

LFS 350

Group 14 VFPC

Proposal

School Lunch Programs Across British Columbia

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Background:

Vancouver Food Policy Council (VFPC) is an official civic agency that collaborates with citizens, experts and government officials. It is an advisory group to City Council that bridges diverse opinions to examine the operation of a local food system with the goal to create a sustainable food system. Volunteers and community liaisons provide ideas and policy recommendations for how the local food system can be improved within the City of Vancouver and its community. As there are multiple different school meal programs across British Columbia (BC), we will not be limiting our preliminary research in terms of community, neighbourhood and type of meals. However, we did come in agreement with our VFPC partners that after our research, we will ultimately focus towards advocating for a universal school lunch program (see Appendix) for BC.

Of the G8 countries, Canada is the only country that does not have a universal school lunch program.¹ A recent UNICEF report ranked Canada 37th of 41 high-income countries regarding access to healthy food for children.² With the aim of improving access for children and youth to healthy and sustainable foods at schools, VFPC has been contributing to a national coalition to advance the universal school lunch program. Members of the School Food working group have realized that advocating for the program is complex and multifactorial because it involves municipal, provincial and federal policies in regards to finances, politics and different organizations. Therefore, VFPC connected with LFS 350 students to receive support in conducting baseline research to make the universal lunch program possible in BC.

Goal:

To have a better understanding of the landscape in BC as related to school lunch programs offered. This can be extended to advocate for a universal school lunch program across Canada and anticipate what the regional needs of BC may be if the program is adopted in the Food Policy for Canada.³

Significance:

The significance of this project is to identify challenges and opportunities in the current BC school lunch programs and how it relates to food justice (see Appendix) and food security (see Appendix) among children. Food justice can be supported by a universal school lunch program that is shared equitably among children, independent of socioeconomic status, which ultimately can help address the issue of food security. Currently, it is reported that “food insecurity is an urgent public health challenge, affecting 1 in 6 children in Canada” and “1 in 3 elementary children and 2 in 3 students in secondary schools do not eat a nutritious breakfast before school.”⁴ Evidence shows that food insecurity has adverse effects on children's learning abilities due to difficulty in concentrating, poorer health status and disruptive behaviour.⁵ This highlights the drawbacks of the current school food system and how a universal school lunch program can be one of the ways to support food security.

A universal school lunch program has numerous benefits including positive impacts on children's mental health and academic success, increasing consumption of healthy foods including fruits and vegetables and supporting the economy in creating jobs around local, fresh food.⁶ In the long term, a school food program can reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes and cancer through consumption of more healthy foods

compared to non-nutritious ones.⁶ This has implications on reducing financial burdens of the health care costs associated with treatments.

Although some school districts (mainly inner city schools)⁷ have subsidized school meal programs targeting “vulnerable students” (see Appendix), it is often limited to a number of students only. Parents may be hesitant to applying to these programs because they are not comfortable speaking about their financial situation and may also have language barriers. It is likely that these programs do not encompass all food insecure, low-income families and thus, are under-represented. This project will work to identify if there are enough initiatives and policies that are supporting lunch programs, to recognize community leaders in school lunches and how are they working towards sustainability to address the complex school food system. The initial approach will be focused on BC, and with successful implementation, this will be a cornerstone to building a universal school lunch program across Canada.

Objectives:

Our objective is to develop a literature review to support policy making of the universal school lunch program including:

- **Objective 1:** Create a summary report on current school food programs existing in BC.
This will allow the community leaders to better understand school food programs around BC.
- **Objective 2:** Summarize relevant policy documents (provincial or municipal) and publications by non-profit organizations in BC to stay updated on the current movement of food policies regarding school lunch programs.

Methods:

We have divided the team into two, which will be the Research and Program groups:

- The Research group will find and summarize resources that are related to provincial and municipal school food programs and published data from non-profit organizations.
- The Program group will work on collecting data from existing school food programs across B.C in a shared excel spreadsheet, where VFPC partners can access and update on our findings. This includes the name of the program, the type of program (breakfast, hot lunches, etc.), age group for the program, and where the program is being conducted.

Our VFPC partners also provided guidance questions that are helpful for us to move forward on our research. By compiling our findings and seeing which regions are lacking support, it will allow us to identify the strengths and limitations in the current school lunch program in Canada.

Outcomes:

The following final products will be completed for our VFPC partners:

- The final presentation and infographic will be submitted on March 26th, 2018.
- The final report is will be submitted on April 8th, 2018.

By the end of the project, we are expected to have an overall understanding of VFPC, as well as the national Coalition for Healthy School Food, which could build a good foundation to develop the school lunch program across BC.

Appendix

Food Justice: “Exists when the benefits and risks of how food is grown and processed, transported, distributed, and consumed are shared equitably.”⁸

Food Security: “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”⁸

Universal school lunch program: “A cost-shared program that will enable all students in Canada to have access to healthy meals at school at little or no cost to students, building on existing programs across the country and including food education to serve culturally appropriate, local, sustainable food to the fullest extent possible.”⁴

Vulnerable students: “Students who may be at risk in terms of academic achievement and social functioning. These students primarily come from less affluent socio-economic backgrounds. In determining which students may be vulnerable, school districts may consider: low income measures; involvement with the provincial social service ministries and related agencies; community socio-economic demographics; information obtained through community mapping; and other relevant information including staff observation and self-identification.”⁹

References:

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