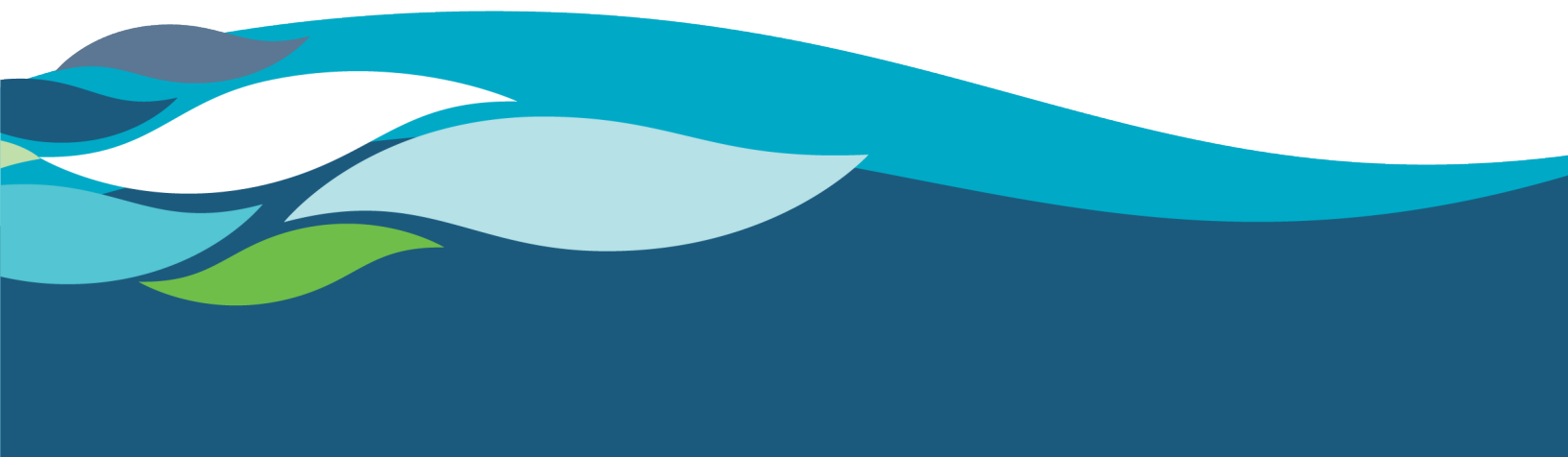




SCHOOL HEALTHY EATING PROGRAMS IN NOVA SCOTIA

Provincial Report
2021-22





Acknowledgement

This provincial report was prepared by Science and System Performance (SSP), Public Health, Nova Scotia Health in consultation with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and with input from the Provincial School Food Advisory Team.

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For more information

For more information or questions about this report, contact SSP-HC@nshealth.ca.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Examining the Current State of School Food in Nova Scotia

School food programs (SFPs) provide students with an important point of access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food and therefore are a prerequisite to learning and are fundamental to creating a more inclusive education system in Nova Scotia. Research on SFPs nationally and internationally has clearly demonstrated their positive contributions to healthy development, nutrition knowledge, dietary intake and academic outcomes.¹

The Province of Nova Scotia provides \$1.7 million annually in School Healthy Eating Program (SHEP) funding to support the provision of healthy food in schools, with a priority focus on breakfast. Recently, there has been increased interest and advocacy at both the federal and provincial levels for investment in a universal school food program that would provide all students with access to a healthy breakfast and lunch during the school day.

The purpose of this provincial report is to:

- Report back to the Province of Nova Scotia and education system on how annual SHEP funding is currently used to support students' access to healthy food in school.
- Understand the current state of free/subsidized lunch offered to students in school.
- Document and share the perspectives of the education system regarding existing barriers and facilitators to healthy school food programs and services in Nova Scotia.

What We Did

Public Health, Nova Scotia Health—in partnership with DEECD—developed complementary quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Quantitative data collection involved a short online survey distributed to all public schools in Nova Scotia to gather data on breakfast programs and/or free/subsidized lunch meals offered in school. A total of 330 schools completed the survey for the 2021–22 school year—representing 89% of all public schools in Nova Scotia. Qualitative data collection involved two phases of key informant interviews conducted with RCE-/CSAP- and school-level informants to explore system- and school-level challenges, facilitators and future opportunities for improving the quality, reach and sustainability of healthy school food programs and services throughout the province.



What We Learned

We learned the following about the current state of school healthy eating programs and services in Nova Scotia public schools.

Program availability

Breakfast

SHEP-funded breakfast programs are widely available in Nova Scotia public schools.

- Almost all schools offer a breakfast program, and most are available five days per week.
- An estimated 43,336 students access breakfast programs across the province on a typical day. This represents 40 per cent of the total student population.

Free/subsidized lunch

Free/subsidized lunch is available in some Nova Scotia public schools on an ad-hoc basis.

- Only about half of schools' report offering students free/subsidized lunch meals.
- Schools that offer free/subsidized lunch are serving only a very small proportion (<5%) of their total student population.
- Most schools identify a select number of students who are perceived to need access to free/subsidized lunch.
- RCEs/CSAP and schools describe current funding amounts as inadequate to support access to free/subsidized lunch in schools, and name funding as a key barrier to lunch program delivery.
- Most schools indicate that free/subsidized lunch is primarily supported through external sources of funding beyond SHEP (such as external grants or other school budget lines).



System-level barriers and facilitators

System-level barriers and facilitators impact the quality, availability and accessibility of healthy eating programs in Nova Scotia public schools. Some priority areas identified as requiring immediate attention included:

- Funding adequacy to cover the true operational costs of universal school food programs, including investment in the necessary infrastructure to store, prepare, order and serve food in schools.
- Human resources dedicated to school food at the RCE/CSAP level to provide oversight of finances and program quality, and at the school-level to manage and implement food programs and services.
- Provincial support, leadership and policy directives to create consistency in what is currently offered and available in schools across the province.
- RCE-/CSAP-level coordination and oversight to help create efficiencies, reduce cost and improve accessibility of local, fresh, whole foods in schools.
- Examining current contracts with private food service providers in schools as a key barrier in the success of school healthy eating programs.

Student access

The importance of non-stigmatizing practices in school food programs to enable student access is well understood by RCEs/CSAP and schools, however, it seems there are still barriers that keep some students from participating in these programs, particularly those vulnerable to food insecurity.

- Most RCEs/CSAP and schools recognize the importance of universal school food—meaning that all students can access a healthy meal in a non-stigmatizing way.
- There is still a wide range of participation in school breakfast programs across the province (from 2% to 100% of a school's student population).
- Provincially, there are no correlations between student participation in breakfast programs and/or free/subsidized lunch and community-level indicators of poverty or material deprivation.
- Funding, human resources and infrastructure were consistently named as barriers to implementing universal models for food programs and services in schools.



Relevance to Practice

Overall, the findings from this current state analysis demonstrate that not every student in Nova Scotia has the same opportunity to access healthy food in school, with concerning gaps in the availability, access, affordability and quality of what is currently offered. While survey findings indicate high availability of SHEP-funded breakfast programs, access to free/subsidized lunch is much less consistent, with a patchwork of systems, models and fee structures currently in place.

While the importance of universality in school food was generally well understood and supported by key informants, the significant variability in participation rates, particularly for breakfast, suggests that there may still be barriers to access and participation for students. The finding that there was no correlation between participation in breakfast programs and/or free/subsidized lunch and community-level indicators of poverty or material deprivation may suggest that need is not a primary factor influencing student participation. Rather, differences in capacity, resources and implementation practices across the province may determine whether families and students access free/subsidized school food programs and services. This finding may warrant further exploration through future data collection to better understand how principles of universality are currently implemented and applied.

The findings of this report also point to key areas of focus for government stakeholders and other decision makers interested in improving the success, sustainability, quality and level of student participation in school food programs and services in Nova Scotia. These include (though are not limited to) operational supports such as sustainable, adequate funding and dedicated human resources (at all levels), regional coordination to create efficiencies and ensure schools are supported in program implementation, and provincial support, leadership and directives to help standardize the accessibility, availability and quality of school food programs and services provincially. Key informants also identified flexibility and autonomy at the RCE/CSAP and school level as an equally important enabler.

In conclusion, this report provides a timely review and assessment of the current state of school food in Nova Scotia that can be used to inform continued quality improvement efforts for existing programs and services. The findings highlight key opportunities to further integrate best practice evidence and address the systemic and operational barriers that continue to impede progress towards equitable access to healthy school food. The results presented here represent the voices and perspectives of school food leaders and administrators and should be carefully considered alongside any endeavours to expand access or availability to meal programs in Nova Scotia public schools.



INTRODUCTION

The Province of Nova Scotia provides \$1.7 million annually in SHEP funding to support the provision of healthy food in schools, with a priority focus on breakfast. The vision for this funding is that all public schools in Nova Scotia will offer, at minimum, a universal breakfast program five days per week in alignment with the Food and Nutrition Policy for Nova Scotia Public Schools. Remaining SHEP funds may be used to offer snacks and/or lunch meals to students under the same universal model, where possible. Schools may also receive funding for meal and snack programs through external sources such as Breakfast Clubs of Canada, President's Choice Children's Charity and/or other school-based fundraising activities.

Recently, there has been increased interest and advocacy at both the federal and provincial levels for investment in a universal school food program that would provide all students with access to a healthy breakfast and lunch during the school day. In December 2021, the Federal Mandate Letters of the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister of Families, Children and Social Development named working with provinces, territories, municipalities, Indigenous partners and stakeholders to advance school food policy and a national school food program as a cross-departmental priority. **This provincial report provides a timely review and assessment of the current state of school food in Nova Scotia that can be used to inform continued quality improvement efforts for existing programs and services and/or future planning regarding their expansion.**

PURPOSE

The purpose of this provincial report is to:

- Report back to the Province of Nova Scotia and education system on how annual SHEP funding is currently used to support students' access to healthy food in school.
- Understand the current state of free/subsidized lunch offered to students in school.
- Document and share the perspectives of the education system regarding existing barriers and facilitators to healthy school food programs and services in Nova Scotia.



EVIDENCE REVIEW

Good nutrition and healthy eating patterns are essential for growth and development and have both immediate and long-term effects on health, learning and student success. There is an extensive body of research documenting how access to nutritious food helps children and youth in school — improving their cognition (e.g., alertness, attention, memory and problem solving),^{2,3} their social skills and their academic performance^{4,5} (e.g., standardized tests scores and grade point averages). Well-nourished children have better school attendance rates and are less likely to experience emotional and behavioral problems⁶ — meaning more time spent in the classroom to focus on education. Specific to Nova Scotia, researchers have also identified associations between the quality of student’s diets and their level of achievement in English language arts and mathematics⁷ — areas that remain prioritized as part of DEECD’s student success planning.

