

Universal School Food programs must think locally

By Wendie Wilson, Executive Staff Officer, BIPOC Advocacy and Engagement

School food is officially part of the school day for many Nova Scotian children. With the onset of the new universal school lunch program, there have been ups and downs. A universal school food program is a significant undertaking, involving the same lunch options on a rotating basis for all students each day. How do you satisfy everyone with the same meal, prepared using the same recipe (with ingredient substitutions), served on the same day, in different containers, made by various vendors across the province? You don't. Managing all of this is a feat in and of itself.



Drawing by Wendie Wilson

Over the next couple of years, the universal school food program will be informed by trial and error. Few solutions can be uniformly applied to all people without considering the unique contexts and stories within each community. School lunches are no exception. Ideally, the program will ultimately grow with these contexts in mind and hopefully allow communities to decide what to feed their students.

Communities should have the autonomy to create menus that best serve their needs based on criteria that promotes healthy and sustainable food. Communities should also have opportunity to benefit economically from the food they consume. One way to achieve this is by prioritizing local food. Using locally sourced food for school meals has several advantages. Strengthening local food systems can grow the local economy and potentially increase the income of community members.

One of the driving forces behind advocating for a universal school food program is the increasing rate of food insecurity among children across Canada. While food alone cannot solve food

insecurity, increasing the income of those affected is more likely to address issues of affordability and access to healthy, culturally-appropriate foods. Most people prefer to feed themselves rather than rely on charitable programs. This is why it is essential for local communities to benefit economically from the food they consume. A stronger local economy means stronger families and communities.

There is a stark disparity in how food insecurity affects children across Canada. Black and Indigenous families are disproportionately impacted. Currently, 46.3 per cent of Black children in Canada experience food insecurity, the highest rate recorded in the country, and this number has risen over the past two years. As a classroom teacher for 20 years, I witnessed the profound effects of food insecurity on students' ability to reach their full learning potential during the school day.

For Black and Indigenous children who experience the highest rates of food insecurity, economic solutions must play a role in achieving food autonomy and sovereignty. One way to empower these communities is by prioritizing Black and Indigenous-owned food businesses and services in school food procurement. Imagine the impact if those most affected by food insecurity were given opportunities to strengthen their economic stability through school food programs and related initiatives. Control over one's food can enhance the overall health, education, and social welfare of a community.

All children have the right to healthy, affordable, accessible, and culturally relevant food. Such a model should recognize and support their autonomy, empower their communities, and place control and decision-making back into the hands of the people most affected.

"To free ourselves, we must feed ourselves."

Farming while Black

Wendie Wilson sits on the Nova Scotia Steering committee of the Coalition for Healthy School Food (CHSF) and is co-founder of CHSF's Black School Food National Group. She is part of the African Nova Scotian & Black Advisory group for HRM's JustFOOD Action Plan, and Co-founder of the Pan-Canadian African Food Sovereignty Network. She sits on the Food Secure Canada Board of Directors including its Indigenous & Black Advisory Circle