



Alberta School Nutrition Programs Study

Insights on Effective Actions and
Implementation Challenges



CASS

College of
Alberta School
Superintendents



Continuing
Education
Program

Alberta School Nutrition Programs

Providing nutritious breakfast, snacks, or lunches are essential to the health and learning capabilities of children and youth. Funding provided by the Government of Alberta (School Nutrition Program) and the Government of Canada (National School Food Program) through the [Canada – Alberta National School Food Program Agreement – 2024 to 2027](#) help school authorities provide food, especially to those who need it most. School nutrition programs help reduce inequities related to access to nutrition and food security.

School nutrition programs play a critical role in the overall health, wellbeing, & academic success of children & youth

In Alberta, the *Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth* (Government of Alberta, 2012), guides school authorities in providing meals and snacks that are consumed outside of the home. Such programs become opportunities for children and youth to learn about healthy and nutritious food choices. This synthesis of recent literature and school authority input through an online survey and focus group is intended to support system education leaders in the development, maintenance, and enhancement of school nutrition programs.

See the full study: [School Nutrition Programs Study 2026](#)

The primary objective of school nutrition programs in Canada is to improve student health



These programs also aim to positively impact student learning and academic performance. Policies within Alberta school authorities specifically focus on fostering student health, enhancing learning potential, and establishing lifelong healthy eating habits.



A core goal is ensuring that all children and youth have access to nutritious food within an inclusive, non-stigmatizing environment. Recently, the focus of some programs has shifted from addressing childhood obesity to a greater concern for food security and the availability of culturally acceptable food, and high-nutrient food choices.

INPUT

The Alberta School Nutrition Programs Study (College of Alberta School Superintendents, 2026) received input from some of Alberta's system education leaders responsible for school nutrition programs through online surveys and a focus group, and several additional points were raised.

RESPONSE FROM
SCHOOL AUTHORITIES
ACROSS ALBERTA



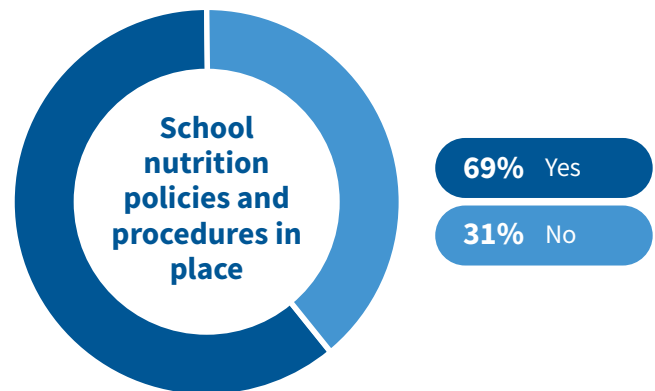
16

REPRESENTING A TOTAL
STUDENT POPULATION OF

291,000

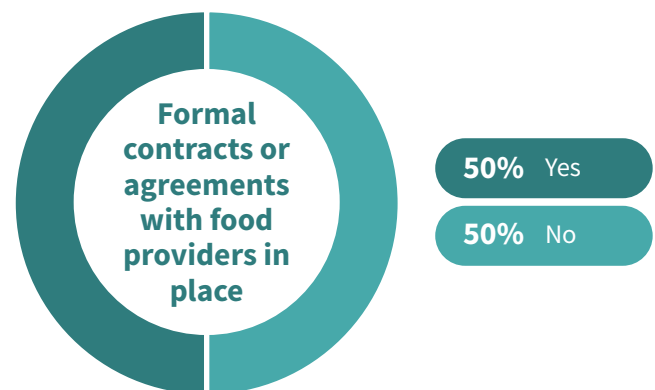
1. Policies & Procedures

Policies and procedures were considered to be important, provided that clear direction and guidance was given to school staff and to those handling the food, preparation, and clean up.



2. Importance of Collaboration & Leadership

Survey respondents and focus groups participants emphasised the role of relationship building with parents, local non-profit and business organizations, food suppliers, grocery stores, and restaurants. School authority leaders and school-based leaders need to work closely with each other to ensure that the broader community is engaged in supporting nutrition programs. Working collaboratively within a school and school authority is necessary and challenging given the multiple education priorities that face schools and their communities.