School food programs (SFPs) are a well-supported approach to improving students’ access to and intake of nutritious food during the school day. In Canada, SFPs may be fully or partially supported through government funding and/or non-profit organization/private sector donations⁸ and generally encompass healthy breakfast, snack and/or lunch meals offered at either a subsidized cost or at no cost to students. The inherent nature of SFPs and their ad-hoc funding means they are often positioned and promoted alongside other charitable and community initiatives that seek to address unmet food needs within the community. While SFPs may provide temporary food relief for some students and families, it is important to note that they are not an appropriate or sustainable solution to household food insecurity* as they do not address its root causes — primarily, inadequate income.⁹ There is also limited evidence indicating SFPs are reaching populations vulnerable to food insecurity, and what research is available suggests that families may in fact avoid using free meal programs primarily due to the stigma associated with accessing food charity.^{10,11}

Recognizing these limitations, SFPs have been intentionally positioned in this report as providing students with an important point of access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food that is a prerequisite to learning and fundamental to creating a more inclusive education system in Nova Scotia. Research on SFPs nationally and internationally has clearly demonstrated their positive contributions to healthy development, nutrition knowledge, dietary intake and academic outcomes. This is particularly true when schools incorporate a variety of intervention components alongside SFP implementation, such as policy, education, food literacy, and family and community involvement.^{12,13,14,15,16} Given that children and youth

* Defined as inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. Derived from: Tarasuk, V., & Mitchell, A. (2020). *Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017–18*. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity.



spend more of their waking hours in school than in any other setting, SFPs offer a significant opportunity to foster their health, learning and well-being. SFPs can, however, vary widely in their scope, design, implementation and reach⁸ and, depending on their approach, have the potential to be supportive or harmful to students and families. Current literature^{8, 17, 18} and experiential evidence from Nova Scotia¹⁹ support several best practices for the planning and operation of SFPs that contribute to their overall success.

- **Sustainable:** SFPs are adequately and consistently funded. This includes resources to support the necessary physical infrastructure and human resources that are required for successful implementation.
- **Universal and Non-Stigmatizing:** Research has documented the harms associated with targeted approaches to food charity and their impact on participation for intended populations.^{10,11} To reduce stigma, SFPs should welcome all students in a school community with no exceptions and be positioned, promoted and resourced as an integral part of the broader learning environment.
- **Nutritious and Culturally Appropriate Foods:** SFPs are guided by nutrition policies and standards that focus on the provisioning of whole, fresh foods that are culturally appropriate and that reflect and celebrate the diversity of the surrounding community.
- **Engagement of School Community:** SFPs engage multiple stakeholders with diverse knowledge and experience to inform and lead their development and implementation.
- **Adapted Locally:** SFPs are connected to and draw from the assets of the school community and are responsive to regional, local and community differences.
- **Procurement of Local Foods:** SFPs use coordinated approaches to procure food and, where possible, work towards greater integration of local food resources to support sustainability and economic development.
- **Integrated as part of Health Promoting Schools:** SFPs are fully integrated within the learning environment and are positioned as part of a comprehensive, multi-part approach to improving health and learning outcomes for students.^{12, 20, 21, 22}
- **Monitored and Evaluated:** There are active and standardized program-level data collection and established benchmarks for SFPs that enable continuous quality improvement and strive for universal participation.⁸



METHODS

Public Health, Nova Scotia Health—in partnership with DEECD—developed complementary quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

Quantitative Data—School Healthy Eating Program (SHEP) Surveys

To better understand the current state of availability and access to breakfast programs and other free/subsidized meals in Nova Scotia public schools, a short online survey was developed and distributed to all public schools in the province using REDCap—a secure web-based data collection and management platform supported and hosted through Nova Scotia Health.^{23,24} Meetings were held with representatives from each RCE and CSAP to provide details of the survey content, as well as the proposed distribution and data collection process.

The SHEP survey intended to gather the following information from schools (see Appendix A):

- availability of breakfast programs and/or free/subsidized lunch meals;
- estimated number of students accessing breakfast and/or free/subsidized lunch; and
- how students access free/subsidized lunch, and what funding sources were used (if applicable).

To improve the integrity of data collected, all schools were encouraged to follow a consistent process when estimating the total number of students participating in their breakfast program (see Appendix A).

Qualitative Data—Key Informant Interviews

In addition to school-based surveys, interviews were also conducted with two groups of key informants to explore system- and school-level challenges, facilitators and future opportunities for improving the quality, reach and sustainability of healthy school food programs and services throughout the province.

Two interview guides (see Appendices B and C) were designed to facilitate data collection on key areas of interest. Participation in the consultation was voluntary and confidentiality was assured through a verbal consent process. All in-depth interviews were recorded and lasted approximately one hour. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify and organize emergent themes.



RCE/CSAP Interviews

RCE-/CSAP-level key informants were identified through the Provincial School Food Advisory team. Informants were invited to participate in virtual in-depth interviews that took place between January–February 2022.

School Interviews

All RCEs/CSAP were invited to identify school administrators/staff that may be interested in discussing the operational barriers and facilitators of their school food programs and services. A list of potential participants was received from seven out of eight RCEs/CSAP. The final sample (N=28) was categorized based on school grade level (Pre-primary to Grade 6; Grades 5+ ONLY; Pre-primary to Grade 12) as a complementary variable to data already collected.

Two rounds of sampling were conducted to select participants for an in-depth virtual interview. Stratified random sampling was applied to identify one participant from each grade level category. This was followed by purposeful sampling to select additional participants based on key school characteristics not yet represented in the primary sample (e.g., schools in urban vs. rural communities and differing cafeteria models). School-level interviews took place between April–May 2022. Participants not selected for an in-depth interview were invited to provide written comments via email using the same interview guide (Appendix C).



LIMITATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

There are several limitations of the methods and data presented in this report that should be considered.

- **It is unclear whether pre-primary students are accessing breakfast programs and/or free/subsidized lunch in schools.** Although pre-primary programs are funded separately, pre-primary students may be accessing school food. Given that survey respondents were not asked to specify involvement of pre-primary students in school healthy eating programs, quantitative analysis has assumed access for all students and included pre-primary populations.
- **Reporting by schools that free/subsidized lunch is “available to all students” should be interpreted as lunch is available to all students *who identify they need it*.** When asked about how students access free/subsidized lunch, the “available to all students” survey response option was intended to capture lunch programs that are universally available to the entire student population. However, further analysis suggests that this was likely interpreted differently by respondents, as almost all schools that offer free/subsidized lunch serve less than 5% of their total student population.
- **This report does not quantify the types or quality of foods and beverages served and sold in schools and/or their alignment to the *Food and Nutrition Policy for Nova Scotia Public Schools*.** These data points were excluded from the SHEP survey for the 2021–22 school year as the Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia was simultaneously completing a performance audit on school food, which is intended to provide complementary analysis on the nutritional quality of food in schools.
- **Total numbers of students reported to be accessing breakfast and/or free/subsidized lunch in schools should be considered an estimate of true participation.** While schools were encouraged to use consistent data collection methods in tracking student involvement in breakfast programs (see Appendix A), it is unclear the extent to which these methods were applied. No consistent methods were required for tracking the number of students accessing free/subsidized lunch. It is also possible that numbers reported this year may have been impacted by absenteeism related to COVID-19.
- **The total number of schools reported to be offering or not offering a breakfast program is representative of the point in time in which data was collected.** RCEs/CSAP have indicated that some schools which reported not offering a breakfast program at the time of SHEP survey distribution have since stood up their programs. As such, reporting on availability of breakfast programs for this school year should be interpreted with caution as responses may reflect residual challenges and interruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



RESULTS

Quantitative Results: School Healthy Eating Programs in Nova Scotia Public Schools

A total of 330 schools completed the SHEP survey for the 2021–22 school year—representing 89% of all public schools in Nova Scotia. Table 1 outlines survey completion rates in each RCE/CSAP.

Table 1. 2021–22 SHEP survey completion rates by RCE/CSAP

RCE/CSAP	Total # of schools*	# (%) of schools that completed SHEP survey
CCRCE	66	65 (98%)
AVRCE	42	35 (83%)
SSRCE	25	23 (92%)
HRCE	135	133 (99%)
CSAP	22	10 (45%)
TCRCE	22	19 (86%)
CBVRCE	38	38 (100%)
SRCE	20	7 (35%)
TOTAL	370	330 (89%)

*Based on DEECD documentation. Totals include alternate programs and adult high schools; not all regions provide healthy eating programs in these schools.

Availability of Breakfast Programs

Of the 330 schools that responded to the survey question, 323 (97.9%) report offering a provincially funded breakfast program to students. Of these 323 schools, 311 (97%) report their breakfast program is available to students five days per week, while the remaining 11** (3%) report their breakfast program is available less than five days per week (with a range of one to four). Seven (2.1%) schools indicate they do not currently offer a breakfast program to students,† primarily due to a perceived lack of need within their school community or a lack of available infrastructure. When asked for additional detail on why they do not offer breakfast, one school responded: “The community is quite affluent, and we don't need funding to meet the needs of students who require food. The staff has expressed that these funds are best directed to needier communities.”

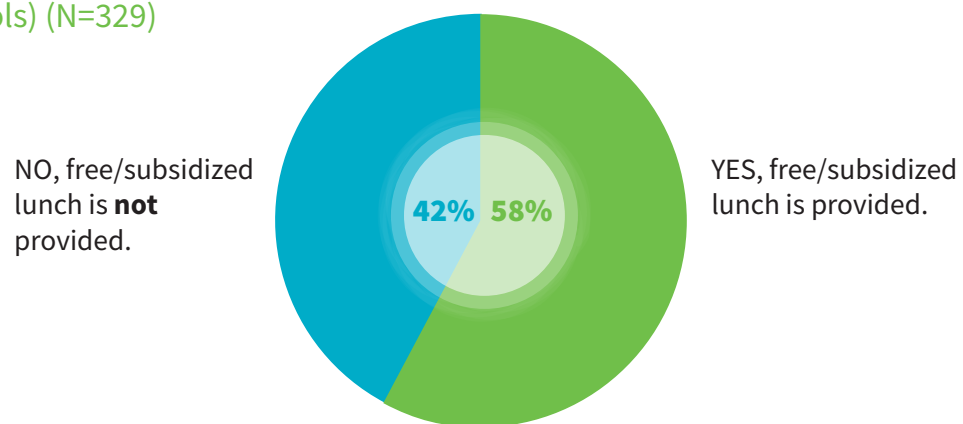
† See limitations section above regarding availability of breakfast programs.

** One school did not indicate the number of days they offer their breakfast program.

Availability of Free/Subsidized Lunch

Of the 329 schools that responded to the survey question, 190 (58%) report currently offering free/subsidized lunch meals to students during the school day.[‡] One hundred and thirty-nine (42%) schools report they do not currently offer free/subsidized lunch meals to students, though it is not clear why this is the case. It is important to note that there is a high degree of variability across the province in whether free/subsidized lunch is available to students in school, ranging from 30% of schools offering free/subsidized lunch in some RCEs/CSAP to almost 96% of schools in others.

