

**DATE:** September 10, 2019

**TO:** Board of Trustees

**FROM:** Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

**SUBJECT:** Strategic Plan Update: School Nutrition Program

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## **ISSUE**

The purpose of this Strategic Plan Update report is to provide the Board of Trustees with an overview of the relationship between nutrition and students positively engaging in school as well as the work happening in some of the District's most socially complex schools to help ensure children have access to healthy food.

## **BACKGROUND**

In 2018, Edmonton Public Schools formally reaffirmed the District Strategic Plan for the 2018-2022 term. The District Strategic Plan has three priority areas with supporting goals and outcomes. The plan provides common direction and alignment between the work of the Board of Trustees, the Superintendent of Schools and District staff. The plan serves as the foundation for a District culture of evidence-based decision making, assurance and accountability.

To demonstrate the District's commitment to transparency and accountability, Strategic Plan Update reports were introduced in 2016–2017 as an extension of the Annual Education Results Report (AERR). The reports are intended to provide the Board of Trustees with detailed progress towards the goals and outcomes of our Strategic Plan.

## **CURRENT SITUATION**

This Strategic Plan Update report sites current research relevant to school nutrition, highlights the importance of schools working with community to provide school nutrition programming, identifies critical components of quality nutrition programs and is in direct response to Priority 3 Goal 2 of the 2018-2022 District Strategic Plan for the District to establish community partnerships to provide supports and services that foster growth, well-being and success of students and families.

## **KEY POINTS**

This Strategic Plan Update report provides the Board of Trustees with an overview of work in support of school nutrition programming.

## **ATTACHMENTS and APPENDICES**

ATTACHMENT I Strategic Plan Update: School Nutrition Program

NP:mh

# Strategic Plan Update:

## School Nutrition Program

September 10, 2019

## INTRODUCTION

This Strategic Plan Report provides the Board of Trustees with an update on school nutrition programming in the District. Priority 3 *Enhance public education through communication, engagement and partnerships*, and Goal 2 *Supports for the Whole Child* of the 2018-2022 District Strategic Plan call for the District to establish community partnerships to provide supports and services that foster growth, well-being and success of students and families.

As part of the Alberta curriculum and in fostering welcoming, inclusive, safe and healthy learning environments, schools across the District address healthy eating and nutrition in their daily work with students. For some schools, this work around nutrition is taken one step further, as they become a key resource or daily source of support for families faced with barriers to food security.

City of Edmonton census data from 2018 indicates that 1 in 8 citizens live in poverty; of these, 40,000 are children. Children and families living in poverty are more likely to have limited access to an adequate supply of healthy food. Many of these children are students in District classrooms where staff recognize first hand the challenges and signs that a child may be sitting in class too hungry to focus, too hungry to learn. Schools become a logical and critical partner in the community's efforts to address food security and ensure every child has predictable and daily access to healthy food.

This report will take a closer look at the relationship between nutrition and students positively engaging in school, as well as describe work happening, in partnership with community, in some the District's most socially complex schools to help ensure children have access to healthy food.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

For more than two decades, North American research has confirmed the connection between proper nutrition and a student's ability to engage meaningfully in academic learning. More recent research in this area has continued to confirm that nutrition directly affects engagement in learning and has also demonstrated a direct relationship between nutrition and a student's social/emotional well-being, their behaviour and overall health - all factors that impact school success and academic performance. The following are two examples from this recent research:

- Access to nutrition, particularly breakfast, can enhance a student's psychosocial well-being, reduce aggression and school suspensions and decrease discipline problems. (Brown et al., 2008).
- Numerous benefits of a school morning meal nutrition program include improvements in student behaviour, attendance and learning (Toronto District School Board, 2016).

Additionally, the research reinforces or helps to inform the importance of the quality and quantity of food provided in a school nutrition program.

- Dietary adequacy and variety were identified as specific aspects of diet quality important to academic performance, which highlights the value of eating a diverse selection of foods to meet the recommended number of servings from each of the four food groups from Canada's Food Guide (Florence, Asbridge & Veugelers, 2008).
- Poor eating habits and low nutrient intake in the first two decades of life are linked to increased risk for serious disease later in life, and the quality of nutrition has been linked to academic performance, behaviour and self-esteem in children and youth (various research cited in Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth, Government of Alberta, 2012).
- Children who report consuming vegetables and fruit less than five times a day are more likely to be overweight or obese (Shields, 2004, as cited in the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth, Government of Alberta, 2012).

# SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMMING

## The Journey of School Nutrition

Due to the close connection between teachers and their students, for decades school staff have provided an informal response to student hunger - teachers adding food to their personal grocery orders to have snacks in their desks for hungry students or schools keeping bread and lunch meat on hand to ensure all students have, at minimum, a sandwich for their lunch.