3. Equitable Access

Ensuring that accessibility to food was universally available to students, was considered to be important to reduce stigma of those requiring nutrition and an appropriate way to address inequity.



Potentially Effective Actions Identified in the Study



1

Comprehensive School Health Approach

Programs are most successful when they integrate a framework of nutritious food options with health and physical education, regular physical activity, and supportive school environments.

2

In-House Preparation & Student Involvement

Preparing food in-house is identified as a sustainable, lower-cost alternative to outside vendors. Involving students through curricular programs, such as Career and Technology Studies, further reduces costs while enhancing valuable skill building and food literacy of secondary students.

3

Reducing Stigma

Implementing "grab and go" stations in multiple locations and ensuring universal availability (offering food to all students rather than just those identified as in need) are effective tactics to reduce social exclusion.

4

Local Autonomy & Partnerships

Allowing for flexibility and local decision-making ensures programs meet unique community and cultural needs (i.e. working with Indigenous partners, distinct linguistic or ethnic groups, restaurants, grocery stores).

5

Dedicated Program Leadership

Establishing a dedicated school nutrition team or coordinator can help maintain, enhance, and establish vital partnerships and ensure operational integrity of the program. System education leadership is necessary for establishing a school authority culture of nutrition and well-being.

6

Resource Management

School authorities can reduce costs by purchasing equipment in bulk and investing in food preparation programs at the secondary level to supply other schools.

7

Monitoring the Program

Identifying what is measurable and tracking activities are key elements in the success of nutrition programs (i.e. number of students served, nutritional value of snacks or meals).

Implementation Challenges Identified in the Study



1

Financial & Resource Constraints

The most prominent challenge is funding instability and the rising costs of food, equipment, and staff. Current funding levels are often cited as insufficient to meet the high demand for these programs.

2

Staffing & Capacity

Maintaining adequate staffing is difficult due to high turnover among volunteers and staff, which leads to increased training costs and operational disruptions.

3

Social & Cultural Barriers

Challenges include the stigma associated with receiving food support, a lack of culturally aligned food options (such as Indigenous, kosher, halal, or ethnic foods), and student preferences for easily accessible low nutrient and high caloric foods.

4

Infrastructure & Logistics

Many schools face inadequate food preparation facilities and storage equipment, as well as time barriers like short lunch periods.

5

Communications

Providing appropriate information to families regarding the purposes and parameters of school nutrition programs can be challenging.

6

Data Collection

Identifying appropriate data to collect and track for accountability purposes is difficult. This requires the energy, focus, and skill of leaders to accomplish.

7

Policy Compliance

Ensuring consistent implementation of nutrition guidelines across all schools—including monitoring vending machine compliance—remains an administrative hurdle.

School authority leaders & school-based staff are working diligently to address learning barriers

School nutrition programs are one element in a constellation of actions system leaders and school leaders must take to support students in achieving educational goals (College of Alberta School Superintendents, 2026).

The pressure on system education and school-based leaders to leverage nutrition funding for the greatest number of students is considerable. Student nutrition has become an educational issue, and educators work hard at partnering with local grocery stores, restaurants, food banks, and other providers and supporters. They reach out to government ministries to access nutrition expertise and possible funding. Essentially, their goal is to utilize all available resources and knowledge to assist students in need of nutritional support.

School authorities are willing to share their practices, and local school authority autonomy is prioritized over a more centralized (provincial) approach to nutrition programs. The commitment to providing quality nutrition programs in schools is very high. The cost of trade-offs to make such programs work is also high, requiring difficult decision making and strong leadership.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

The stability of school nutrition programs is rooted in strong leadership.

Developing and maintaining partnerships is crucial for successful school nutrition programs, and this relies on effective leadership.

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Additional Resources

Full study: School Nutrition Programs Study 2026

<https://cass.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Alberta-School-Nutrition-Programs-2026.pdf>

Albert School Nutrition Learning Lab

<https://cass.ab.ca/resources/research-and-position-papers/>

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