Figure 1. Availability of free/subsidized lunch in Nova Scotia public schools (% schools) (N=329)

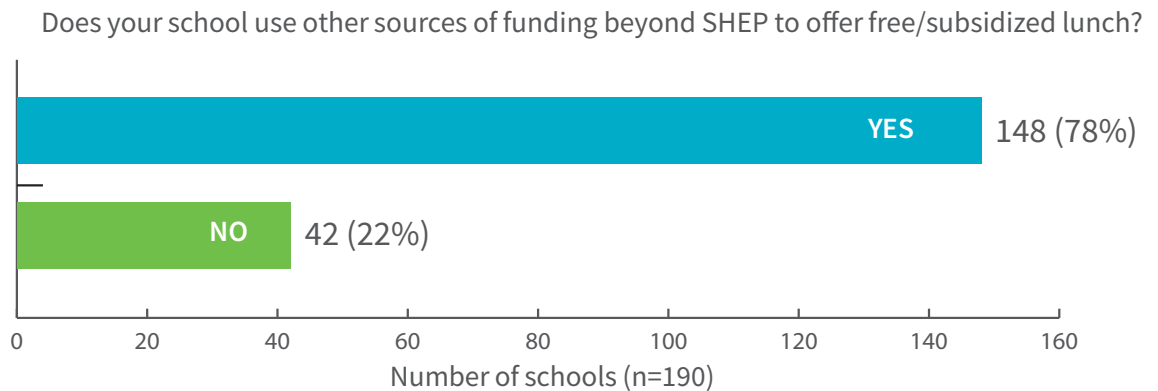


Sources of Funding Used to Offer Free/Subsidized Lunch to Students

Of the 190 schools that offer free/subsidized lunch, most (N=148, 78%) rely on other sources beyond provincial SHEP funding to provide these meals to students. These sources of funding may include, for example, external grant opportunities and other school budget lines. Only a small number of schools (N=42, 22%) that offer free/subsidized lunch report not using sources of funding beyond SHEP.

[‡] Free/subsidized lunch is primarily offered in schools on an ad-hoc basis to a select number of students (see below for more details).

Figure 2. Sources of funding used to offer free/subsidized lunch to students in Nova Scotia public schools (N=190)



How Students Access Free/Subsidized Lunch

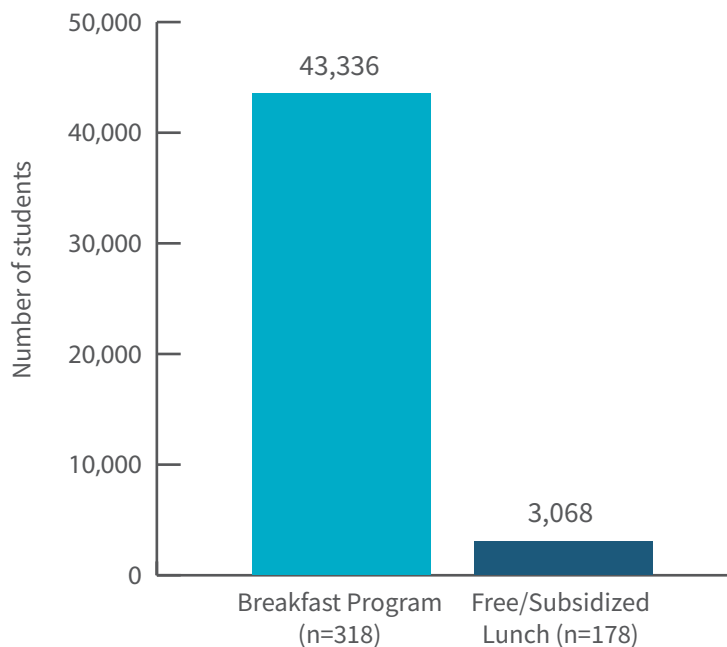
Schools were also asked how students access free/subsidized lunches if they are available (N=190). Half of schools (N=102, 54%) report that a select number of students are identified who may benefit from access to a free/subsidized lunch, while about a quarter of schools (N=50, 26%) report that free/subsidized lunch is available to all students.[§] Thirty-eight schools (20%) indicate “other” models of free/subsidized lunch delivery, which include, for example: “students come to the office to ask for lunch, parents contact the school to request support, or food service staff prepare extra lunches based on their knowledge of student needs.”

[§] “Available to all students” should be interpreted as lunch is available to *all students who identify they need it*. See *Limitations and Considerations* section.

Total Number of Students Accessing Breakfast and/or Free/Subsidized Lunch

A total of 318** schools provided an estimate of the number of students accessing any foods or beverages offered as part of their breakfast program. On a typical school day, there are a total of 43,336 students accessing breakfast in these schools. Access to lunch is much more limited, with approximately 3,068 students reported to be receiving a free/subsidized lunch on a typical school day in the 178** schools that provided an estimate.

Figure 3. Total number of students accessing breakfast and/or free/subsidized lunch in Nova Scotia public schools on a typical school day (# of students)

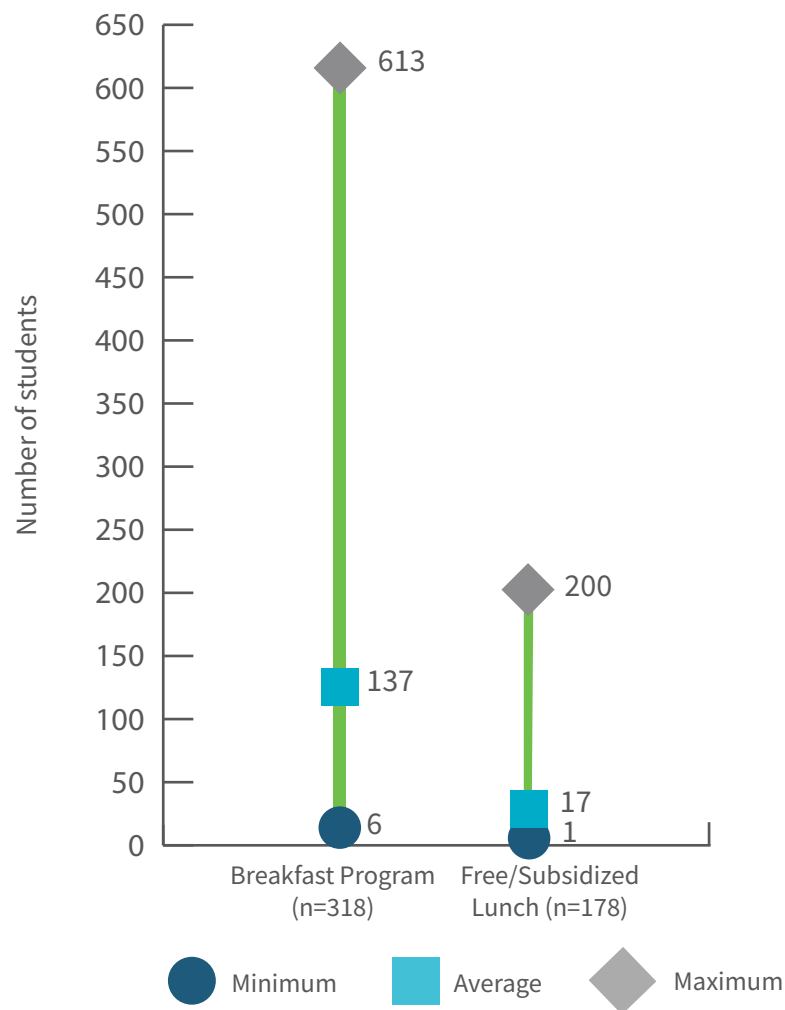


** Note: Five schools that report they offer breakfast programs and 12 schools that report they offer free/subsidized lunch did not respond to the survey question regarding the number of students who access these meals each day.

Range of Students Accessing Breakfast and/or Free/Subsidized Lunch Per School

The number of students accessing breakfast on a typical day per school ranges from a minimum of six to a maximum of 613, with an average of 137 students (standard deviation [SD] = 109.3). In comparison, the number of students accessing free/subsidized lunch on a typical day per school ranges from a minimum of one to a maximum of 200, with an average of 17 students (SD = 27.7).*

Figure 4. Range of students accessing breakfast and/or free/subsidized lunch per school (# of students)



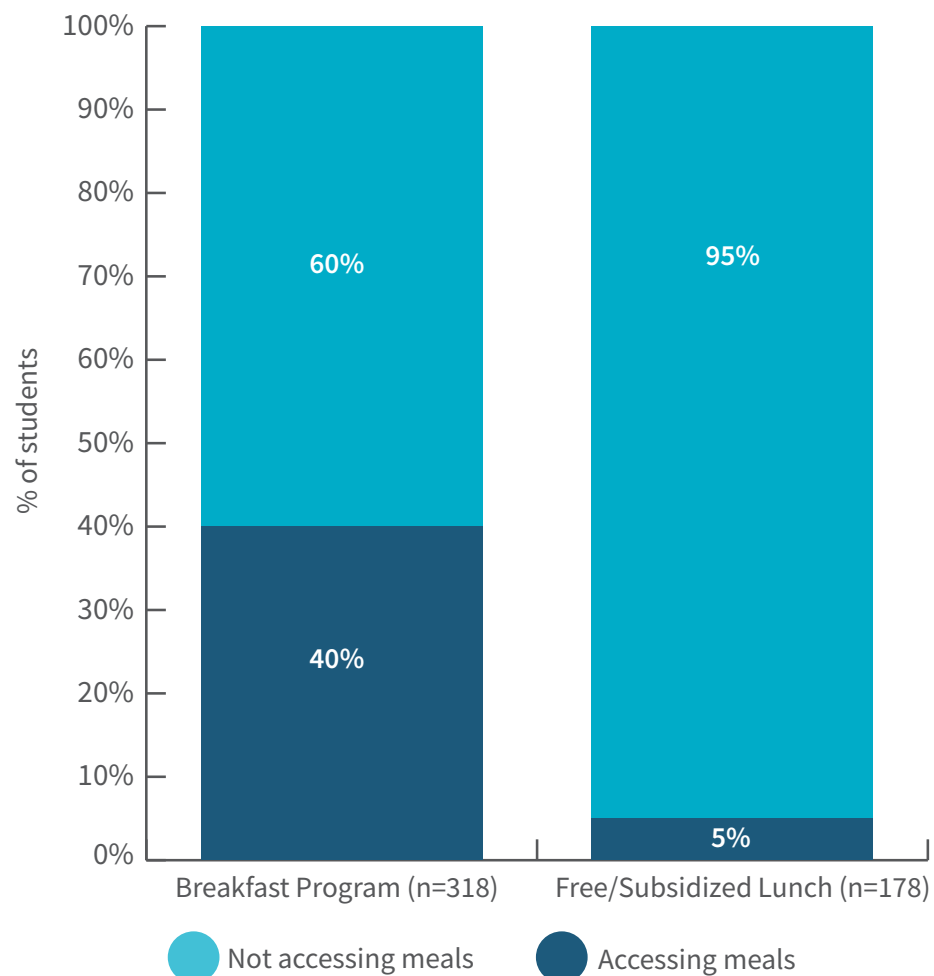
*Note: Some variability may be attributed to differences in school population size—see proportion of student population accessing breakfast and/or free/subsidized lunch.



