



## CHAPTER 3:

# Hungry students in BC public schools and the adequacy of school meal programs to support them

This report is one of a series documenting the findings of the Poverty and Education survey. For additional information, see: <http://www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx>



*A BC Teachers' Federation study. This survey was conducted by BCTF Research in collaboration with the Anti-poverty action group of the Committee for Action on Social Justice.*



istock images

Poverty and Education survey:  
A teacher's perspective

## About the Poverty and Education survey

The *Poverty and Education survey: A teacher's perspective* was conducted by BCTF Research in collaboration with the BCTF Anti-Poverty Action Group of the Committee for Action on Social Justice, building on the findings of focus group research that explored poverty and education issues with teachers in four school districts<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of the provincial survey was to assess whether and to what extent the focus group findings reflect teachers' experience across the province, to deepen our understanding of how poverty and education issues vary by regional, socio-economic, and school characteristics, and to identify what resources are most needed to address poverty within BC schools and the community.

## Contributions and acknowledgments

### BCTF Research Department

- Research design, data analysis, and reporting of survey results: Margaret White, Senior Research Analyst
- Assistance in all phases of the research project: Anne Field, Research Assistant
- Leadership and support for the project: Larry Kuehn, Director, Research and Technology Division

### Committee for Action on Social Justice—Anti-poverty action group

As staff and committee members have changed since the study began, we would like to acknowledge those who contributed, past and present, at various phases of the research project.

- Leadership, co-ordination, and survey promotion: Kathy Hartman, Assistant Director, Professional and Social Issues Division
- Leadership in the early phases of survey design: James Chamberlain, Assistant Director, Professional and Social Issues Division (up to August 2012)
- Pre-testing, survey promotion, and/or input into survey results: Amy Dash, Sue Spalding, Debbie Sabourin, Annie Ohana (current members as of May, 2013) and ongoing input from members of the CASJ Anti-Poverty Action Group.
- Survey development and questionnaire design: Ilse Hill (former member of the CASJ Anti-poverty action group)

We would like to acknowledge former members of the CASJ Anti-poverty action group (Ilse Hill, Julia MacRae, Stacey Kemp), and Linda Young of the Vancouver Elementary School Teachers' Association Anti-poverty Committee, for their contribution to the focus-group research in phase one of the study. We also wish to acknowledge the contribution of all the teachers who took the time to complete the survey, assisted in the pre-testing, and the teachers who participated in the focus groups that led to the development of this survey.

We also wish to thank Adrienne Montani of First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, for taking the time to review a draft of the survey, and First Call for providing us with opportunities to share the research results with community groups across BC.

*We also wish to acknowledge the BC Teachers' Federation for supporting this project.*

---

<sup>1</sup> White, M., Hill, I., Kemp, S., MacRae, J., and Young, L. (2012). *Poverty and education: A teacher's perspective—Summary of the findings of the focus group research*. Available at: [www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx](http://www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx).

## **Table of contents**

### **Introduction**

Survey objectives for this chapter

### **Survey results**

Extent of hungry students in the classroom

Students attending school hungry versus available school meal programs

Type of school meal programs available to students at the school

Teacher bringing food to school for students

Adequacy of school meal programs to meet the needs of all students who require nutritional support

Reasons why students in need may not participate in meal programs

### **Chapter 3: Summary and discussion**

**Information on study design and who responded to the survey:** See Chapter 1, *Teachers who responded to the survey and the students that they teach*, at [www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx](http://www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx).

## Introduction

The previous chapter, *Child poverty in BC public schools and economic pressures on families*<sup>2</sup>, provides insights into the economic factors contributing to family poverty since the global recession. Provincial statistics show an increasing number of BC families are experiencing food insecurity, as measured by the use of food banks<sup>3</sup>. The number of people using BC food banks in 2014 increased significantly (by 24.7%) since 2008, the start of the global recession. By 2014, 97,369 individuals were assisted by the food banks in BC, with almost one-third (30.8%) being children and youth under 18 years of age. Food bank use by BC households increased dramatically between 2008 and 2009, improved slightly between 2009 and 2011, and has increased steadily since then. In 2014, there were 10,435 more BC households assisted by food banks than in 2008.

Food insecurity has significant implications for the physical and emotional well-being of children and youth, which in turn can impact on educational outcomes. A report by the Provincial Health Services Authority, *Food Costing in BC 2013*<sup>4</sup>, summarizes the findings of a Ministry of Health review of the research on the effects of inadequate nutrition on child and youth development. Citing this review of the evidence, the report states that children who are food insecure may have poor academic performance and social skills compared to children who do not experience food insecurity; have poorer overall general health; and youth who experience hunger are more likely to have a chronic health condition. The report also cites evidence from the review that concluded “child hunger is an independent risk factor for depression and suicidal symptoms in adolescence and early adulthood”. According to a Provincial Health Services Authority report<sup>5</sup>, a 2006 review of the research evidence by the BC Legislature’s Select Standing Committee on Health concluded that “children living in households with limited financial resources are more likely to suffer from a myriad of health problems and lower education outcomes”. Research by the McCreary Centre Society<sup>6</sup> suggests that students whose families experience food insecurity may be more subject to bullying and social exclusion at school. The results of the 2008 BC Adolescent Health Survey found “sixty-eight percent of youth who went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food had experienced at least one form of bullying compared to 46% of youth who were not experiencing this level of poverty.”

### Survey objectives for this chapter

Students coming to school hungry or without adequate food was an issue that came up repeatedly in the focus groups, with teachers observing effects such as students having difficulty concentrating, or feeling tired and weak, and having less control over their behaviour<sup>7</sup>.

The focus group findings suggest that schools vary greatly in their capacity to meet the needs of hungry students and in their procedures for providing financial assistance to families for the cost

---

<sup>2</sup> [www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx](http://www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> Food Banks Canada. (2014). *Hunger Count 2014*, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Provincial Health Services Authority. (2014). *Food costing in BC 2013*, p. 3, citing evidence from a literature review reported on in BC Ministry of Health, *Core Functions Food Security Evidence Review*.

