition programs provide important opportunities for all students to come together in a common space, feel included and experience a sense of belonging. The programs address a need for food but it’s so much more than that. It’s about equity and health. Everyone eats together, everyone’s meal looks the same, everyone fits in because everyone can participate and students look forward to this important part to their day.” Kate Greavette, ED. York Region Food Network.

It has been well documented that Student Nutrition Programs (SNPs) have a substantial positive effect on student success, well-being and mental health, all of which have been identified as priorities for the Region of York through its commitment to public health. [1] Currently 270 Student Nutrition Programs operate within York Region, and in 2022-2023 they served a total of 10,972,450 meals to students. Schools receive seed funding and administrative support from Community Development Coordinators (CDCs) employed by Peterborough Child and Family Centres (PCFC), Lead Agency for Student Nutrition Ontario Central East (SNOCE). York Region Food for Learning (YRFFL) is the local committee which serves as the collaborative organization that supports student nutrition within our Region through advocacy, awareness, and fundraising efforts. This local advocacy allows us to be responsive and adaptive to the changing needs of our growing community as well as work towards a truly equitable York Region.

It is important that SNPs take a universal, health promotion approach. They do not focus on feeding only low-income students; however, we know that these students benefit greatly from the programs for the positive physical, mental and social health impacts they provide. The universal approach to SNP is peer-reviewed and is considered a best practice. This approach means that SNP is accessible to and inclusive of all; any potential stigma that could be perceived from accessing the programs is eliminated.

In 2004 the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) established Student Nutrition Ontario, providing seed funding via 14 lead agencies for Ontario schools to apply for. There has been a substantial increase in the number of schools participating since that time, but core funding from the Ministry had not increased since 2014. This has resulted in schools receiving less funding each year and a waitlist for schools who wish to begin a program. For the 2023-2024 school year, this base funding from the MCSS will represent approximately \$0.05 per snack/meal for schools in York Region. It costs \$1.25 to \$2.00 for every snack/meal served. Recently the Ministry added \$5 million to the Ontario budget for student nutrition but it doesn’t make a substantial difference to individual school programs given the growing number of programs across the province. Additionally, as of November 2023 the Ministry has not indicated whether this is a one-time allocation or a permanent increase in funding. These funds, along with donations from national level funders, are administered by PCFC and distributed with the assistance of the school boards.

Bottom line, funds from the Ministry are not sufficient and were never intended to cover the full operating costs of SNPs. The balance of the funds required must come from other sources such

as school fundraising and/or external grants. This is not an equitable situation as some school communities are poised to raise ample funds while those schools in primarily lower-income communities, with substantially less fundraising capacity, are at risk. In addition, fundraising dollars are not a consistent and reliable source of funding as amounts donated can fluctuate drastically year over year. As a result, schools struggle to maintain and support their programs resulting in some SNP not continuing to serve meals until the end of the school year unless additional funding sources are identified. In 2022-2023 there were 20 programs that had to stop serving entirely due to lack of funding, and we anticipate that number being much higher in the current school year. This is incredibly challenging for individuals, schools and the broader community as food insecurity rates are at an all-time high in York Region with 1 in 7 people experiencing food insecurity, including 23,500 children. Several of these schools are located in the Community Action Table priority neighbourhoods as determined by the York Region Community Safety and Well-Being Plan.

Up until 2022, the Region of York had provided \$100,000 for YRFFL through their Community Investment Fund (CIF), to support programs in the public, separate and French school boards. In 2021 the decision was made to reprioritize CIF and this decision resulted in the loss of a stable, consistent source of revenue which YRFFL has not been able to make up and will not for the foreseeable future. It has recently been communicated to us that CIF funding will no longer be available for student nutrition or other food programs going forward. At this time, the inflated costs of food adds another barrier on top of the funding shortfalls that programs are experiencing. Hence, the need for a new solution - a sustainable funding approach that recognizes the foundational importance of student nutrition in the lives of our young people. Investments in nutrition will go a long way to enhancing and actualizing other public health and community based efforts to bolster mental and physical health and build resilient communities.

Today we present to you a request to support Student Nutrition Programs across the Region of York in a significant and sustainable way. Our budget request is for an investment of \$500,000 annually to address the ongoing costs of these foundational programs and a 2% annual increase to accommodate growth. This investment is a small fraction of what we are seeing invested in other cities and regions, but it would go an incredibly long way to supporting children and youth in York Region, and building healthier communities.