Proportion of Students Accessing Breakfast and/or Free/Subsidized Lunch

The number of students accessing breakfast and/or free/subsidized lunch was also examined as a proportion of the total student population in Nova Scotia public schools.^{††} Of the 318 schools that provided participation rates for their breakfast programs, 40% of their summed total student population report accessing breakfast on a typical school day. In comparison, of the 178 schools that provided participation rates for free/subsidized lunch, only 5% of their summed total student population report accessing free/subsidized lunch.

Figure 5. Proportion of total student population accessing breakfast and/or free/subsidized lunch in Nova Scotia public schools (% student population)

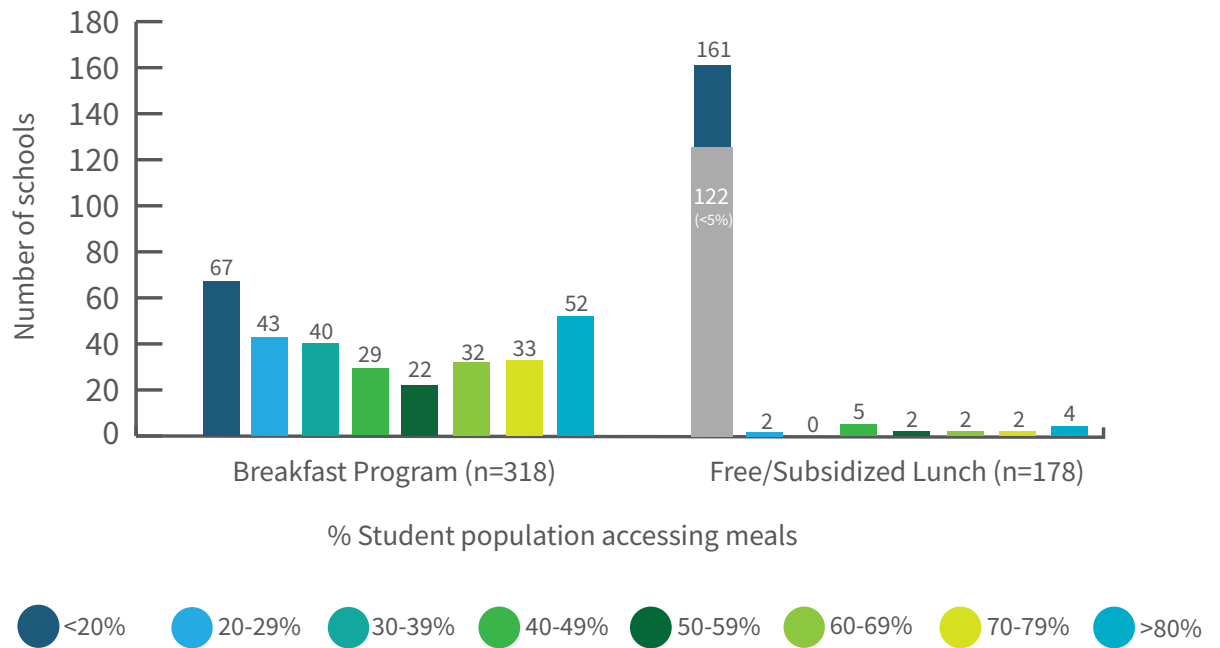


^{††} Student populations are based on DEECD's 2021–22 school enrolment data available via: <https://www.ednet.ns.ca/document-depot>; totals include pre-primary students.

Proportion of Student Population Accessing Breakfast and/or Free/Subsidized Lunch—Distribution Across Schools

There is a relatively even split in the number of schools that report less than 50% of their total student population access breakfast on a typical school day (N=179, 56%) and the number of schools that report access by 50% or more of their total student population (N=139, 44%). There are 13 schools that report 100% of their total student population are accessing breakfast. In contrast to breakfast programs, there is much less variation in the proportion of students accessing free/subsidized lunch in schools. Almost all schools that offer free/subsidized lunch to students report that less than 20% of their student population access these meals on a typical school day (N=161), and 122 of them report access by less than 5% of their student population.

Figure 6. Proportion of student population accessing breakfast and/or free/subsidized lunch—distribution across schools (# of schools)



Secondary Quantitative Analysis

Student Participation in Breakfast Programs and/or Free/Subsidized Lunch and Community-Level Indicators of Poverty and Material Deprivation

A secondary analysis was completed using 2016 Statistics Canada Census data to determine potential correlation between student participation in breakfast programs and/or free/subsidized lunch in Nova Scotia public schools and community-level indicators of poverty and material deprivation. Material Deprivation Index (MDI) rank^{‡‡, 25} and Low-Income Measure, After Tax (LIM-AT)^{§§} were used as proxies for vulnerability to food insecurity within the school community. Schools that completed the SHEP survey were assigned to their respective community cluster^{***} and dissemination area (DA)^{†††} based on their geography. Data for the indicators mentioned were pulled from Statistics Canada's Geospatial Database and matched to schools using cluster and DA codes. Correlation analysis was completed. Results indicate there is no significant correlation between rates of student participation in breakfast programs and/or free/subsidized lunch and MDI rank at a community cluster level ($r = -0.0414$ and 0.0521 , respectively). There was, however, significant variance observed in participation rates per school within each community cluster. To account for potential differences within clusters, correlation analysis was also completed for rates of student participation in breakfast programs and/or free/subsidized lunch and rate of LIM-AT at a DA level. Results further confirmed no significant correlation between these variables ($r = 0.0081$ and $r = 0.1431$, respectively).

‡‡ MDI ranks 54 community clusters across Nova Scotia from 1–5 according to their level of material deprivation, with 5 indicating highest deprivation. Variables used to calculate MDI include (for the population 15 years and over): proportion of the population without a high school diploma, the employment to population ratio, the average income of the population.

§§ The LIM-AT refers to a fixed percentage (50%) of median adjusted after-tax income of private households. The household after-tax income is adjusted by an equivalence scale to take economies of scale into account. This adjustment for different household sizes reflects the fact that a household's needs increase, but at a decreasing rate, as the number of members increases.

*** Community Clusters (CCs) were developed to create common areas for health service delivery planning and have been subsequently adopted as the planning geography for Nova Scotia Health. They align with what are generally perceived as clusters of areas sharing a community identity, known as natural communities. There are 54 CCs in NS.

††† A DA is a small, relatively stable geographic unit comprised of one or more adjacent dissemination blocks with an average population of 400 to 700 persons. It is the smallest standard geographic area for which all census data are disseminated. There are 1670 DAs in NS.



Qualitative Results: Barriers and Facilitators to Healthy School Food Programs and Services

Two phases of key informant interviews were conducted to gather perspectives at the RCE/CSAP and school level.

- **RCE/CSAP interviews:** a total of 15 participants were interviewed, representing each RCE/CSAP and a diversity of roles within the education system, such as directors, coordinators, dietitians and others who support and coordinate school food programs and services.
- **School interviews:** a total of six participants were interviewed, and an additional two informants provided written comments by email. All but one participant held a role as a school administrator (principal or vice-principal).

The following is an overview of *what we heard* from education partners and leaders regarding the current successes and challenges faced in providing healthy food to students in Nova Scotia public schools. Due to the inter-related nature of school food, we have used “school food programs and services” in this section of the report to encompass both provincially funded breakfast programs and other free/subsidized or fee-based meals offered in the school environment.

What We Heard

The qualitative findings from the interviews have been summarized in detail below under several core themes: *funding, human resources, infrastructure, school food procurement, privatization of food services, universality and availability of fresh, whole food*. The contrary nature of whether these themes were described by informants as a current barrier or facilitator to their school food programs and services further demonstrates the vast differences in the systems and structures currently in place across RCEs/CSAP and schools.

Funding

Sustainable, adequate resourcing was identified at the RCE/CSAP and school level as both a persistent challenge and key facilitator of healthy and universal school food programs and services. In many cases, key informants spoke of the need to critically examine current funding allotted to school food programs and services to ensure it reflects their level of importance in promoting health, fostering an inclusive learning environment, and improving academic outcomes for students. Across all interviews, informants were consistent in identifying the critical connection between funding and the availability and accessibility of breakfast and/or free/subsidized lunch in the school environment.



School Breakfast Programs

While the results of this report demonstrate the many successes of provincial SHEP funding (including that most schools in Nova Scotia are offering breakfast programs to students), several informants at both the RCE/CSAP and school level also described current funding allotments as insufficient to ***cover increasing costs of programming and full implementation of the recommended universal^{†††} model***. Factors contributing to this funding gap included:

- Increased food costs and inflation.
- Increased demand for breakfast programs attributed partially to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- A shift to classroom-based breakfast program models during the pandemic which may have increased their accessibility and therefore, levels of participation.

One school informant described “emergency” funding provided during the COVID-19 pandemic as highly supportive in making breakfast programs more financially viable. However, they also expressed concern that when this additional funding lapses, the sustainability and quality of breakfast programs may suffer.

“I really appreciate the fact that the [emergency] funds are in place to ensure that I don’t have to say, OK, we’re only gonna offer breakfast on Tuesdays and Thursdays because, you know, there are kids that do rely on that top up, whether they’ve had breakfast or they’ve walked from home and not gotten it, so I just appreciate that the funding is there right now, that we can continue to offer it five days a week. In the manner that we have. . . I know the rug’s probably gonna get pulled out, but at the same time, I’ve appreciated not having to worry too much about, you know, running out of funds.”

~ School Informant

^{†††} Offering universal school food programs was described to informants as meaning that every student has equal opportunity to access a healthy meal in a non-stigmatizing way.

Free/Subsidized Lunch in School

Several key informants also described an *increased need to provide free lunches to students*, particularly during recent school years. Free lunch meals (often referred to as “equity meals”) are generally provided by schools on an ad-hoc basis when students are without a lunch or are unable to purchase one. In several RCEs/CSAP, these meals are described as being financed through other school budget lines, which was identified as an unsustainable practice.

“We’ve seen a growing...more acute and urgent need around feeding kids [at] lunch hour. Breakfast programs typically are pretty high quality, and you know, financially sustainable. A lot of that is not just the funding we get provincially, but a lot of community partnerships as well. . . Where we are noticing the gap is in feeding kids that need a lunch, and we’re doing that at a pretty significant financial hit to the region in order to sustain that, especially over the last couple of years.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

Due to these challenges, RCE/CSAP informants shared strategies used to secure additional funding, such as grant writing, seeking support from community partners, or soliciting charitable donations. This fundraising work required a significant amount of staff time and was described as taking educators away from other important duties. One key informant also felt the uncertainty related to grants or donation-based funding streams may lead to perceptions of funding scarcity and suboptimal use of current funds by schools.