<sup>5</sup> Provincial Health Services Authority. (2010). *Food for Thought: The Issues and Challenges of Food Security*, August 2010, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> McCreary Centre Society. *Youth who are bullied: A BC Adolescent Health Survey 2008 Fact Sheet*, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> White, M., Hill, I., Kemp, S., MacRae, J., and Young, L. (2012). *Poverty and education: A teacher's perspective—Summary of the findings of the focus group research*. Available at: [www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx](http://www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx).

of meal programs. Teachers stressed the importance of offering meal programs in such a way that students are not singled out for participating.

The issues raised in the focus groups helped inform the design of the questions about student hunger and school meal programs. The objectives of the *Poverty and Education survey* for the section on *Hunger and school meal programs* are to document, from a teacher's perspective, the extent of hungry students in BC classrooms, to assess the adequacy of school meal programs, and to explore reasons why families are sometimes reluctant to apply for financial assistance for school meal programs.

## Survey results

### Extent of hungry students in the classroom

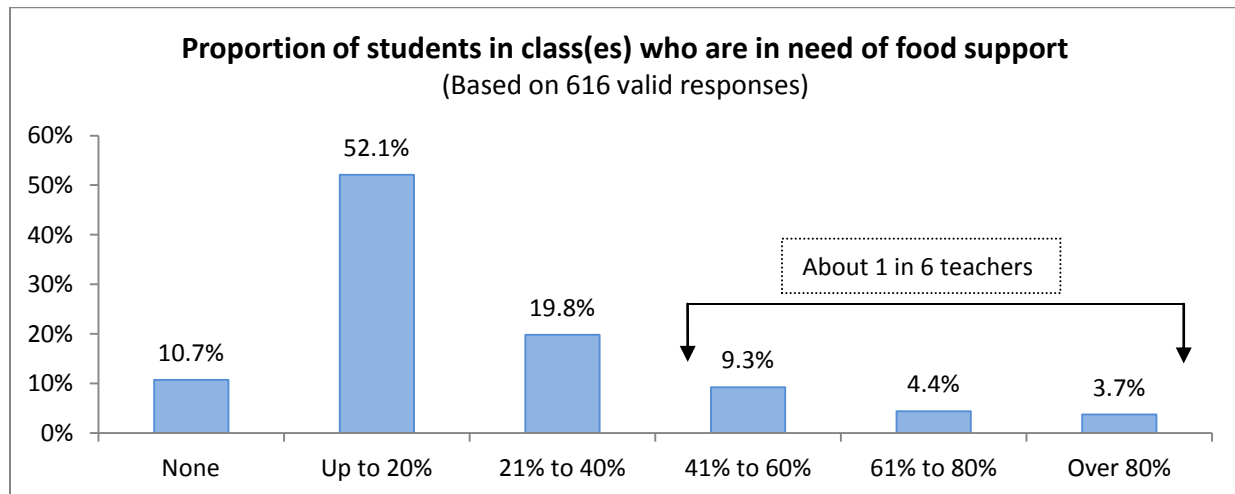
The survey asked teachers about whether there were hungry students in their class(es) and to estimate how many students were in need of food support. About 8 out of 10 teachers responding to the survey answered “Yes” when asked if they had students in their class(es) who start the day hungry (80.6%) and who do not bring food for lunch and snacks (80.3%).

#### Percentage of teachers in the sample who indicated there are students in their class(es) who start the day hungry or who do not bring food for lunch or snacks (n=778)

Are there students in your class(es):	Yes	No	No answer
Who start the day hungry	80.6%	14.8%	4.6%
Who do not bring food for lunch or snacks	80.3%	15.9%	3.7%

The survey also asked teachers to indicate how many students in their class(es) they are aware of who are in need of food support, and to indicate the total number of students they teach in this school year. The data provided was used to calculate the percentage of students in the class(es) whom teachers consider to be in need of food support, which was then grouped into quintiles. Some teachers reported figures in such a way that a percentage could not be calculated, and were excluded from the analysis, leaving 616 valid responses.

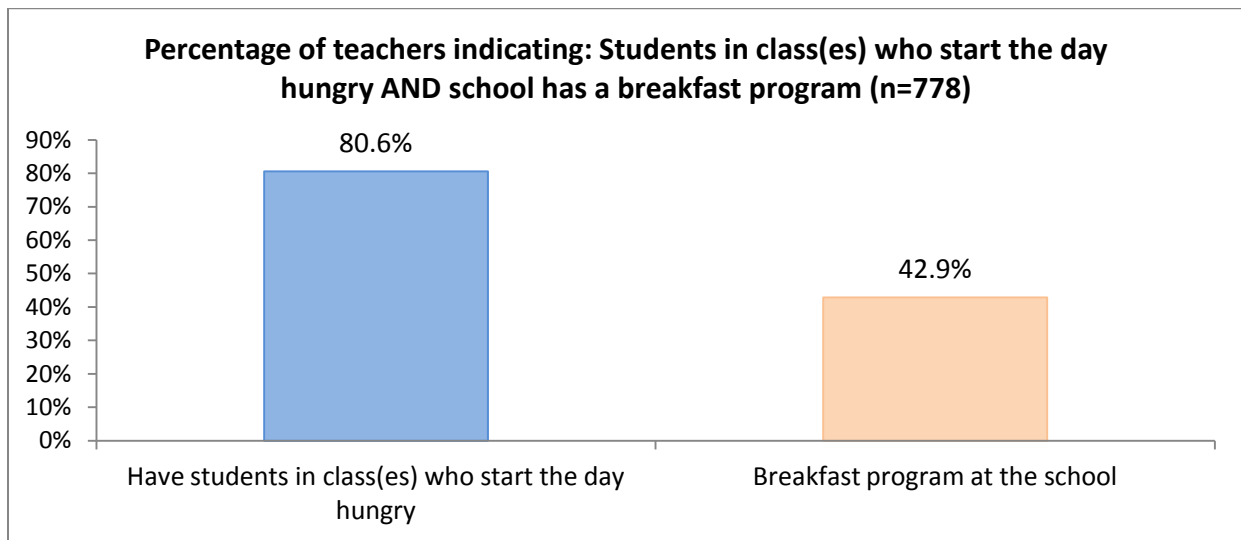
Of these 616 responses, one-half (52.1%) of teachers indicate having “Up to 20%” of students and one in five (19.8%) from “21% to 40%” of students in their class(es) who are in need of food support. About one in six teachers are in class(es) where at least 40% of students are in need of food support—with 9.3% of the respondents having “41% to 60%” of students, 4.4% having “61% to 80%” of students, and 3.7% having “Over 80%” of students in their class(es) who are in need of food support. About one in ten (10.7%) of the 616 respondents indicate having no students in their class(es) in need of food support.



