

What is meant by a “Universal Student Nutrition Program”?

What is a Student Nutrition Program?

A Student Nutrition Program (SNP) is a program that offers a healthy breakfast, morning meal, snack and/or lunch to students before, during or after each school day.¹

These programs can also be referred to as Child Nutrition Programs, School Feeding Programs, School Food Programs, School Breakfast Programs or School Meal Programs.

What is meant by “Universal”?

In Ontario, a “universal” Student Nutrition Program means that all children and youth have the opportunity to participate in the program. “Universal” means that no child is turned away based on their family’s ability to pay, fundraise or volunteer with the program.

All programs that receive funding from the Government of Ontario must adopt a “universal” approach. Some programs may ask parents to pay a small fee if they are able or take part in fundraising.²

What is the Benefit of a “Universal” Program?

Children come to school hungry for a number of reasons including lengthy commutes, early morning practices, not being hungry when they wake up, busy family routines in the morning, and household food insecurity.

A universal program is based on the idea of making sure that all of our children can eat at least one healthy meal or snack at school each day and that they are ready to learn when they come into the classroom.

¹ FoodShare Toronto – Student Nutrition: <http://www.foodshare.net/student-nutrition>

² Text adapted from Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services – Frequently Asked Questions: <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/schoolsnacks/faq.aspx>

What are some elements of a “gold standard” Universal Student Nutrition Program?³

- Offered to all students within a school
- Integrated into the school as a component of a comprehensive school nutrition environment (seen as an integral, seamless component, and not as a separate entity)
- High participation rate among student population (i.e. students want to be a part of the program)
- Program is safe, welcoming and well-supervised
- Students are actively involved in the program (preparation, delivery)
- Breakfast or morning meal program (served before 10:30 am) with 3-4 food groups
- Operate at least two days per week
- Offer a variety of culturally appropriate nutritious foods
- Be financially sustainable (receives adequate and consistent funding from diverse sources – government, parents, and other supporters; school fundraising to increase commitment and awareness)
- Have adequate kitchen facilities, equipment, food preparation area, storage, etc.
- Practice safe food handling and storage
- Strong partnership between parents, volunteers, school administration, teachers etc.
- Knowledgeable, well-trained, committed coordinator; strong local program committee; and sufficient volunteers that are involved at every step of the way from planning to daily operation
- Have a system in place to recognize volunteers and supporters
- Include program budgeting, monitoring and evaluation on a regular basis

Ideally, Student Nutrition Programs should also:

- Offer fresh vegetables and fruits
- Use local, sustainable food products
- Reduce reliance on pre-packaged, prepared foods
- Allow 20 minutes or more for eating

A program should meet the Ministry of Children and Youth Service’s SNP Nutrition Guidelines to ensure that programs are serving nutritious foods.⁴

Programs are also enhanced when they promote a “shared experience” around food, meaning that they provide enough time for students to eat their food, are located somewhere that is comfortable and conducive to eating, and where they allow students to connect with one another and other members of the school community including teachers and program volunteers.

Visit sustainontario.com/work/edible-education/say-yes/ for more *Say Yes! to Good Healthy Food in Schools* resources.

³ Toronto Public Health – Nourishing Young Minds: <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2012/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-48313.pdf>

⁴ Available at: http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/schoolsnacks/nutrition_guidelines.aspx