“There has to be a pot of money that is sustainable year in, year out. Here’s what you’re getting to work within it . . . having to wait on grants and different pockets of money throughout the year, you know they’re coming, but you’re not 100% sure and it creates a little bit of uncertainty and some schools . . . tend to want to squirrel it away for a rainy day.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

The challenges related to the ad-hoc nature of funding for equity meals and the significant efforts required by staff to obtain it was reinforced by key informants at the school level, particularly those with schools in areas perceived to have higher rates of poverty. Several school informants spoke about seeking donations from the community or local charities to provide equity meals or to subsidize lunch meals to make them more affordable for students.

“We also have to offset our costs. We sent out probably 50 letters to businesses in the area and asked them to support our food program. So, for example, if they donated \$200, that’s subsidizing the cost of one lunch for all students. So, it’s a two-dollar lunch instead of a four- or five-dollar lunch. We said \$200 buys every student milk for a week. One thousand dollars would get you four or five free lunches for the whole school. So, we probably got \$3,000 in donations, which was really nice, and we’ve offered free lunch the day before a long weekend. So that we all know kids are going home with a full belly on the Friday or the Thursday before being home for a three-day weekend.”

~ School Informant

Human Resources

All key informants spoke of human resource capacity as a central tenet of successful and sustainable school food programs and services. They described the current state of human resources upholding school food in Nova Scotia as a patchwork system of volunteers (community and school staff), externally contracted food service workers, and internally hired staff. The type and amount of human resource support available not only varied greatly across RCEs/CSAP and between schools, in some cases it also depended on the type of food program or service being offered (e.g., breakfast programs vs. lunch).

RCE/CSAP Staff

Limited regional and provincial staff with a dedicated focus on school food was a key challenge discussed across RCEs/CSAP. Informants described a need for increased staffing complements within their respective RCE/CSAP to improve coordination and oversight of finances and program quality (e.g., standardized menus and training of food service staff). As one informant described, without dedicated staff, school food remained “off the side of their desks.”

“In terms of additional staff, so [we have our two regional level staff]. And that position is basically a full-time position and then I think we have to...we have to say how...I mean, [staff name] throws in off the side of his desk, [staff name] throws in off the side of her desk, [staff name] and myself and so it [school food programs] doesn't happen without regional support and in some ways, we know that we're lean on the ground. In some ways like even with what we have now, we're still not fully staffed to be able to start something [referring to new/expanded food programs] and follow it the whole way through.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

In contrast, having a designated staff person, or team of individuals, at the RCE/CSAP level to manage school food programs and services was deemed a significant contributor to their success. While the specific job tasks/duties of this type of role varied, in instances where there was an RCE-/CSAP-level position for school food in place, it was generally felt to be a facilitator supporting operational functions (e.g., procurement and menu development) and helping to ensure consistency in program delivery across schools.

“But I think having [school food coordinator] around to assist with problem solving things when they come up helps as well, because then again, it's not taking the principal away from their instructional leadership responsibilities and buildings, and it's being led by an expert. Somebody who knows foodservice, who knows how to [understand] nutrition and can guide cafeteria staff through [that], you know.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant



School Staff

RCE/CSAP key informants also commented on the lack of dedicated human resources for implementing school food programs and services. There was much discussion about how, in the absence of food service managers and staff, school administrators were often tasked with taking on the responsibilities of school food operations in addition to, and sometimes to the detriment of, their core roles as educators.

“Not to be blunt, but school food falls low on the list of priorities in the sense of we all know and they [school administrators] all know . . . that kids need food. I've worked in a variety of schools in a variety of communities . . . we all know the importance of food and learning, but when you look at the principal's job or the vice-principal's job in terms of being the instructional leader. Uh, and then you take COVID and you throw that in the middle of all of it . . . So, I think one of the biggest challenges is the capacity. I left a school of over 500 students in an elementary school. Now we were lucky we had a cafeteria that was run by employees, but we never really had much of a breakfast program . . . And to ask myself or the vice-principal or teachers to take that on would have been a big challenge.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

Like interviewees from RCEs/CSAP, school-level informants discussed how school administrators (principals or vice-principals) tend to have a “catch-all” role in overseeing the implementation of school food programs and services. Examples of their various responsibilities included:

- food procurement and supply management;
- infrastructure maintenance;
- negotiating with private food service operators;
- quality control;
- supporting student involvement/feedback;
- hiring staff or recruiting volunteers;
- financial management;
- securing additional funding; and
- navigating relationships with students to ensure food needs are met in ways that reduce stigma.

While some school administrators we spoke with may not necessarily view the oversight of school food programs and services as part of their role as an instructional leader, they described the need to do so in the absence of dedicated staff. They also spoke of an increasing time commitment in relation to the above duties in recent years.

“But I will tell you that the amount of time and effort that was spent on ensuring healthy lunch and healthy breakfast 17 years ago is not what it is today. It’s significantly increased. There’s more pressure and responsibility on the administrator . . . to get the volunteers, to make sure that the ordering is done . . . making sure you have the supplies. Among all the other things that you’re responsible for in the school, you’re responsible for the functioning of the dishwasher in the cafeteria. You know, who knew that? . . . So that . . . it’s a lot. I don’t see [my] role in school administration to be ensuring the healthy food of students like it’s, you know. But who’s gonna do it?”

~ School Informant

At the same time, school informants understood the social importance of eating together in school and recognized that ensuring students’ food needs were met was essential to their overall well-being. There was significant internal conflict present in the way in which school informants described access to healthy food programs and services in school as a priority alongside their feelings of being overburdened and under-resourced in their implementation.

“I mean it’s a full-time job, like breakfast programs can be a full-time job of themselves. And it’s just one more thing that we do in our schools, as you know . . . with the wraparound care model that’s currently in schools . . . not only food, but everything else that’s there. It’s just one more thing and you just do it and make sure it’s done, and I think from a culture standpoint, it’s really important for you to do those things because . . . if you think about successful and happy families, you’re usually sitting around eating together.”

~ School Informant

Teachers and other school staff, such as administrative staff and educational program assistants (EPAs), were also described as supports for school food programs and services; however, one administrator described that it was challenging to rely on teachers for program delivery due to the need to volunteer outside of their regular work hours.

“And the problem with breakfast program in the morning, it’s hard to get teacher volunteers . . . to get them here at 7:45 in the morning to get the breakfast [out] . . . it’s hard, right? They have families and stuff like that. So, a lot of times I would just do it by myself by getting there in the morning and throwing the baskets together and I’d wheel them down to each class.”

~ School Informant



Food Service Staff

Participants from the school-level interviews described limited food service staff to support school food programs and services as a key operational challenge. In some schools, this creates logistical issues for serving many students in a short period of time. Several interviewees commented that to expand on, or improve the quality of, the food offered, more trained and skilled food service staff would be needed. Recruitment and retention of skilled food service staff was also discussed as a key challenge and barrier to program sustainability, particularly in rural areas of the province. Food programs and services were also described by school-level informants as vulnerable to closing if staff resigned their positions.

“Having qualified food service staff is a challenge. We don't have a deep bench of food service staff, so if we have a cafeteria staff person that becomes ill, then you know that's a real issue because we don't have anybody to backfill. And so that's when we do see a disruption in services.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

RCE/CSAP and school-level key informants felt that this was in part due to the low wages and lack of benefits available to food service workers. Several interviewees indicated that offering a living wage and ensuring pay equity across the province could help significantly in addressing current staffing challenges.

“Food service worker in school A is making 15 bucks and down the road somebody else is doing the same job for 13 bucks. That's a big problem right now because it reflects on what we're telling them, and if we've been telling them all along it's equity for all . . . equity for kids in terms of what they access in the school. But equity for the employees, and that they're valued members of the school, that doesn't send a very valued message.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

Echoing this sentiment, one school-level interview participant discussed how food service staff are not valued financially and are not empowered to make decisions around food service management through adequate training, leaving these responsibilities again to the school administrator.

“[The administrator's responsibility to deal with day-to-day management of the cafeteria] . . . part of that is that sometimes I feel like the food service workers don't feel empowered to make decisions. Part of that is that we've got a new manager and a brand-new secondary cook, so these two ladies are a new partnership . . . Going through that change last year was very difficult and there was a lot of residual fear of the change and not knowing what was allowed and what wasn't, so empowering, our food service workers. They are also not paid very much, and they don't get very much time off . . . I don't feel that we value them enough financially in terms of what we pay them and what we're asking them to do.”

~ School Informant

School and Community Volunteers

In addition to paid staff, informants recognized and valued the commitment of community, parent and school staff volunteers and champions, particularly as a key support and facilitator of provincially funded school breakfast programs. RCEs/CSAP informants were more apt to speak positively about volunteerism as a facilitator and identified that increasing volunteer capacity for school food programs and services was one way to improve human resource support, and in turn program sustainability. School administrators, on the other hand, tended to describe the challenges and significant investment of their time in securing and maintaining volunteer support.

“I think probably the best [success] is the volunteers in the schools. Whether that's the principal, the vice-principal, teacher, parents, they would be our hugest success, so right now [RCE] breakfast program is fully run on volunteers or staff volunteers, so they may be working in the school . . . but they are volunteering to do this role.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

“And you know, to try to reach out to ask people . . . as a school administrator. You are always asking for volunteers . . . So, there's a lot of things that you're asking for. The biggest thing about it is they need a lot of certain checks. You got to get the criminal record check. You got to get the child abuse registry checks, things like that. So that makes it even more of a challenge.”

~ School Informant

Many RCE/CSAP informants did talk about the limitations of relying solely on volunteerism to operationalize what was deemed an “essential” service in schools. This was especially evident in light of COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions, which many respondents noted put noticeable strain on parent/community volunteer capacity. Similarly, some key informants at the school level reported that they are still impacted by policies put in place during the pandemic, which continue to challenge volunteer recruitment.

“We really should not be relying on the altruism of teachers or community volunteers to provide a service that we think is essential, and so you know, I think that is problematic.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant



Overall, lack of paid human resources at all levels may mean that school food programs and services are not given the time and attention needed to ensure success. Almost all RCEs/CSAP described a need for funding specific to the expansion of human resources for school food to ensure appropriate supports are in place at the provincial, regional and school levels. School-level participants echoed these comments and specifically mentioned the need for designated positions for food program/services management, potentially at the family-of-schools level, to ensure sustainability and support any future expansion.

“So, like, first of all, the two meals a day like the breakfast program that we have here, I think it works pretty well. So, I guess that kind of takes care of one, right? But you do need an employee to do it [expand to offer lunch]. Like we would need somebody that would be there every day and they'd have to get paid for it. You can't rely on... I don't think you can rely on volunteers to do that.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

Infrastructure

Most RCE/CSAP informants shared that infrastructure availability for food ordering, preparation, cooking and storage differs significantly from school to school. Physical school food infrastructure can range from fully equipped commercial kitchens to converted storage closets. Other challenges related to infrastructure included:

- aging infrastructure and equipment that requires upgrades with no/limited allocated budget;
- lack of appropriate/sufficient spaces for food preparation and students to eat, particularly in older facilities; and
- lack of access to kitchen spaces for school healthy eating programs when food service contracts are held by private companies.