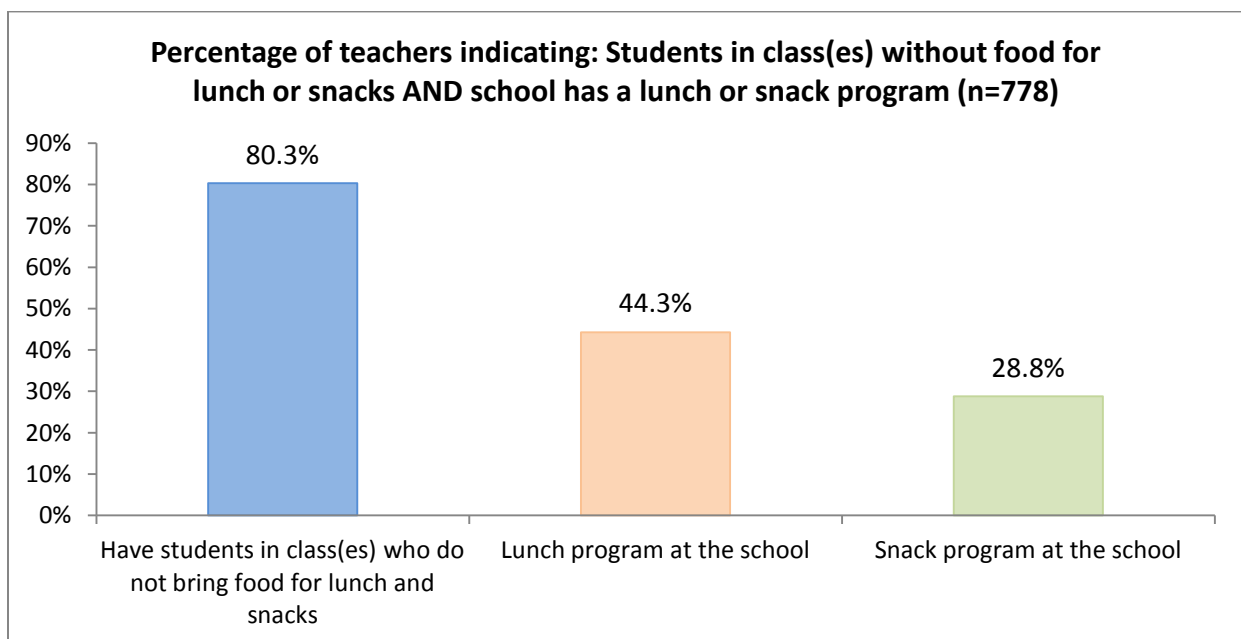
## Students attending school hungry versus available school meal programs

The survey results suggest there is a considerable gap between the needs of hungry children attending public schools and the food programs available to meet their needs. Twice as many teachers indicated students attending school hungry or without food than indicated the school offered a breakfast or lunch program.

The following chart shows that while 80.6% of the 778 teachers who responded to the survey indicated having students who start the school day hungry, only 42.9% of all schools represented in the sample offer a breakfast program.



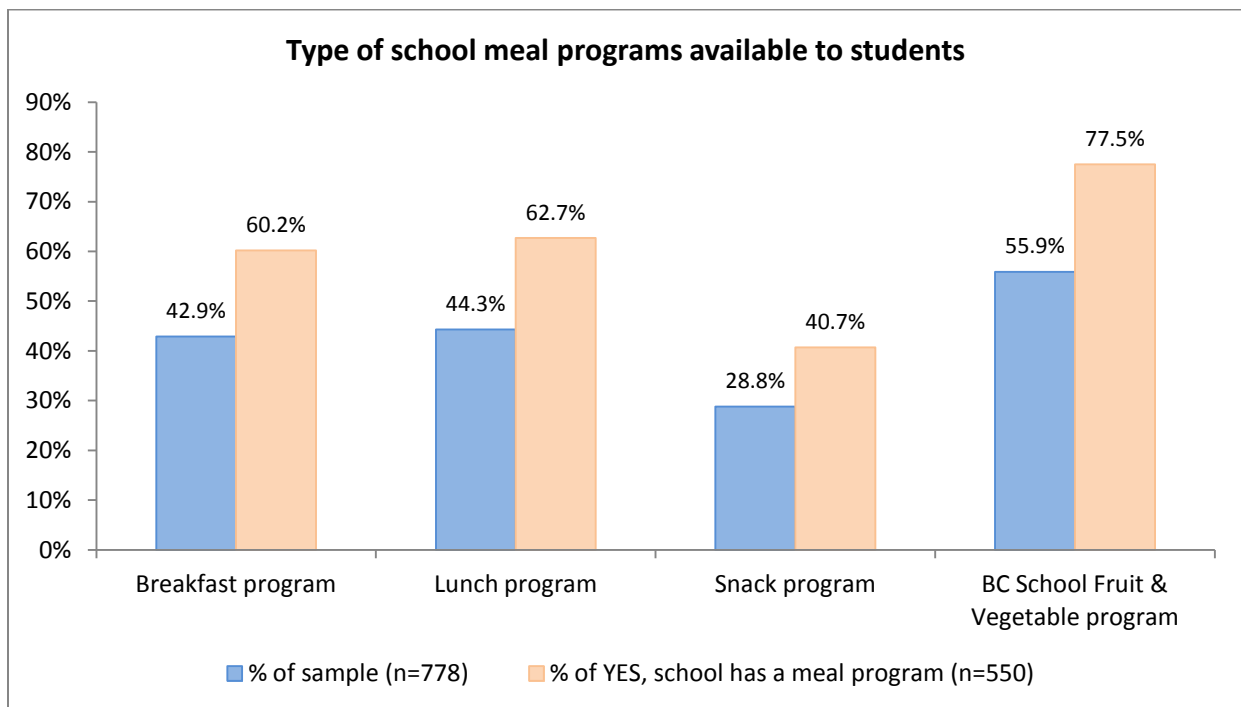
And while 80.3% indicated having students who come to school without any food for snacks or lunch, less than one-half (44.3%) of the teachers indicated there was a lunch program, and just over one-quarter (28.8%) of teachers indicated there was a snack program at the school.