Over 20 years ago, educators and key members of Edmonton's food security network began to explore how to better leverage the role schools could play in ensuring children in socially complex communities have access to nutrition programming. This journey over the past two decades is briefly summarized below:

- Norwood School and e4c started the first daily school lunch program in the District; today, e4c provides the School Lunch Program in an additional eight District schools, as well as snack or morning meal funding support in nine schools.
- As awareness and culture around school nutrition programming began to emerge, many schools applied for grants focused on the provision of daily nutrition support for students, while others reached out to members of the community seeking either food donations or financial resources to help support their capacity to provide a school nutrition program for their students.
  - According to 2018-2019 data entered in the District's School Community Tracking Tool, 77 schools identified having community support for school nutrition.
  - Many of these schools rely on multiple sources of community support to provide adequate nutritional support for their students.
- Across District schools, many staff continue to bring in extra food to support students who come to school hungry.
- To clearly articulate the District's responsibility towards student health and well-being the Board of Trustees established [Board Policy AEBB.BP Wellness of Students and Staff](#). The policy recognizes the five dimensions of wellness and anchors the role schools play in support of health and wellness within a comprehensive school health approach, this includes nutrition and healthy eating.
- To guide District expectations around school nutrition, [Administrative Regulation FBE.AR Health and Wellness of Staff and Students](#) was first implemented in March 2008. These expectations around the serving and selling of food in schools are informed by Alberta Health Services' [Healthy Eating in Schools: Policy Recommendations](#) and reflect the *choose most often*, *choose sometimes* and *choose least often* strategy of determining food choices.

## Today's Context

In our schools serving our most socially complex communities, having students come to school hungry is not limited to one or two students a day who forgot their lunch at home, but represents a significant number of students each day struggling because they are hungry. Within these school communities a formal school nutrition program is an essential service to support families and enable students to succeed. However, in Alberta there is not a predictable or stable systemic response for school nutrition programming; the provision of this programming reflects a shared responsibility, commitment and collaboration between schools and community stakeholders. In 2016, Alberta Education launched a pilot to begin to address this critical gap.

## Alberta Education School Nutrition Program

In 2016, Alberta Education invited the District to participate in a provincial pilot exploring school nutrition programming. The first year of the School Nutrition Program (SNP) enabled the District to implement this work in two highly socially vulnerable District schools. This work was delivered in partnership with e4c and saw the provision of a daily meal that included four food groups and was made universally available to all students of the school community.

Another key aspect of the model was engagement with both students and families. The intent was not to simply feed the children, but to build their awareness and understanding of hunger, nutrition and well-being so that they could be empowered to make life-long healthy choices in respect to food and eating. Parents also played an

important role in the model, as they are partners and contributors to their child's healthy eating. Families were encouraged to send food when able and children ate a combination of both their food from home and food from the SNP to meet their daily nutritional needs.

In 2018, the District was provided with additional provincial funding that enabled the expansion of the program into 20 more schools, bringing the total Alberta Education SNP cohort to 22 schools. The 20 new schools were selected with consideration to the District's high social vulnerability\* data, existing school nutrition supports, as well as engagement within each school community. The work to onboard the new cohort of schools was based on the same model and principles as the year one SNP schools. Supplemental to Alberta Education SNP funding, the District invested dollars to support facility upgrades in SNP schools to ensure Alberta Health Services' food handling, storage and preparation standards could be met in all 22 schools.

Across the cohort of 22 schools, the 2018-2019 provincial SNP funding has enabled for the provision of:

- Access for 4,606 students to a daily meal consisting of all four food groups.
- Funding to address the human resources required to support the provision of a daily, nutritious meal within a school community.
- Food preparation, storage and serving equipment that meets Alberta Health standards.
- Nutrition education to support students developing lifelong healthy eating habits.

The District approached participation in Alberta Education's SNP through a capacity-building approach, to enable SNP schools to continue to support the safe delivery of healthy food, and to benefit schools outside of the SNP cohort through leveraging lessons learned about best practices. This capacity-building approach was enabled through the collaborative efforts across several Central departments, including Strategic District Supports, Infrastructure, Purchasing, Finance and Curriculum and Resource Support. Resources developed to be shared across District schools include:

- A District purchasing list for infrastructure items to support the safe preparation, storing and serving of food in schools. This list was:
  - Developed in collaboration with e4c to ensure alignment to food handling standards.
  - Negotiated to obtain best cost efficiencies for the District.
- Weekly meal and snack menus that reflect the Alberta Nutritional Guidelines for Children and Youth.
- Lesson plans linked to provincial curriculum that support nutrition education and lifelong healthy eating habits.

### **Evidence of Impact**

To support program evaluation, staff from the Alberta Education SNP schools were surveyed to offer their observations of the impact of the school nutrition program for their school community. They shared that the provision of school nutrition resulted in improvements to student behaviour, attendance and learning. Some of their feedback included:

- "The school nutrition program has positively changed many of our students' lives :)"
- "This is an amazing program and we are seeing really positive results at our school. Thank you for helping us access this opportunity for our students and families."
- "Internal school survey data of staff suggests a perception of increased student engagement and achievement over the long term of the school nutrition program implementation."
- "There has been increased school attendance and fewer 'late' students. Some of our very challenging families with attendance issues are coming to school more consistently. Student volunteers that assist with the breakfast program are happy to show up early every day."