This variability in available infrastructure was also highlighted as a key theme in school-level interviews with some informants describing it as a key barrier and others reporting that their infrastructure needs were fully met. Overall, informants felt schools with limited infrastructure may offer lower quality food to students (e.g., more pre-packaged vs. fresh, whole foods) which could further contribute to inequities in healthy food access across schools.

“[We've had to] beg, borrow, steal here, there and everywhere [to secure funding for equipment]. But I mean if you go across the region [to] older schools, the equipment in there could be 30 or 40 years old and having no budget to actually draw upon to replace that stuff can be problematic. I mean tomorrow we could have a school that contacts us and says there's no refrigeration here... You know you can't run a cafeteria without a refrigerator.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant



To attempt to offset this gap, some schools without appropriate infrastructure for food preparation made use of online food delivery services in the community. Limitations included the need for advance planning by students/families and a lack of extra meals on hand for students who may not have one. One administrator also perceived that some schools would have significant challenges expanding programs and services beyond current meal offerings as there would be insufficient space and equipment to prepare and serve the volume of meals required to offer programs in a universal manner.

“Barriers and facilitators...mine is the age of the building. We don't have space, there's no cafeteria. There's not even a kitchen per se. We have a very small, decrepit stove that has two burners that work, and we have a . . . countertop convection oven and two microwaves. So not conducive to food prep . . . [it's important to] recognize that trying to get a second meal into a school across the board might not be . . . done as easily in some buildings as others.”

~ School Informant

School Food Procurement

School food procurement systems varied greatly across the province. While some key informants discussed successful strategies and approaches, most identified procurement as a considerable challenge and key priority for RCEs/CSAP and the province to consider in endeavours to improve the school food system. Currently, food procurement in Nova Scotia public schools is described as primarily school-led, with limited pockets of regional coordination in place. In most cases, RCEs/CSAP spoke of the significant staff/volunteer commitment involved with school-level food procurement, creating multiple inefficiencies, and being piecemeal across the different school food programs and services offered. For example, in relation to breakfast programs in schools, staff/volunteers may be required to undertake procurement duties outside of their normal hours of work and without appropriate compensation.

“Whether it's staff or community volunteers doing this [food procurement for breakfast programs], they're typically doing it on their own time. So, during non-work time. And they're using their own vehicles and often not getting mileage, and so you know. And that's also happening with some of our lunch programs, you know, and so really thinking about [is there] any other profession where that happens? I don't know of any. And so again, you know, taking advantage of goodwill.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant



Informants from schools located in rural areas also described additional challenges with procuring food, particularly fresh produce, at a reasonable price in their community.

“So on their way to work [teachers who live outside the school community] . . . out of the kindness of their hearts . . . and not the food service workers, because our food service workers are locals . . . but the staff in the teaching positions are traveling a lot greater distance. So out of the kindness of their heart, stopping by grocery stores at 7:00 a.m. to get here for 7:30. So that's not a sustainable program. And without those things, the cost of food here [in the immediate school community] is really high.”

~ School Informant

Furthermore, some RCEs/CSAP report that schools may have different staff completing the procurement work for each food program (e.g., SHEP, after-school, pre-primary, Schools Plus) and felt there should be a shift towards streamlining procurement for all food programs and services offered in schools.

“There was many people trying to do the same thing at the school level, so different groups, for example, like [school support program] and parent navigators and you know everybody was trying to do what they felt was right by, you know, going out themselves and getting the food themselves [and] sometimes not getting the best price because it wasn't, you know, coming from a wholesalers and what not. And we had people like, you know, looking at flyers on a weekend to try to get the best deal to, you know . . . buy for breakfast programs.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

Several RCE/CSAP informants also discussed efforts to establish coordinated procurement systems and/or existing centralized approaches as key successes. Potential benefits included improving efficiency, reducing food costs, and limiting food waste.

“And when we talk about procurement, so for example, for breakfast we have a centralized model where I'm the lead on that. So, I order the food through the wholesalers. It's delivered to the schools, and it works quite well . . . So what's interesting is like, for example, [food company] will pull up to a school . . . so when the truck pulls up, they drop off milk for breakfast, they drop off the milk for the school milk program, they drop off the milk for pre-primary and they drop off the milk for the staff account . . . So that one truck, one vehicle and you can have as many accounts as you want with them, so it works very well, and it helps to limit waste and you're not . . . people aren't running to the grocery store . . . It's extremely efficient. No one runs to the grocery store right now.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant



School-level informants had similar perspectives on centralized procurement which was generally considered to be a promising approach to reduce stress on administrators, improve inventory management, and overcome barriers to working with wholesalers such as minimum orders and cost-prohibitive delivery fees. However, an additional challenge in the rural context is related to the negative impacts on small communities where schools may have previously accessed food from local community retailers.

“Recently it's been, they've moved to [centralized] food service to provide...to order our things and provide [food]... The one thing that's unfortunate... [when] you look at a community like ours and the local [grocery store], which is an independently owned and operated small grocery store in a rural community, you know [previously we were] spending a couple thousand dollars a month or so. You know, that's revenue that they're going to ultimately lose now because it's gone to food service, so that's a little bit of a concern... The decision in terms of centralizing that piece was done to try and make it easier on us. But for us it was working OK in that way because I could just make a call and the folks, you know, down at the grocery store would order stuff in and pack it all up and bring it up and deliver it and whatever. And so, in our case, it was working OK. But in other communities [food procurement] might not have been working like that.”

~ School Informant

Privatization of Food Service

Privately run food services were primarily described by interviewees as a barrier to providing healthy and accessible food in Nova Scotia public schools. While contracted food service providers may offer some benefits to schools in reducing staff/administrative burden related to food procurement and preparation, multiple informants felt that private cafeterias were often very disconnected from the broader school community and from the priorities of the education system to create inclusive and healthy school food environments.

Quality and Affordability

When discussing current experiences with private food service providers in their area, several key informants from RCEs/CSAP expressed concern around the quality of food offered (e.g, alignment with the School Food and Nutrition Policy) and high price point, making it inaccessible for many students. Affordability was also described as the main concern with private food service operators across many of the school-level interviews. In recent years, school-level informants have observed continually increasing prices which was described as a direct barrier to student access.

“Some of the barriers to [universal access] like come with [private food service provider]. So first, their food is extremely expensive. Their portions are very low. They are given a bonus if they keep the portion under a certain amount, right? So, I was at [name of school] yesterday and for a Styrofoam cup of pasta... not even full to the rim—maybe to the little line [on the cup]—\$5. And people are better off going downtown and getting a slice of pizza, right? Because they're paying less and they're getting more.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

“Significantly over the last five or ten years, it’s a real challenge to even buy a healthy lunch from them [private food service provider] given the cost as a result [of] their sales decreased. Because I’m...a little speculation here, but because families can’t necessarily afford the price, sales go down and then you have to up the price again. So, it’s a bit of a chicken/egg scenario. It’s not great.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

Profit vs. Health

Private cafeterias were also described as not being responsive to the needs of students and the school community, creating misalignment with health promoting school approaches and priorities. This was in part due to their profit-driven goals.

“It’s the motivation because . . . privatization makes it, so their goal is to make money...so I mean that is the goal of their business. It’s not necessarily a critique, it’s just . . . that’s not necessarily our mandate, it’s not our mandate.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

This for-profit model may also create challenges with the consistency and sustainability of food services within the school. Some RCE/CSAP and school informants spoke of challenges with private food service providers leaving schools or reducing days of service when they are not making a profit. One school informant described this as a detriment to their breakfast program, as when the cafeteria is not open, they must use breakfast program supplies to ensure students’ food needs are met throughout the day. Furthermore, another school-level informant described how their school recently lost their cafeteria services as it was unaffordable to continue to operate when staff salaries are paid directly out of cafeteria revenue.

“So we had [private food service provider] for a very short period of time last year at [school name]. They weren’t making enough money, so they closed, right? This is what they do, but they still own the contract.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

“The cooks were unionized so they had to be paid even on storm days when the cafeteria is closed . . . which is normal, but the cafeteria revenue pays directly for their salaries. There are only 200 students . . . plus the cafeteria revenue has to cover the cost of food plus the cost of the labour. So, that isn’t a good business plan. So, it wasn’t financially viable to pay for the food and the staff salaries . . . so that’s exactly why it closed.”

~ School Informant

Agency and Autonomy

It was also noted that due to the nature of contracts, schools with private cafeterias may have less control over their school food environments and fewer opportunities to provide students with other points of access to healthy food.

“[Privately run cafeterias]...like because they have control on what is sold—it’s been a long time since I’ve looked at a contract but—whatever is sold outside the cafeteria they [the private company] have the control. It’s not easy when, like if the school wants to offer...I don’t know, bagels, during the break...they have to check this with the company. Like they really have a monopoly.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

“So, like we had a vegetable garden growing outside, right? So, we harvest everything and then we were able to make like some vegetable chicken soup. We had a chef come in—a community chef. She made sure that all the standards you know were followed and we were able to provide soup a few days a week free of charge to all the kids. And then [food service company] comes back in [saying] ‘you can’t do that.’ It’s just such a barrier.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

Education-led, Not-for-Profit Models

In contrast to a privatized approach to school food, one RCE described how having an education-led, not-for-profit model for cafeterias supported the health and learning of their students. Some benefits of this approach included establishing strong partnerships and leadership for healthy school food at the RCE level, which resulted in consistent expectations for healthy food environments in schools. Informants also commented on the autonomy of this approach, in terms of monitoring, overseeing and, subsequently, improving the quality and consistency of their school food programs and service operations. Education-led food services were also perceived as an opportunity to fully integrate food literacy opportunities within schools.

“And I mean I just wanna say that our philosophy here is...this is not for profit. It’s [cafeteria revenue] all being circled back into what we’re trying to do and [that’s] feeding everybody. So, there’s no profit, you know, that we’re chasing here. This is just hopefully to keep afloat and make sure that we can serve healthy food to every student.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant



Universality and Access to School Food

Provincial SHEP funding is intended to support universal school food programs, which ensure that every student has equal opportunity to access a healthy meal in a non-stigmatizing way. RCE-/CSAP- and school-level key informants reported a range of successes and challenges in implementing universal models. While most described currently offering universal breakfast programs at no cost to students, barrier-free and non-stigmatizing access to free/subsidized lunch meals in schools was less apparent, illustrating the important connections between adequate, reliable funding and non-stigmatizing approaches to school food.

Universal vs. Targeted Approaches

Generally, school interviewees demonstrated a good understanding of the importance of universal school food programs and services and avoiding assumptions around who would benefit from a free/subsidized meal. Several administrators felt that breakfast programs in their schools have little to no stigma associated with them, demonstrating the importance of making these programs part of the school culture and communicating that they are open to all.