## Type of school meal programs available to students at the school

About three-quarters (70.7%) of teachers indicated their school provides some form of nutritional program, ranging from occasional snacks to full lunch and breakfast programs.

The following chart shows the type of school meal programs offered by percentage of the total sample, and for only those teachers who indicated the school provides some type of nutritional support. Of the 550 teachers who indicated their school has a meal program, six in ten teachers indicated the school has a Breakfast program (60.2%) and/or a Lunch program (62.7%), and 40.7% indicated the school provides some type of snack program. About three-quarters of those respondents whose school offers some type of food support indicated participating in the BC Fruit and Vegetable Program (77.5%). Rather than provide food support to students in need on a daily basis, this program<sup>8</sup> brings fresh fruits or vegetable snacks to schools every other week (13 times a year) to educate and encourage all students about the benefits of healthy eating.



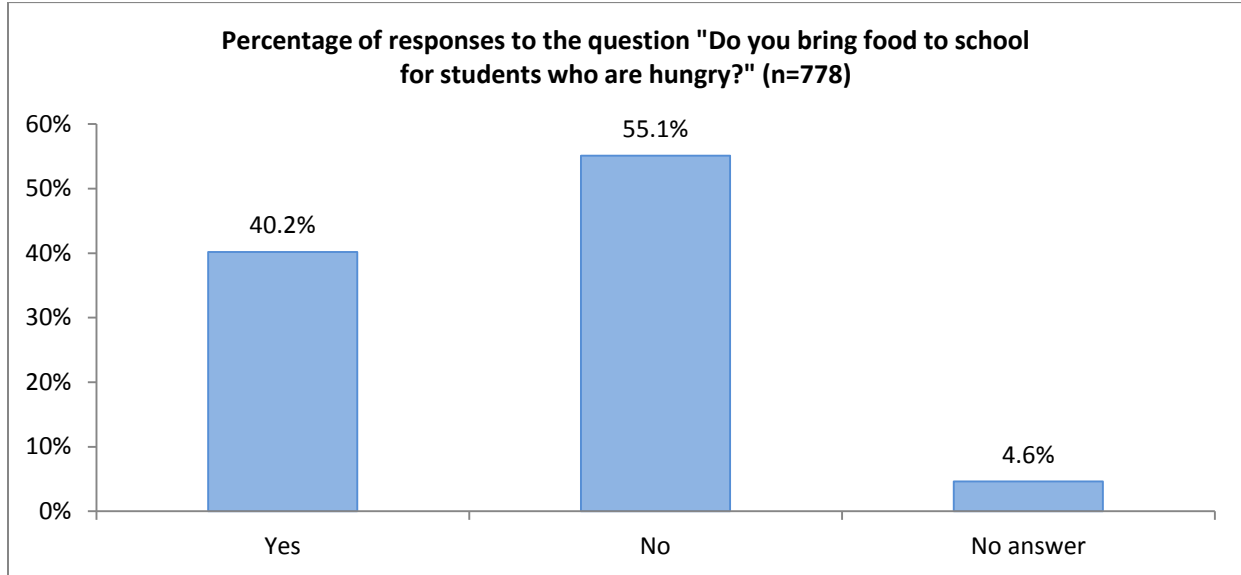
Of the respondents who indicated their school offered some type of meal program, 21.6% selected “Other nutrition program”. The comments provided by teachers reveal that many schools maintain a supply of snacks, which some referred to as emergency cupboards. And some schools provide bagged lunches funded by the Salvation Army, sandwiches funded by donations from churches, community groups, firefighters, local businesses, and the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) or other school donations. The comments indicate that some types of food support may only be offered once or twice a week, or on an emergency basis. Some students in specific programs received food support as part of an Aboriginal education program or an alternate education program. Some schools have a cafeteria, providing vouchers to low-income students to purchase a lunch. Several teachers commented that they bring food to school for students in need of breakfast, snacks, or lunch, or buy vouchers for students to participate in a meal program.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the BC School Fruit and Vegetable Nutritional Program see [www.sfvnp.ca/](http://www.sfvnp.ca/).



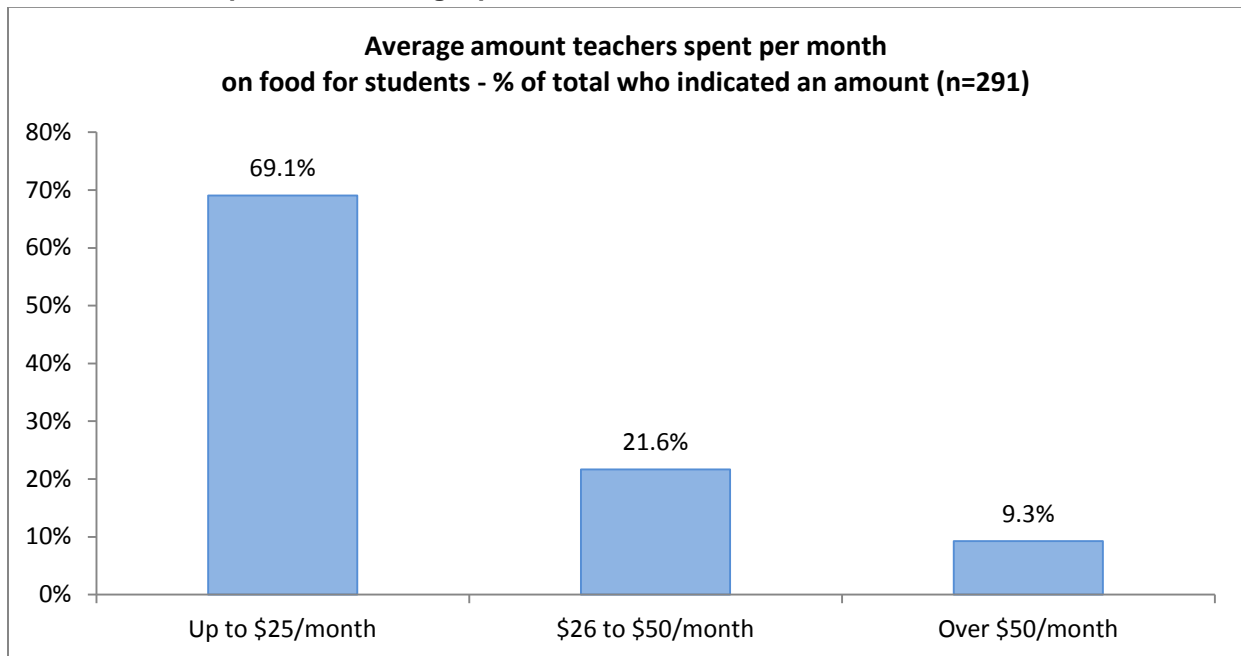
## Teacher bringing food to school for students

