

Pre-Budget Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance



Submitted by:
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In this submission we offer two recommendations about how the Government of Canada can “support families and help vulnerable Canadians by focusing on their health & education...” The national scope and urgency of developing physical literacy and ensuring proper nutrition of Canadian children and youth merit a proportionate federal response. Where a problem or health-impairing set of conditions exists in every sub-national jurisdiction in Canada, federal leadership is needed.

Physical literacy is the gateway to active participation, and more active children are healthier. Declining sport participation rates, high rates of screen time, increased rates of overweight and obesity all make it plain that the declining health and well-being of Canadian children and youth require the attention of everyone, including the Government of Canada. In 1970, federal leadership in the Canada Fitness Awards sought to "create better attitudes towards personal fitness and to build skills and aptitudes useful beyond the formative years." While eventually discontinued, a renewed national effort, based on current research and pedagogy, is urgently required.

Our children also need proper nutrition. A national school meals program can provide health-protecting nutrition. Many national governments have adopted measures to feed children while they are in the care of schools. The United States established the National School Lunch Program in 1946. It is a federally assisted meal program operating in more than 100,000 public and non-profit private schools and residential child care institutions. In 2013, it provided nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 31 million children each school day. There is a compelling case for a "pan-Canadian" school meal program to reinforce and fill enormous gaps in the patchwork of provincial subsidies, corporate donations, parental volunteer efforts, and non-profit pilot projects.

There is an urgency to tackling these related problems – physical illiteracy, food insecurity and unhealthy food environments – in order to reduce the chronic public health burden associated with obesity, sedentary behaviour, hunger, emotional and mental distress, poor learning outcomes, tobacco and alcohol addiction, and truancy and absenteeism that plague so many Canadians as they develop from childhood to adulthood. The World Health Organization says that one in five of all deaths are caused by poor nutrition: about 50,000 cancer, heart disease, stroke and diabetes deaths annually in

Canada. Concern about nutrition, tobacco, physical inactivity, and alcohol prompted the United Nations General Assembly to hold a [High Level Meeting on the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Disease](#) in 2011 ([reviewed in 2014](#)), only the second such meeting on a health issue since WWII.

National Physical Literacy Intervention for Every Canadian Child and Youth

The new Canadian Sport Policy privileges physical literacy as the foundational piece upon which the Canadian sport and recreational system rests. *Physical literacy* is the ability of an individual to move with competence and confidence in a wide variety of physical activities in multiple environments that benefit the healthy development of the whole person. Physical literacy is recognized as a precondition for the lifelong participation in, and enjoyment of, physical activity and sport. Ideally, development begins in childhood and improves throughout one's life. It is both a driver of performance for the competitive athlete and a foundation for active participation in life, whether recreational or vocational. Physical literacy can be learned through physical activities other than sport, such as physical education and play. As such, it provides a basis for collaboration with health, education, recreation, and sport partners. The awareness of its centrality to an individual's overall health, well-being and adaptability is rapidly gaining acceptance around the world and is now being acknowledged as a relevant concept by those in professions such as medicine, psychology, education and social work.

Canada is recognized as a leader in this area with the innovative Long-Term Athlete Development program developed by Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L). It is grounded in a staged, sequential and developmentally appropriate paradigm for introducing physical activity and sport to young people. Becoming physically literate depends on the acquisition of confidence and competence which, in turn, is highly correlated with participation in recreational and competitive sport. CS4L and Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada) have pioneered a set of complementary tools for use in the community recreation and education settings. These are, respectively, PLAY (Physical Literacy Assessment for Youth) and Passport for Life. Both are showing huge promise in moving the needle on obesity and declining rates of physical activity and sport participation. In fact, an official in the Social and Human Sciences Sector of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has recently urged that Canada take on a peer review role in an international study in this area "considering the ground breaking work carried out by PHE Canada on physical literacy." A recent analysis of results of Passport for Life's grades 3 to 6 program found that students who report higher feelings of confidence, importance, autonomy, and enjoyment along with less anxiety in physical activity are most likely to be physically active (and intensely so) and have better fitness and movement skills. PLAY has shown similar promise, where physical literacy levels of children have improved by educating recreation leaders on how to promote physical literacy. Such interventions are successful because they foster intrinsic motivation, confidence, competence and fun and hold huge potential to promote the adoption of lifelong healthy and virtuous behaviours.

Notwithstanding these promising early results, the concept has yet to receive systematic adoption by every community sport club, recreational department, after-school program or school board in Canada. We recommend the Federal Government urgently address health challenges by developing a nationally funded physical literacy intervention, as it did in 1970.