“I think it’s because of how it [breakfast program] is delivered. Like everyone has access because I pass around and ask everyone if they would like an apple or an orange . . . ‘Do you need something?’ It’s like, it’s understood that anyone, you don’t have to be hungry, you don’t have to have a special reason to have it . . .”

~ School Informant

“And you don’t know who needs that [free/subsidized meal]. That gets to the other piece, and we can’t make assumptions that, you know [one community is more impoverished than the other]. We have no idea what’s going on behind closed doors and how much money is available for food.”

~ School Informant

Similarly, some RCE/CSAP stakeholders felt that there has been an improvement in school staff/community understanding of the benefits of universal school food programs, compared with those that attempt to target students who may be experiencing food insecurity. Others reported that despite improvements, more work was required to continue to shift the culture and reduce stigma associated with free/subsidized food in school.

“Even schools who have breakfast programs, there are some communities within those schools that are saying ‘Why? Why do we have a breakfast program?’ So, I think there’s still lots more work to do around what school food means and why we have universal school food . . . so all our communities truly understand the priority and the nature of school food programs and why we have them and what it means to start your day off equitably on the same foot.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

Despite cultural shifts within the system, several RCE/CSAP key informants described that targeted, emergency feeding programs (e.g., backpack programs) continue to be a prevalent response to perceived food insecurity among students. Although these programs are delivered with good intentions, targeted programs are inherently stigmatizing²⁶, and key informants discussed the importance of continuing to emphasize nourishment and student success, not “feeding,” as the benefits and purpose of school food programs and services.

“When you talk nourishment [compared with] talking about, you know, feeding...it's tough to have this conversation with some. Some people do not fully understand, like, for example, the breakfast programs and the snacks. . .they're going [for] quantity over quality a lot of times because they really feel that they need to feed those kids, not nourish them, and [that's] not really what [school food programs] are about.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

In most cases, RCEs/CSAP informants spoke of schools having to apply more targeted approaches in the provision of free/subsidized lunch meals to students due to a lack of funding. While informants felt that school staff and administrators did their best to provide free/subsidized lunch to students who self-identified as needing access, they also recognized that this is not currently meeting the needs of all students.

“I will say our principals do a fantastic job of knowing who those students are. They can't afford lunch and [principals are] finding a way to fund that lunch. It's not always what we would develop ourselves for them as a selection, but they find a way to make sure the kids eat. So, on the equity . . . kind of that universality . . . are kids eating? I firmly believe that if they want something and they identify it to principals it's looked after. One of the barriers I think is to figure out those students that are not identifying that they're hungry, that . . . you know they may not feel comfortable acknowledging that.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

This finding was further supported through the school-level interviews. In the absence of lunch programs with sustainable funding and universal access, a common way that equity meals are operationalized is through “cafeteria bucks” provided by cafeteria operators to administrators and teachers to distribute to students. While distributing these through trusted teachers, rather than through the office, was described as one way to reduce stigma, administrators also recognized limitations of this approach in singling students out.

“They [cafeteria operator] do provide [cafeteria bucks] that I distribute to kids. And you know, we make sure that it's not just [me that] can distribute to kids. I make sure it's spread around the school so that students can go to a trusted teacher and get a free lunch. Coming to the office is not always a nice thing, you know. So having the office being the only source of the food is not necessarily a good [thing], you know, if you have food insecurity issues coming to the office is not gonna [work].”

~ School Informant



In another school, one administrator described how uptake in “equity meals” was not as high among older students who may be more aware of potential stigma.

“[Grades] 7 to 12 is much harder to gauge. We've got a lot of kids that just won't eat at school, and it's a lot harder to get them to order an equity lunch. So . . . even though I have called several families because they maybe have six children in the building and they are primary to 12 and said we're providing lunch for you, the older ones are not as likely to go to the cafeteria and pick that food up or even order it because it feels weird.”

~ School Informant

Online Ordering and Payment Systems

Online ordering and payment systems were named in several RCE-/CSAP-level interviews as an asset to school food programs and services, particularly in helping to facilitate ordering of meals by parents and inventory management and food preparation for school food services. These systems were also perceived as an opportunity to protect the anonymity of students who require a free/subsidized lunch and to ensure programs are offered in a non-stigmatizing way.

“We would use a system where people pay online and when children go through the cafeteria to eat, no one knows who paid or who didn't pay, right?”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

“So initially the food service workers can provide the administrative assistance of the schools . . . the weekly menu—it gets posted online. The parents have kind of until whatever day to go online and make the order. And they usually, I think they have it set now that it's for a week. So, the parent would go online and order their children's meals for a week. Then the food service workers get a report and know exactly what meals they want . . . [and that] they need to prepare for like inventory. So, it helps with waste management and that sort of thing . . . Especially with this kind of waste management piece, but also for, you know, planning and reducing time and prepping and all that stuff too.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

This finding was also supported by the school-level interviews which highlighted how these payment systems are operationalized and how non-stigmatizing principles can be applied. One school informant described using a payment card system that allows families to pre-load funds for students to access meals. This school was also able to use donations to “top up” cards for students that may not have a lunch to avoid singling out these students at the point of service. However, it is important to note that this approach may not reach all students who could benefit from a free/subsidized meal, as in this case it was only available to students identified through Schools Plus.

“They have a [payment] card that the school can put money on from the community donations. Everyone is paying in the same way, so you don’t know who needs a free meal. But I’m sure that there are other students who are not in the [Schools Plus] system that may need a meal that we don’t know about. And it’s only thanks to the [charitable] organization that this can be provided.”

~ School Informant

Models of Program Delivery and Reach

School-level informants described a variety of models of delivery and how they may impact the reach of school food programs and services. For breakfast programs, “grab and go” models seemed to be most common among the schools interviewed, with some schools offering a mixed “grab and go” and “sit-down” model by providing a cafeteria space for students to eat. One administrator described some perceived advantages of “sit-down” meals:

“We use sit-down delivery method in our cafeteria. This gives the students an opportunity to relax while eating and to be monitored. In this delivery model, we are able to do “check-ins” with students to see how their morning is going, and it provides practice for students to sit independently at a table to eat, practice their expressive language skills by making requests, practice their self-advocacy skills by telling the workers what he/she/they need, and promotes positive peer interaction.”

~ School Informant

Administrators also discussed how providing flexibility in eating spaces, such as allowing students to eat in classrooms (which arose as a common practice due to COVID-19 protocols) may contribute to increased breakfast program uptake and reduced stigma. Overall, having food available in multiple locations throughout the school and enabling student choice in when and where to access food was described as one way to improve the reach of current programs and services.

“And you know, there's been lots of suggestions about . . . should you have it [school food programs and services] in each classroom or should you have it at each corner of the school? But I'm seeing the way this rolls out when the kids come in [to the cafeteria] they're pretty comfortable. And then we leave some food out during the day in a certain part of the cafeteria . . . I bet you there's 5% to 10% of the kids that just don't eat. They don't eat at all, right. And then I don't know if they're worried about what they look like or anything like that. So, I wish there were some ways that we could just show them the importance of [eating throughout the day] . . . and I have had students come up and say, ‘can I eat down in my classroom?’ and ‘I don't like eating in front of people.’ So, then we try to make that accommodation.”

~ School Informant

Affordability

Overall, school-level informants believed the primary barrier keeping students from accessing fee-based lunch at school was affordability and described the need for a universally available free or subsidized lunch program to truly support equitable, stigma-free access. One school administrator described the high uptake in school meals when they are offered for free to all students.

“Juniors and seniors will not go eat if it's an equity meal. But if it's free to everyone, everyone will. So, I would say 75% of the students access free lunch when there's free lunch day.”

~ School Informant

Interview findings also demonstrated the differences in what is perceived as an affordable price for lunch meals between school communities across the province. For example, \$4.00–\$6.00 was described as an affordable price point for a subsidized lunch at one school. In contrast, one school informant that provides meals at the same price point described it as unaffordable for most families in their school community.

“Lunch is served in the cafeteria. There are two sizes, so there's a \$4 size and a \$5 size. This menu and this pricing were imposed on us and it definitely decreased the number of families that can afford food.”

~ School Informant

Overall, these findings highlight the need for equity considerations in funding and flexibility in models of delivery to ensure the needs of all school communities are met.



Availability of Fresh, Whole Food in Schools

Key informant interview findings highlight current inconsistencies in students' access to fresh, whole food within the school environment, both across RCEs/CSAP and across schools. While some RCE/CSAP informants reported successes in offering fresh, whole foods, including recent improvements in the amounts of vegetables and fruits available and in the variety and choice of foods offered, others described challenges in ensuring fresh, whole foods were available and accessible in all schools, including (though not limited to):

- high (and continually rising) food costs;
- rurality and limited access to food outlets with fresh produce; and
- a shift to pre-packaged foods in response to COVID-19 pandemic measures.

The finding that there was a continued reliance on pre-packaged items to offer breakfast programs was also confirmed in several school-level interviews, despite the low risk of COVID-19 transmission through food and lifting of most COVID-19-related public health measures in Nova Scotia public schools in March 2022.

“So, I would say our menus are varied, like we see lots of things, the students have choices. In certain schools, healthy foods, we see a lot more fruits and vegetables offered with lunch. We see lots of fruits and vegetables offered during breakfast.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

“But you know in rural Nova Scotia, the cost of some items is much higher than other parts of the province, and you know \$10,000 in the Chéticamp area is not the same as \$10,000 in Halifax when it comes to food.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

At the school level, breakfast programs were generally described as offering healthy options, which was important to indirectly provide students with knowledge around food and nutrition and expose them to new healthy foods.

“So in that way that's a success [of breakfast programs], I think. We, you know, we are getting kids healthy things and indirectly we're providing kids with, you know, knowledge of healthy food choices all along.”

~ School Informant



With respect to lunch meals, some school-level interviewees perceived that while healthy options are made available to students at school, they are less likely to choose these options due to their food preferences. Making healthy options more affordable was perceived as one way to improve student buy-in and discourage them from eating at fast-food outlets which are located near some schools. This was particularly the case for older students, who could leave school grounds at lunch to access other food retail options in the community.

“Again, I don't know how much buy-in we would get from our students, you know. Would they still want the, you know, the pepperoni and cheese [pizza]—probably you're fighting a battle on that one. And in terms of nutrition and choice and you know, [they] are still going to want to go to [fast food chain] . . . for instance . . . when it's \$2.95 for a bowl of fruit. And you want to encourage the kids to get fruit. But it costs more than you know . . . a fruit and a drink cost more than the pepperoni and cheese and pop costs.”

~ School Informant

Standardized vs. Flexible Menus

In terms of improving the quality of foods offered in schools, some RCE/CSAP informants reported success with standardized menus, particularly in providing direction on items to be served that are in alignment with the School Food and Nutrition Policy. Others felt there also needed to be room for flexibility to allow schools to tailor menus to the needs of their community, as well as to be inclusive of cultural foods and dietary preferences. One school administrator also described the importance of offering healthy options while also appealing to students' taste and enabling choice.