The survey asked teachers “Do you bring food to school for students who are hungry?”, and if so, to estimate the amount they spend each month. Four in ten (40.2%) of teachers answered “Yes”, spending an average of about \$30 per month (\$28.88) of their own money for food.



The chart below shows that about two-thirds (69.1%) of these teachers spend “Up to \$25 per month”, one in five (21.6%) spend “\$26 to \$50 per month” and about one in ten (9.3%) spend “Over \$50 per month”. Seventeen teachers report spending over \$100 per month on food to bring to school for students who are hungry.

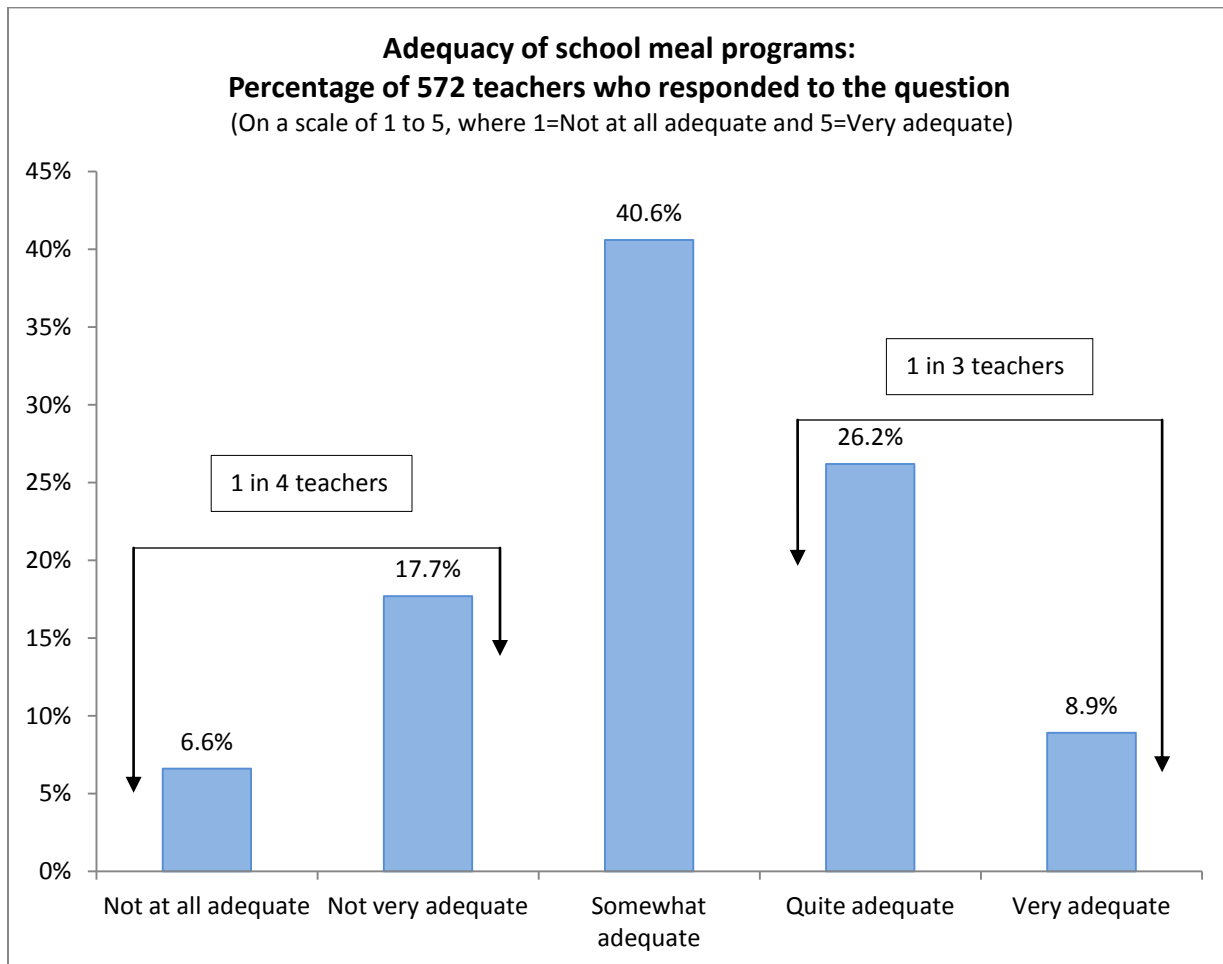
### Amount teacher spends, on average, per month on food for students



