

Universal Healthy Food School Program

Final Policy Paper



Overview

Healthy lifestyle and well-being are important aspects of childhood. Health in the earliest years strengthens developing biological systems, enabling children to grow into healthy adults. As per a report published by UNICEF, Canada happens to rank 37th out of 41 HICs for the provision of nutritive food to children (CBC news, 2017). Lack of proper nutrition continues to threaten children's health, increasing their risk of developing chronic diseases such as CVD, Diabetes, stroke etc. in adulthood. Access to unhealthy, ultra-processed food and beverages is very prevalent in schools making kids vulnerable to consume foods high in fat, sugar and salt (Engler-Stringer, 2014). To sum up, Canada is not doing well in providing access to nutritious food, outlying a need for the development of a universal healthy school food program so that students can have regular access to healthy and hygienic food in institutes (CBC news, 2017).

Search and Scope

To begin with searching articles, I broke the research topic into 3 basic parts: Current problem, Proposed solution and Challenges. I explored different databases which included PubMed, Google Scholar, Medline, Science Direct, NCBI etc. through UW library catalogue. I used phrases such as “child obesity”, “school influencing eating”, “need school food policy” and narrowed down to the relevant scholarly articles. I referred to google search engine to find grey literature: supporting statistics, figures and relevant news publications that aligned with the peer-reviewed articles. The challenging part with the scoping process was to look for specific children interventions and school food policies that fitted Canada context. Since no propositions for universal school food program had been made for the country, I had to narrow down my search filter to United States as it is the most similar country in relation of proximity and North American

culture. Moreover, I had problem finding literature that could cover pitfalls related to healthy school food program. There was not much information available, therefore, I had to come up with recommendations from scratch by analyzing literature on children's behavior.

Analysis

Supportive environments can play a crucial role in guiding and helping children learn about healthy eating behaviours (Kremers et al, 2012). Results from a canteen programme intervention suggest that an environment strongly influences people's food decisions (Kremers et al, 2012). So, to facilitate children to consume healthy food and develop healthy eating patterns, it is important to ensure that the surrounding food environment is healthy. Children tend to spend an enormous time and consume almost two meals in the school settings (Reddan et. al, 2002). Therefore, targeting students in institutional facilities offer great potential to improve their eating habits and imbibing knowledge about healthy nutrition (Oostindjer et. al, 2017). Research shows that habits and values instilled in early life persist in adulthood, therefore, developing a nutritionally balanced diet and healthy lifestyle patterns from a young age can have a positive effect on one's nutrition and health all through their lives (Global Panel, 2015). Schools can be an important key setting for promoting everlasting healthy eating habits and lifestyle because they can reach larger audiences for continuous years. Hence, there is a need to call for the development of a Universal Healthy School Food Policy so that children across the nation attending schools can have access to healthy food while learning about nutrition and eating behaviors (Tufts University, 2018). This could contribute in lessening students' risk of evolving severe, persistent diseases, such as diabetes mellitus, heart-related illnesses and certain types of cancer.

Efforts have been made by provinces such as British Columbia, Ontario, Nova Scotia to come up with comprehensive and evidence-based healthy eating policies in schools (Phorson, 2015). All of the provincial-based nutrition policies share a lot in common which includes some sort of restrictions on food sold through canteens or vending machines. British Columbia has set up mandatory guidelines for food and beverages sale in schools; categorizing food sold into 3 groups based on the sales and nutrition level (Phorson, 2015). Ontario began with a healthy vending machine program which was replaced by Policy Program Memorandum No. 150 (PPM 150) which is very similar to BC school policy. New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland & Labrador implemented a similar food program under which only 'maximum to moderate' nutritious food was sold on the premises (Phorson, 2015). Despite the effort, our country is still lagging behind other G7 nations and doesn't have a national school food program. Canada needs to learn from the challenges and success of other countries to improve student's health. For instance, Italy has put in far most efforts to change its school system incorporating social and nutritional health lessons along with an emphasis on environment stewardship (Oostindjer et. al, 2017). Under the program, food is provided through menu cycles i.e., varying dishes for every month. Their system emphasis on the importance of calories count and has set up a nutritional environment in a manner that promotes cultural and social lessons as well. Reports suggest a significant reduction of 3-4% in the prevalence of obesity amongst different children age groups over 3 years (European Commission, 2010).

Canadian Federal Government needs to join hands with provincial and territorial authorities and incorporate their existing frameworks for building a universal food program. Currently, a small percentage of children in Canada have access to school food programs; most of them come hungry to school due to lengthy commutes, busy family routines and household food

insecurity issues (Petralias et. al, 2016). A universal program can help to ensure equal opportunity and access to healthy meals for all youth. A partnership between schools and food system stakeholders can help increase accessibility in marginalised locations such as food deserts. Healthy meals can be served in schools, meeting the nutritional requirements of children (He et. al, 2014). Schools can help in supporting local agricultural practices through the steady demand of products (Izumi et. al, 2010). This would benefit small farmers and producers who don't have access to international markets and rely on local demand. Schools serving as the delivery platform for healthy meals can train staff and teachers to facilitate the inclusion of food literacy in the academic curriculum. Appropriate hand washing, personal hygiene and sanitation could be included in the educational agenda considering the pandemic. The integrated education-food strategy would create a section of new job possibilities along the chain; staff to collect data, track the cost-effective use of resources and link farmers to school jurisdictions (Global Panel, 2015). Hence, the national school food policy would with more than food security, that is an economic opportunity. Reports from successful school food policy (SPF) nations such as Italy, Brazil and the USA suggest a huge revenue generation that can further be diverted to a different sector, the healthcare division for Canadian context (Oostindjer et. al, 2017).