“I believe that for [school food programs] to be very successful, there needs to be an element of choice for the students, and there should be a respect of the different cultures present in our schools. So, it would be hard to say everybody is going to eat pork, everyone is going to drink milk.”

~ RCE/CSAP Key Informant

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, the findings from the SHEP surveys and key informant interviews demonstrate RCE-/CSAP- and school-level differences in school food programs and services in Nova Scotia public schools. Although we can always expect a certain degree of variability in how food programs and services are coordinated and implemented, both the qualitative and quantitative data point to concerning gaps in availability, access, affordability and quality of what is currently offered in schools. While survey findings indicate high availability of SHEP-funded breakfast programs, access to free/subsidized lunch is much less consistent, with a patchwork of systems, models and fee structures currently in place. Without a dedicated funding stream, free/subsidized lunch is primarily being offered to students on an ad-hoc basis and is often resourced through other school budget lines, external grants and/or community donations—strategies named as unsustainable by key informants. There are also many schools that report not offering free/subsidized lunch, making access dependent on where a student currently resides within the province. **As such, we can conclude the current state is that not every student in this province has the same opportunity to access healthy food in school.** It is imperative to note that this is not at the fault of education leaders and school administrators, who were clearly passionate about the well-being of their students and described the many challenges of managing and implementing healthy school food on top of their primary roles as educators. Instead, it emphasizes the need to reflect on the system barriers and facilitators named in this report to identify actions that will address current disparities in school food programs provincially and ensure that all students have access to healthy food for learning.

Interestingly, qualitative findings, in which almost all informants described their breakfast programs as universal in nature, are juxtaposed to quantitative data which indicates a high degree of variability across the province in students' participation in these programs (ranging from 2% to 100% of a school's total population). Contesting that these differences may be attributed to varied levels of need for food within communities, further analysis indicated there were no significant correlations between rates of student participation in breakfast programs and community-level indicators of poverty or material deprivation. **If community need is not the primary factor driving differences in breakfast program participation, it is more likely to be the systems that uphold and support school food programs in Nova Scotia and/or their practices that largely determine whether families and students access and use them.** This finding suggests that despite the intent to differentiate school food from other types of food charity, there may still be a certain degree of stigma associated with accessing free or subsidized food in school, which persists as a barrier to student participation. **This does not mean that we should be targeting students vulnerable to food insecurity.** Instead, looking to schools with higher participation rates may help to identify the factors that contribute to their overall success and make them accessible for everyone. To some extent, these learnings



reinforce what research has long demonstrated about free or subsidized food programs, including those offered in schools - that they have never been well-positioned to address food insecurity as an issue rooted in income policy.⁹ Overall, it speaks to the need to further separate and clarify the purpose of healthy school food programs in supporting inclusion, student achievement and health, from broader policy efforts that ensure all families have adequate resources to meet their basic needs.

Considering research which demonstrates the critical importance of universal approaches in reducing stigmatization and improving participation among intended populations,⁸ these findings also draw into question the consistency of our collective understanding and application of universality in school food programs and services across the province. In a recent Canadian study, Ruetz and McKenna⁸ discuss a key disconnect in interpretations of universality among the school food practitioners they surveyed, differentiating between what they deem as the most common understanding—*universal access*, in which all students are eligible to participate in school food programs, and *universal participation*, in which all students are intended to receive these programs. In the context of Nova Scotia, the small but significant distinction is that under a universal participation approach, leaders and administrators of school food programs would be adequately supported to address barriers to participation in order to actively increase uptake across the student population, including those vulnerable to food insecurity. Given that this current state analysis did not collect specific data on universality at a school level, we cannot conclude there are in fact differences in how it is currently understood and applied. However, universal is a key principle and current standard for breakfast program implementation in Nova Scotia, and as such, strategies and approaches that have the potential to reduce barriers to access for all students are topics that warrant further exploration and discussion.

It is important to note that we heard unanimous agreement from education leaders and school administrators of the critical importance of access to nutritious food in schools, and their desire to improve the accessibility and quality of what is currently offered. It was apparent that many within the education system want to meet the needs of their students and would strongly support a shift towards universal participation in school food but are consistently challenged to do so within existing resources and capacity. The findings of this report point to key areas of focus for government stakeholders and other decision makers interested in improving the success, sustainability, quality and level of student participation in school food programs and services in Nova Scotia. These include (though are not limited to) operational supports such as sustainable, adequate funding and dedicated human resources (at all levels), regional coordination to create efficiencies and ensure schools are supported in program implementation, and provincial leadership and directives to help standardize the accessibility, availability and quality of school food programs and services, including regular monitoring of progress to identify where further and future supports are needed.



While provincial standards and leadership for healthy school food were perceived as essential to the success of programs and services, including any potential expansion, it should be noted that key informants also identified flexibility and autonomy at the RCE/CSAP and school levels as an equally important enabler. This is consistent with current best practice evidence, which emphasizes both coordination and the need for adaptability such that school food programs remain connected to and draw from the assets of the school community and are responsive to regional/local differences. **For these reasons, it will be important to strike a balance between areas that require provincial direction and support to address the system-level barriers identified, while also allowing RCEs/CSAP and schools to build on their prior successes and unique approaches.** Key informants also described many challenges in relation to current privatized food service contracts and food procurement in schools. Shifting towards not-for-profit models, with an education-led food service workforce and working towards greater coordination of school food procurement were named in several interviews as promising approaches.

In conclusion, the findings from this provincial report demonstrate there is work to be done to further integrate best practice evidence and address the systemic and operational barriers that continue to impede progress towards universal participation in healthy school food. The results presented here represent the voices, perspectives and wisdom of current school food leaders, administrators and champions within the education system and should be carefully considered alongside any endeavours to expand access or availability to meal programs in Nova Scotia public schools.



APPENDIX A: School Healthy Eating Program Survey Questions

Section 1) General Information

Please provide the following contact information as the representative completing this survey on behalf of your school. This information will only be used for future survey distribution purposes and/or to contact you to confirm or clarify the responses provided.

- School name
- Select your RCE/CSAP
- First name
- Last name
- Role (for example, principal, teacher, breakfast program coordinator or volunteer, etc.)
- Email address

Section 2) Breakfast Programs

The following section is intended to collect information on your provincially funded school breakfast program.

1. Is your school offering a breakfast program this school year (2021-2022)?
 - No
If no, please provide additional details on why the program will not be offered this year.
 - Yes
2. On average, how many days per week is your school breakfast program available to students?
3. Select one typical day to report on the total number of students accessing any items offered as part of your breakfast program.^{§§§}

Section 3) Meals offered in school beyond breakfast

The following section is intended to collect information on free or subsidized**** lunch meals offered at your school.

4. Does your school provide any free or subsidized lunch meals to students?
 - No
 - Yes
5. If yes, how do students access these free or subsidized lunch meals?
 - Free or subsidized lunch is available to all students.
 - Select students are identified who may benefit from a free or subsidized lunch.
 - Other, please describe:
6. On a typical school day, approximately how many students are provided with a free or subsidized lunch meal?
7. Does your school use other sources††† of funding (beyond SHEP) to offer free or subsidized lunch meals?
 - No
 - Yes

§§§ We recommend having one staff member or volunteer (per classroom, if applicable) directly involved with the breakfast program collect this data. Further instructions are provided in the accompanying tracking form.

**** A subsidized meal refers to one that is cost-shared between the school and the student/family (i.e., the school pays for a portion of the meal and the remainder is paid for by the student).

††† For example, other school budget lines or external grant opportunities.

SCHOOL HEALTHY EATING PROGRAM TRACKING FORM

Staff/volunteers may choose to print this form to help keep track of participation in your school breakfast program. The number entered into the online survey should be the **total reported on all tracking forms** completed for your school.

To calculate total participation in your breakfast program:

- Select **one typical school day** to count students.
- Have **one staff member/volunteer** (per classroom, if applicable) keep track of students as they are served and take a final total count.
- Count each student **only once** if they are served **any foods or beverages**.
- All counts done for the school should be **completed by first break**.

*Use this space as needed to keep count of students who are served **any foods or beverages** offered as part of your school's breakfast program.*

**Total number of
students served:**



APPENDIX B: Key Informant Interview - RCE/CSAP

Purpose: to better understand system level barriers and facilitators to school food programs and services in Nova Scotia.

- 1) Tell us a little bit about school food in your RCE/CSAP:
 - Are there contracted food services (e.g., Chartwells?)
 - What does food procurement look like?
 - Are whole, fresh foods readily available in all schools?
 - Do schools currently have adequate infrastructure to store, cook, serve healthy foods?
 - What human resources are in place (regionally and locally)?
 - What is working well? What are the challenges?
 - What would you like to see change?
- 2) What do breakfast programs look like in your RCE/CSAP?
 - How are they operationalized (primarily volunteer run, staff, etc.)?
 - What are some of the successes?
 - What are some of the challenges?
 - What would you like to see change?
- 3) What is the role of your RCE/CSAP in supporting school food at the regional level? (e.g., regional coordination, administration of funding, etc.)
- 4) Offering universal school food programs means that every student has equal opportunity to access a healthy meal in a non-stigmatizing way.
 - Can you tell us about the barriers and facilitators to offering universal school food programs in your RCE/CSAP?
- 5) Looking ahead, what should be prioritized to improve the quality and/or sustainability of healthy school food in Nova Scotia schools?
- 6) If there were future opportunities to expand school food programs, what would a successful and sustainable program where students are offered two meals per day look like in your region/CSAP?
- 7) Anything else you would like to share?



APPENDIX C: Key Informant Interview - School Administrators/Staff

Purpose: to better understand operational barriers and facilitators at the school level to food programs and services in Nova Scotia.

- 1) Tell us a little bit about food services in your school:
 - Is there a cafeteria and how is it run?
 - What human resources are in place?
 - What kinds of foods are served and sold?
 - What is working well?
 - What are some of the challenges?
 - What would you like to see change? What supports are needed?

- 2) What do breakfast programs look like in your school?
 - How are they coordinated and implemented? Who is involved?
 - What kind of model of delivery is primarily used (sit down meal, grab & go, classroom baskets) and why?
 - What are some of the successes?
 - What are some of the challenges?
 - What would you like to see change? What supports are needed?

- 3) What do you see as the primary role of school administrators in supporting healthy school food programs and services?
 - What do you see as the role of other school staff and volunteers?

- 4) A universal school food program means that every student has equal opportunity to access a healthy meal in a non-stigmatizing way.
 - Can you tell us a bit about the barriers and facilitators to offering universal school food programs in your school?

- 5) We know that some schools offer free/subsidized lunch to students, primarily on an ad-hoc basis.
 - Do you see a need to offer meals beyond breakfast in your school community?
 - Is your school currently offering free/subsidized lunch?
 - If so, what does this look like?
 - If there were future opportunities to expand school food programs to offer two meals per day, what would you need in your school to be successful?

- 6) Anything else you would like to share?



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