## Adequacy of school meal programs to meet the needs of all students who require nutritional support

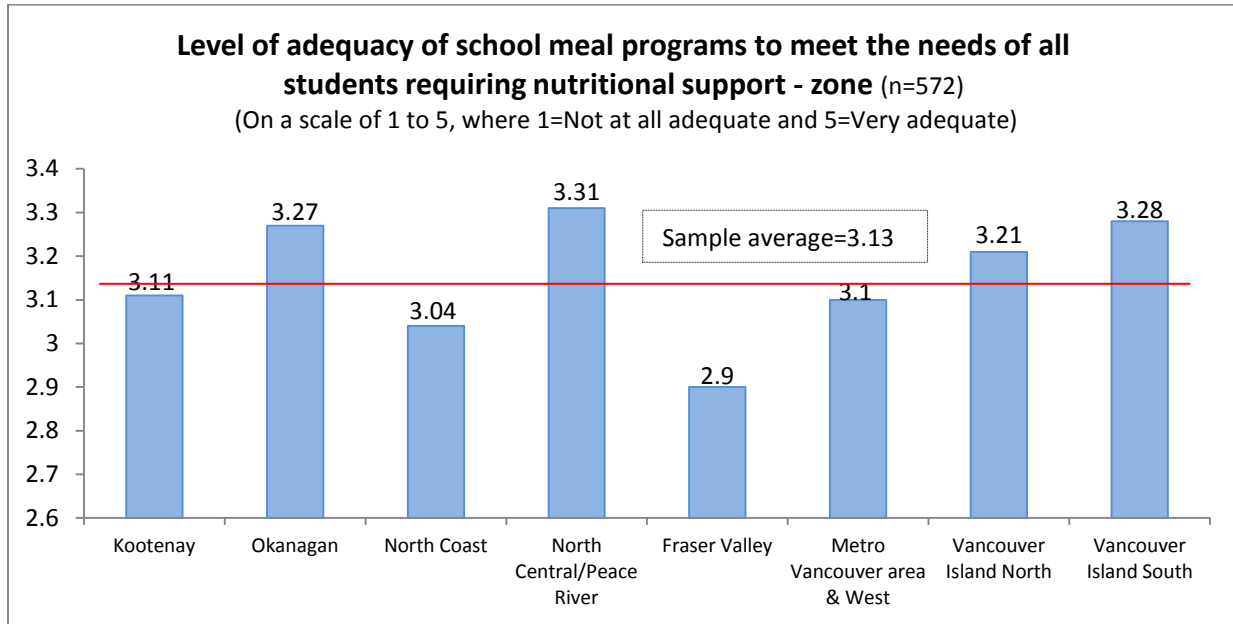
The survey asked teachers to rate “How adequate are the meal programs in your school in meeting the needs of all students who require nutritional support?”, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is “Not at all adequate” and 5 is “Very adequate”. The data in the chart below suggests that while some schools seem to be meeting the needs of hungry students, many students are attending classes on a daily basis without adequate nutritional support.

Almost a quarter of teachers responding to this question rated the school meal program on the low end of the scale as either “Not at all adequate” (6.6%) or “Not very adequate” (17.7%) in meeting the needs of hungry students. Only one in three teachers rated the adequacy of the school meal programs as either “Very adequate” (8.9%) or as “Quite adequate” (26.2%). Many schools appear to fall in the middle, with 40.6% rating the adequacy of school meal programs as “Somewhat adequate”.

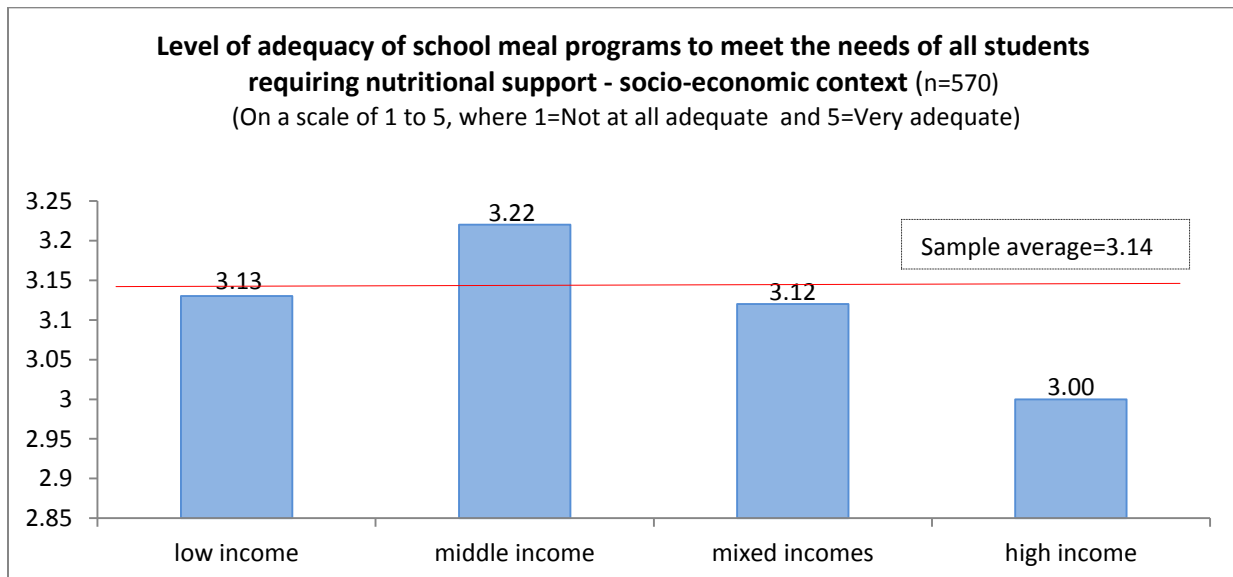


### Adequacy of school meal programs by zone and socio-economic context

The following chart shows the average (mean) level of adequacy of school meal programs, as rated by teachers in the survey, for the zone the school is located in and the sample average. The chart shows that on average, teachers in North Coast (3.04) and in the Fraser Valley (2.9) rate the adequacy of nutritional support for students in need the lowest of all zones, and below the sample average of 3.13.