Recommendation 1: The National Physical Literacy Intervention would provide a baseline assessment of the physical literacy of each of the nearly 5 million students enrolled in the 10,000 elementary schools and 4,600 high schools across Canada, and then train leaders to improve the quality of programs. A \$10 million annual investment by the Government of Canada in a national physical literacy diagnostic and intervention would consist of:

- A formative assessment and inventory of every child's fitness, motor skills, motivational profile and social skills to establish a baseline measurement;
- A train-the-trainer component to allow for the production of sufficient numbers of physical literacy-equipped and trained young people and specialists able to deliver the intervention in school and club-based settings;
- A knowledge hub to allow for collection, tracking, research and reporting of individual student physical literacy profiles;
- Support to upgrade and revise the main physical literacy diagnostic and assessment tools in use in Canada to ensure their relevancy to the needs of the Canadian school-aged population.

Promoting Health through a National School Meals Program

We urge the Government of Canada to make a substantial financial commitment to establish a national universal school meals program to fund meals meeting strong nutrition standards for school children K-12. The Government should enlist new and increased commitments from provincial and local governments to join the effort, prevent companies and schools from profiting by selling junk food to children, and increase children's future workforce productivity for a time when dependency ratios are expected to be high and rising as baby boomers retire.

Subsidized school meals may improve school attendance, completion, and equalize opportunities for life success among children from families with unequal financial means.

Canadian federal government financial contributions to school nutrition programs are virtually nil (even for Aboriginal students living in First Nations communities) and provincial investment is meagre. By sharp contrast, the U.S. Department of Agriculture proposed new strict binding nutrition standards for foods to qualify for supplementary funds in the Department's [\\$15.7 billion program for school foods](#), which invests approximately \$1.42 per student per school-day. That commitment is 23 times higher than the approximately [\\$0.06 per student that Canadian \(mostly provincial\) governments spend on school meals](#), assuming a 190-day school year and recognizing recently increased commitments by the Government of Ontario

Previously, [leading national health and children's advocates have proposed specific approaches to increase Canadian government investment in school foods](#) at all levels of government. In [2005, the federal and provincial ministers of health agreed that the federal government should explore and support P/T healthy eating programs and policies, and undertake a feasibility study](#) on fiscal measures to encourage healthy living (e.g. tax credits/penalties, subsidies, price supports).

A November [2008 scientific literature review by experts at Harvard University](#) concluded that:

...more than 100 published research articles, provides the scientific basis for concluding that the [US] federal School Breakfast Program is highly effective in terms of providing children with a stronger basis to learn in school, eat more nutritious diets, and lead more healthy lives both emotionally and physically...significantly improves their cognitive or mental abilities, enabling them to be more alert, pay better attention, and to do better in terms of reading, math and other standardized test scores. Children getting breakfast at school also are sick less often, have fewer problems associated with hunger, such as dizziness, lethargy, stomach aches and ear aches, and do significantly better than their peers who do not get a school breakfast in terms of cooperation, discipline and inter-personal behavior.

In the [Chief Public Health Officer's 2008 Report on the State of Public Health in Canada](#), Dr. Butler Jones observed:

When children go to school hungry or poorly nourished, their energy levels, memory, problem-solving skills, creativity, concentration and behaviour are all negatively impacted. Studies have shown that 31% of elementary students and 62% of secondary school students do not eat a nutritious breakfast before school. Almost one quarter of Canadian children in Grade 4 do not eat breakfast daily and, by Grade 8, that number jumps to almost half of all girls. The reasons for this vary – from a lack of available food or nutritious options in low-income homes, to poor eating choices made by children and/or their caregivers. As a result of being hungry at school, these children may not reach their full developmental potential – an outcome that can have a health impact throughout their entire lives.

In 2008 and 2011, all major federal party election campaign platforms acknowledged the value of prevention, with the NDP specifically proposing a school meals program. Other than coordinating a discussion among provincial officials to develop a national common *voluntary* nutrition standard for school foods, we are not aware of any recent real national progress in school nutrition standards or subsidies.

One notable exception: in 2008 [Ontario implemented binding school nutrition regulations](#), a first in Canada, and recently increased their small subsidies. The 2013 [Ontario Healthy Kids Panel report, *No Time to Wait*](#), recommended that the Government of Ontario:

“2.8 Establish a universal school nutrition program for all Ontario publicly funded elementary and secondary schools.

2.9 Establish a universal school nutrition program for First Nations communities.

2.10 Develop a single standard guideline for food and beverages served or sold where children play and learn.”

According to Toronto Public Health, a simple, healthy meal can be provided to children for as little as \$1-\$1.50 per day. School meal programs that devote scarce resources to (potentially stigmatizing) means-testing to establish eligibility for subsidies (as is done in some places), or an endless pursuit of funding, are hard-pressed to feed children nutritious meals reliably and frugally. Significant contributions from all levels of government, as well as community groups without commercial conflicts of interest, could make such a program an important contributor to population health and community vitality.

Recommendation 2: In the long term, a meaningful federal government contribution would be \$200-300 million/year. This funding would be phased-in over several years and only where willing provincial

and local governments also contribute. A national school meals program could be a profoundly important investment in Canada's future and the well-being of the young people who, though lacking in political and economic power, need our help to fulfill their potential and, ultimately, to help support their forbearers and future generations.