Limitations

Limited evidence is available to support the fact that institutional settings implement and adhere to the proposed policies and guidelines. It would be quite challenging to assess the implementation of food policies relating to nutrition since vendors, season produces, nature of food services varies across regions, provinces and school boards (Vine et al, 2014). Findings from

PHAC suggest Canada will difficulty tracking school nutritional policies due to limited availability of surveillance and data tracking tools in comparison to other countries (PHAC, 2010).

Besides that, easy access to unhealthy ‘junk’ food poses another issue to the school food policy (Story et al, 2008). Statistics show that students are more likely to consume sugary foods and beverages when fast-food restaurants are present in close proximity. In fact, proximity to fast food outlets is linked to increased access during breaks or lunchtime. Therefore, regulations will need to be set up to limit the number of fast-food providers across the schools (Phorson, 2015).

Due to limited funding, schools will struggle with obtaining food that’s affordable, nutritious and appealing to the students (PHAC, 2010) (Kremers et al, 2012). Fresh produce requires proper storage and refrigeration posing a challenge to purchase just the right amount to minimize wastage (Global Panel, 2015). There is a high possibility that students will react to change and alternative food options in a negative manner that may cause hindrance in their academics.

Conclusion

Personally, I think COVID-19 has increased all of our awareness about food insecurity. Figures from a Canadian survey show that Canadian households with children were more likely to be worried about the food running out and had difficulty affording balanced meals (Tufts University, 2018). School food program can support children with healthy and nutritious food at school. Now that transition is being made back to schools, a comprehensive universal healthy school food program can help support students and ensure their well-being. National school food policy can ensure that a healthy learning environment is available to students by offering a continuous supply of nutritious food, improving food literacy, reducing food insecurity, providing

family support and promoting an integrated network of local food demand and supply that helps in economic development (French et al, 2004). To conclude, policy aiming to supply quality food inside schools is a major step to overcome food insecurity, however, a lot of effort is required (Global Panel, 2015). Stakeholders at federal, provincial and district levels need to recognize and support the development of Health-promoting schools through a policy framework to establish a connection between health and learning. Universal School Food Program is an investment that comes with returns related to both health and economic prosperity.

Reflection

Through this policy paper, I got the opportunity to learn about the existing school food policies around Canada as well as the world. I learnt about the importance of food policies and how schools can play an important role in advocating such policies and contribute towards improvement in the nation's overall health. In order to complete this assignment, I put in a lot of time to do research on top G7 nations regulations for school food provision, as well as existing provincials school policies so as to develop recommendations that would fit the Canadian context.

While working on the paper, I gained insight about the impact of school food policies on food security, job vacancies and agricultural practices. For the longest time, I thought that school food programs only benefitted children's health by imposing certain restrictions and regulations, however, there is more than that. The aim is to instill values and behaviors that can last for adult life. I think I did a good job in elaborating on the need for school food provision policy since Canada happens to be the only G7 nation without a universal program. If given a chance to redo the paper, I would conduct a detailed comparative analysis of the existing provincial school food policies and make recommendations based on the best of each scheme.

I interpreted the suggestions made in the feedback and modified a major portion of my paper. Incorporating changes following the rubric and comments received, I would place the submission in the excellent category. For the next steps, I would spend time study more the school food interventions proposed by different countries. Given the interest I have in the topic, I would like to work on a formal proposal to the Federal Government highlighting the need and recommendations of SFP.

Author/ Date	Research Question(s)/ Hypotheses	Methodology	Analysis & Results	Conclusions	Implications For practice
Rachel Engler-Stringer (2014)	Assessed the location related accessibility to healthy and unhealthy food sources for school children	Collected data related to presence of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores near schools in the city of Saskatoon	Generated score for accessibility of healthy and unhealthy sources present around schools. Compared the results of unhealthy and healthy food outlets in relation to distance from school	Found a prevalence of unhealthy food sources around the neighbourhood in proximity to schools	Used the source to talk about the impact of easy access to Junk food on School Food policy
Mary Story (2007)	Determines the effectiveness of environmental and policy interventions to create healthy eating strategies for population.	Reflects on major ecological frameworks at Macro and Meso levels and studies the impact of each setting on the behavior of consumer making food choice	Focuses on testing food-environment measures which are adoptable to variety of locations. Mixed outcomes related to effect of environment intervention on nutrition	Mentions that significant public health efforts are required to develop sustainable healthy environments.	Used the reference to talk about the importance of developing environment for children to reduce problems such obesity and overweight
Michelle M Vine (2013)	Determines the factors shaping the school nutrition Policy in Canada	Makes use of Qualitative methods to gather information related to barriers to the school food policy. Information was gathered through questionnaires and telephone interviews	Recognises different barriers hindering the effectiveness of food policy in schools along Ontario	Mentions about critical factors that affect the policy: proximity to outlet shops, open break policy of schools, impact of stigma etc.	Used the reference to talk about barriers to the implementation of Universal School food Policy
Global Panel on Agriculture and Food systems for Nutrition (2017)	Policy brief proposes the need of school meal plans and links benefits to agriculture, education and nutrition	-----	Recommends ideas to Policymakers to successfully implement nation food policy meeting nutritional dietary requirements	Concludes School Food program as one of the best ways to address the epidemic of unhealthy diets.	Used the reference to highlight goals of the school food program and potential extensions that can help in supporting the local producers
Ronette R. Briefel (2009)	Determines the impact of healthy school food environment on children in US	The study targeted 287 public schools with children ranging from one to 12 th grade. Collected data from menus, cafeterias and ran a dietary assessment study	Statistical regression was performed and found associations between food environment and dietary outcomes.	Emphasise the importance of school food environments and practices to improve children's diet and reduce obesity	Used the reference to propose the need of a school food policy in Canada

Table 1: Identifies and summarizes the key findings from the articles

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