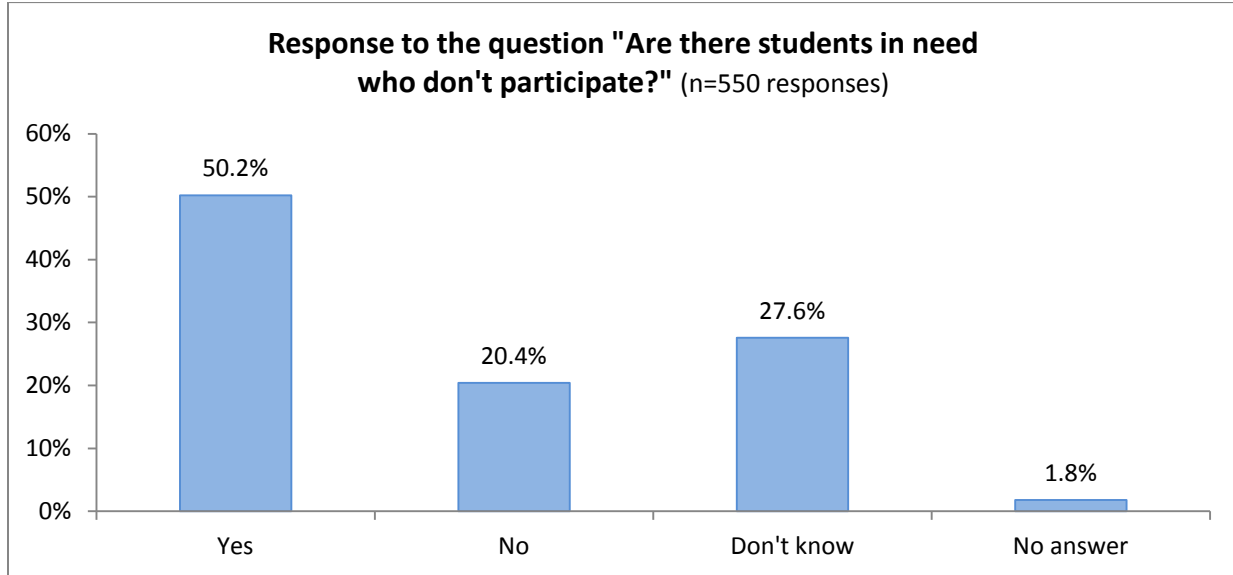


A comparison of means by socio-economic context of the school neighbourhood shows that those teaching in high-income areas, on average, rated the level of adequacy of nutritional support programs to support students in need the lowest (3.00) of all socio-economic groups and well below the sample mean of 3.14. Middle-income schools rated the level of adequacy, on average, the highest of all socio-economic groups (3.22), and above the sample average of 3.14.



## Reasons why students in need may not participate in meal programs

The survey asked teachers, “Are there students in your class who would benefit from the school meal program who do not participate?” Of the 550 teachers who indicated the school offers some type of school meal program, one-half (50.2%) of respondents answered “Yes”.



When asked why students in need don't participate in meal programs, the responses by teachers reveal several reasons why students and/or their parents may not seek financial assistance to participate in a school meal program.

Several teachers noted that many schools charge a fee to participate in meal programs, and if families cannot afford the fee, they must apply for financial assistance. Many teachers saw this as a significant emotional and social barrier for many parents, who feel uncomfortable disclosing their financial situation to the school. The most frequent terms teachers used to describe the emotional barriers they perceived were preventing families from applying for financial assistance were pride, shame, embarrassment, fear of their child being stigmatized, or other negative consequences.

*Embarrassment - they see the lunch program as a program for needy people and are ashamed to participate - parents, however, are pleased with the program when asked if it would help. Often they cannot even pay the \$20 per month asked so we fund that too.*

*I do not think that it is easy for families to understand that they might be eligible for support or having to declare financial need to the principal is an obstacle. It seems as though parents feel pressured to send money and most do, even if it is an obvious hardship... I would like it if teachers could be trusted to know which kids need food and put them on the 'no pay' list without having to go through the principal.*

The comments also suggest that the fear of being viewed as different from others prevents students who are hungry from accepting food that is offered by the school:

*Because most of their peers are relatively affluent, many students don't participate because of the social stigma that attaches to accepting this sort of social assistance.*

*Often students who need to eat are embarrassed to eat. They feel that others are watching them. Because of this we encourage everyone to get food so that there is less stigma attached.*

*Stigma of needing the program. Poverty is not constant, sometimes students have food, other times they don't. These intermittent students are not plugged into these programs.*

Some schools offer breakfast programs but logistical reasons prevent students from participating. Several teachers commented that students who arrive late, or are not able to arrive early enough (such as those who travel by school bus) start the school day hungry, even though a breakfast meal program is offered.

Other barriers identified by teachers to participating in school meal programs include the type of food served in the program conflicting with cultural preferences and beliefs; students not liking the food served; difficulty completing the forms; and lack of awareness that financial assistance is available.

*Some kids don't benefit from the lunch program because on many days the food served is "new" to them and they don't like the smell or the look of it [especially true for the refugee kids]. Several of my students don't eat meat nor drink milk and alternate food items are not provided. If they don't choose to eat the lunch program then they go hungry.*

Some teachers commented that the meal programs at their school were funded by a specific program, and only students in the program are eligible to participate. Two teachers suggested some students in need of nutritional support are not offered the meal program because the school has a limited number of spaces that are subsidized.

*There has been a reduction of services to the meal program. It was available to more students last year. I think new students who would benefit are not being offered the program.*

*We only have 50 spaces available for our lunch programme, so our administrator had to decide who was the most "needy".*

Finally, one teacher commented that it is not just school meal programs that charge a fee, so do the fund-raising activities such as "treat days" at the school, with some students being excluded for financial reasons.

*PAC fundraising for the school - weekly popcorn sales, pizza days, smoothies - require extra funds from families for empty calories and are an embarrassment or burden - some students are always left out of these 'fun' school spirit events unless another family kindly donates funds on their behalf or teachers put in extra funds for all to be included.*

## Chapter 3: Summary and discussion

The survey results reveal that much remains to be done to improve the adequacy of food support for students in BC public schools. Eight in ten teachers reported having students who come to school hungry, and having students who are without food for lunch or snacks. Yet less than half of teachers indicated the school has a breakfast or lunch program. Only one-third of teachers rated the meal programs at their school as either “quite” or “very” adequate to meet the needs of all students at the school requiring nutritional support.

While school districts undertake many initiatives to address the needs of hungry students, these survey results suggest that funds available to districts for school meal programs are inadequate to meet the need. A recent *Vancouver Sun* article by Daphne Bramham<sup>9</sup> cites a spokesperson for Surrey school district indicating the availability of school meal programs for all students coming to school hungry falls well short of the need, estimating there could be as many as 1,000 to 2,000 students without food at home who are in need of a breakfast and/or lunch program. With the district facing an \$8 million budget shortfall, and provincially-mandated cuts to education funding, many of these students will continue to go hungry unless new funds are forthcoming.