\*District High Social Vulnerability is calculated annually based on September 30th enrolment information, student postal codes and census data; the data helps to identify schools with a significant percentage of students deemed to be socially vulnerable.

Additionally, the District conducted a survey in year one of the SNP to better understand the benefit and impact of a formal school nutrition program on quality teaching and learning. The following is a summary of these results:

- 100 per cent of staff agreed that the availability of breakfast and snack had a positive impact on student learning.
- 80 per cent of staff agreed that having school breakfast had a positive impact on student attendance.
- 100 per cent of staff agreed that having a universally available breakfast had a positive impact on student behaviour.

Given the option to share a personal story or comment in the survey, one teacher wrote:

*“The method of delivery and the timing of the Alberta nutrition program food service is a wonderful fit for a High Social Vulnerable school like ours. Our children’s faces and spirit, and overall confidence is visibly different due to a total predictability of school based nutrition. Teachers now are content that their students are nourished, and the teachers are therefore keeping excellent instruction foremost in mind.”*

## **Lessons Learned**

The pilot has enabled the District to gain greater insight into the components necessary to deliver school nutrition programming in a safe, healthy and predictable manner. Comprehensive school nutrition programs play an important role in supporting student success in socially vulnerable schools. In order to be effective and meet food and health standards, these programs require the capacity to provide the following:

- Healthy food aligned with the Alberta Nutritional Guidelines for Children and Youth.
- Nutrition education to support students’ understanding of healthy eating and portion control.
- School-based infrastructure to support the safe handling and storage of food.
- Adequate human resources to ensure the safe preparation, handling and service of food.

## **Support for School Nutrition Programs**

Effective, sustainable school nutrition programming cannot be achieved solely by the efforts of schools. Schools are willing hosts to school nutrition programs because educators recognize the critical interplay between children having proper nutrition and their overall well-being and ability to learn. However, educators can not do this alone.

- Education is funded to provide K to 12 educational programming; with the exception of the SNP sites, a school’s budget does not have the capacity to cover the operational costs of a daily universally available nutrition program.
  - Based on nutrition guidelines, the average daily cost for a morning meal consisting of four food groups is \$1.62 per child.
  - The work to plan, prepare and deliver a daily morning meal is substantial and most schools depend upon volunteers or additional funding to support the human resources required to run their nutrition program.
- Additionally, educators do not have the knowledge and expertise to construct nutritionally optimal menus or ensure the delivery of a healthy and safe food service; to meet these standards, schools depend upon the expertise and support of nutrition partners within the community.

In the absence of a systemic response to school nutrition programming, District schools have collaborated with many stakeholders in the Edmonton area who are concerned about children being hungry and want to step up and help address this issue. These community stakeholders include not-for-profit organizations, service clubs, local businesses and private individuals. The 2018-2019 School Community Relationship Tracker Tool data identified 61 unique community stakeholders directly supporting school nutrition programming in District schools. For a complete list of these valued partners, see Appendix I.

As long as the efforts to address student hunger generate locally at the school and community level, there is the risk of these supports not being sustainable. Additionally, in the absence of a systemic response, there will be schools struggling to provide access to adequate nutritional support for their students.

## **NEXT STEPS**

School nutrition programs provide an essential service for students and families in many District schools. The challenge continues to be accessing predictable and stable funding to support the provision of these programs in our most socially vulnerable communities.

This fall, District schools will continue to be responsive to the needs of the families they serve. For many schools, this responsiveness will include offering a school nutrition program. These programs will reflect the collective grassroots efforts of school staff and many community partners.

**Supports for School Nutrition**

The 2018-2019 School Community Relationship Tracker Tool data identified 61 unique community stakeholders supporting school nutrition programming across District schools. The following list represents those community stakeholders who gave permission for their name to be publicly acknowledged and celebrated by the District.

Andy's IGA	Loblaws
AON Insurance	Loonie Toons Express
APPLE Schools	Lunch Lady, The
Bear Mountain	Mayfield Rotary Club
Best Bite	Meals to Go
Bon Ton Bakery, The	Nitza's Pizza
Breakfast Clubs of Canada	Panago
Bryan & Alison's No Frills	Pembina Pipeline Corporation
Capital Meats	Pizza City
COBS Bread	President's Choice Children's Charity
e4c	Real Canadian Superstore
Edmonton Food Bank, The	Safeway
Elks and Royal Purple Edmonton	Salvation Army
Family Centre, The	Sangha Operating Group
Food for Thought	Saputo Dairy
Go Auto	Save On Foods
Good Shepherd Anglican Church	Snack Shack
Grocery People, The	Sobeys
H & W Produce	Sold Sisters, The
Hope Mission	St. Mark and St. Mary Coptic Orthodox Church
International Boilermakers Local 146	Starbucks Mill Woods Towne Centre
Kiwanis	University of Alberta
Lions Clubs	Wok Box