When funds are short, teachers are helping to fill the gap. The *Poverty and Education survey* found that 40% of teachers bring food to school for students who are hungry, spending an average of \$29 per month. Based on this figure, BC teachers are contributing a total of \$3.85 million per year<sup>10</sup> to meet the needs of hungry students in BC public schools. A national survey of American teachers<sup>11</sup> found similar results, with six in ten teachers having students who regularly come to school hungry, and described students having symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, and poor concentration. One-third of teachers in the US survey spent their own money to bring food for students at least a few times per month, while three-quarters did so once in awhile. They spend an average of \$26 per month on food for students, a similar amount to BC teachers.

The *Poverty and Education: A teacher's perspective* survey results also provide insights into reasons why students who are hungry may go without food rather than use school meal programs, suggesting that emotional and social barriers are an important factor. The implication for schools is that it is not enough to provide school meal programs, students and families need to feel emotionally safe using the service. Given the high proportion of teachers who report having students who start the school-day hungry, a more universal approach to providing nutritional food for all students would lessen the emotional and social barriers that may prevent some low-income students from participating in meal programs that require a fee.

But cost pressures on school districts may be reducing their commitment to “pay as you can” programs. A recent review of inner-city school programs by the Vancouver School Board<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Bramham, Daphne. “Hungry kids and not enough classrooms only part of Surrey’s budget woes”. *Vancouver Sun*, March 26, 2015.

[www.vancouversun.com/news/Daphne+Bramham+Hungry+kids+enough+classrooms+only+part+Surrey+budget+woes/10920112/story.html](http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Daphne+Bramham+Hungry+kids+enough+classrooms+only+part+Surrey+budget+woes/10920112/story.html)

<sup>10</sup> \$29 per month @ 10 months = \$290 per year. This amount (\$290) multiplied by 40% of 33,147 teachers (13,259) = \$3.85 million. FTE figures from Ministry of Education. *Teacher Statistics, 2013/14*, p.3 at

[www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reporting/province.php](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reporting/province.php)

<sup>11</sup> Share Our Strength. *APCO Insight*. “Hunger in the Classroom: Share our Strength Teacher Report 2012,” June 2012, pp.5–6, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Vancouver School Board. *Re-visioning Inner City and CommunityLINK Resources in Vancouver Schools*, Final Report, February 2014, p. 14.

suggests the VSB is moving away from universal school meal programs, attributing the need for this change to a considerable demographic shift in neighbourhoods and the lack of new funding. In the review report the VSB explains that as there is no new funding for school meal programs, the focus is on redistributing existing resources to those students most in need. A recent *Globe and Mail* article<sup>13</sup> reported that the Vancouver school district is dropping its subsidized lunch programs at four schools and will instead offer a program that provides free bagged lunches to “vulnerable” students across the district<sup>14</sup>. A September 2014 memo issued by the VSB Food Services Healthy Eating Programs<sup>15</sup> lists only nine schools with a universal school meal program (pay as you can) and 17 schools with full-pay school meal programs. The memo states that subsidy is available to support “vulnerable” children only, with applications available from the school principal.

What are the implications of the survey results for a move toward full-pay food programs? The results of this survey suggest that it is often emotionally challenging for students or their parents (on behalf of the student) to apply for financial assistance to participate in school meal programs. As the policy for full-pay school meal programs requires that parents ask the principal for an application to request financial assistance, this may pose a significant emotional barrier for some families. Programs that deliver bag lunches to students in need of food support who are at schools without a formal lunch program address an important gap in services. But unless there is a process for delivering these lunches in such a way that students do not feel singled out from their peers, some may avoid participating in the lunch program. This may be especially so in schools where low-income students make up a small proportion of the school population. Fear of stigma was identified by teachers as one reason students may not participate in meal programs.

Having thousands of BC households experiencing food insecurity and relying on food banks to meet their most basic needs is an indicator of the failure of an economy to provide employment with an income sufficient to support a family, and a failure of social programs to meet the most basic needs of those who are unable to work in paid employment. While there are many well-co-ordinated school meals programs across the province, supported in part by funding from the provincial government,<sup>16</sup> the survey results suggest that funding is not adequate to meet the needs of the thousands of students in BC public schools whose families live on incomes below the poverty line and who struggle with food insecurity on a daily basis. While school meal programs respond to the most basic and immediate need of hungry children, they do not address the underlying causes of food insecurity. What is needed is a comprehensive poverty reduction plan to provide families with a sustainable income sufficient to meet the needs of themselves and their children.

2015-09-01  
ML:af:tfu

---

<sup>13</sup> Hager, Mike. “Vancouver school board to revamp lunch program”. *The Globe and Mail* - Fri February 27 2015, p.S1. [www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/vancouver-school-board-to-revamp-lunch-program/article23222719/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/vancouver-school-board-to-revamp-lunch-program/article23222719/)

<sup>14</sup> *CBC News* recently reported the VSB implemented a pilot program in 2015 called “Lunch-to-Go,” that delivers food to vulnerable kids at schools without hot lunch programs. Gallagher, Margaret. School lunch programs overhauled in Vancouver to target vulnerable kids: VSB’s Supervisor of Food Services says changes coming to the subsidized elementary school lunch program. *CBC News*, Last updated: Feb 26, 2015 7:32 AM PT, available at: [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/school-lunch-programs-overhauled-in-vancouver-to-target-vulnerable-kids-1.2972826](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/school-lunch-programs-overhauled-in-vancouver-to-target-vulnerable-kids-1.2972826).

<sup>15</sup> VSB Food Services Healthy Eating Programs – Memo: Lunchsmart UPDATE September 2014.

<sup>16</sup> The provincial government provides districts with \$51.1 million CommunityLINK funding, some of which is used to support breakfast, lunch, and snack programs. Three years ago the Ministry of Education added a “Vulnerable student supplement” of \$11.2 million to the operating grants. Neither grant has increased in the last three years.