

Nourishing Care: Conceptualizing School Food within a Multi-Level Framework

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Abstract

In 2024, Canada's federal government committed \$1 billion toward a national school food program to increase food access for children and youth. The current provincial policies focus on nutrition standards while neglecting feeding relationships, which raises questions about their effectiveness. This policy analysis examines how Ontario school food frameworks could include care-based feeding using a School Food Care framework that is adapted from Black and Byun's (2025) multi-level theory of food care and Satter's (2007) Division of Responsibility. Analysis reveals that current policies privilege measurable nutrition outcomes and efficiency over care relationships, creating structural conditions that leave open space for practices that undermine children's food autonomy and reproduce existing power imbalances. While this interpretation requires further empirical validation, this paper offers policy recommendations that include revising procedures to specify responsive feeding practices as pedagogical care work.

Keywords

care work, feminized labour, full-day kindergarten, Ontario, responsive feeding, school food policy

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Ashley Garlick is a Master of Education candidate at Queen's University. Her experience as a Registered Early Childhood Educator has inspired her current research, which examines the social and systemic influences shaping feeding practices and mealtime routines in Ontario's kindergarten program. Ashley has held roles as an educator in childcare and school settings, a pedagogical leader, and a post-secondary instructor. Her teaching philosophy emphasizes reciprocal relationships that empower children and families while honoring diverse perspectives and lived experiences.

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Canada has four years remaining to meet its commitments under the United Nations' 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG), 2025). Of interest to this report, Canada is not on track to meet SDG 2 goal of ending hunger and has made the lowest improvement of the G7 countries (OAG, 2025). Rising obesity rates, which are closely linked to low income, remain a major challenge (Sachs et al., 2025) signaling that food access alone may not fully address this issue. Collaboration across sectors and levels of government has been identified as a key component to making progress toward the SDG goals. In 2024, the federal government committed \$1 billion to a National School Food Program (NSFP), subsequently releasing the National School Food Policy to guide its implementation (GoC, 2024). The NSFP requires such coordination between provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners to ensure children can access nutritious meals (OAG, 2025). The NSFP comes at a critical time as the number of families experiencing food insecurity continues to rise (Sarangi et al., 2026). School food programs reduce hunger and the inequalities stemming from limited access to nutritious foods (Maximova et al., 2025; Zhong et al., 2023). The vision of the National School Food Policy aims to address some of those issues within an "inclusive, non-stigmatizing environment that fosters healthy practices" (GoC, 2024, p. 14). Yet, current evidence suggests there is a gap between this vision and what is currently happening in schools. Recent news reports highlight parents' concerns about school staff judging packed lunches (Marfo, 2025). While research shows packed lunches typically have low nutritional quality (Neilson et al., 2022; O'Rourke et al., 2020), parents feel a gap exists between policies supporting healthy eating initiatives and the reality that many families are experiencing food insecurity (Marfo, 2025).

These tensions reveal a fundamental problem in how school food policy is conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated. To provide children with nutritious food in stigma-free environments, policies must ensure staff interactions are informed by evidence and respond to children's and families' diverse identities and lived experiences. The disconnect between nutrition-focused policies and the relational care work required to meet children's food needs reflects a broader gap in scholarly and policy discourse. Black and Byun (2025) recently proposed "food care" as a multi-level framework for understanding how individuals and organizations recognize and respond to the food needs of children (p. 3). Operating across individual, interpersonal, institutional and community, and systemic, and intergenerational levels (see Black & Byun, 2025, Figure 1), this framework defines many processes involved in caring for children's food needs that extend beyond parental feeding practices.

Figure 1.



At the interpersonal level, responsive feeding refers to a relational approach that supports children's nutritional needs while also forming the attitudes, habits, and social meanings around mealtimes. Satter's Division of Responsibility (Satter's DoR) (Satter, 2007) operationalizes these principles by clarifying the distinct

roles of adults and children so that children's hunger and fullness cues are recognized and respected. Satter's DoR has been applied to adult and child relationships to develop responsive feeding environments within the context of both home and childcare settings (Dev et al., 2017). How these principles translate to school settings and where parents and educators share this responsibility remains underexplored in both research and policy.

Researching and Evaluating Current School Food Programs

In their systematic review, Everitt et al. (2022) revealed that evaluations of Canadian school food programs have not assessed health equity, cultural responsiveness, or social benefits. This paper addresses these conceptual gaps by proposing a new school food care framework, adapted from Black and Byun's (2025) food care model and Satter's DoR (Satter, 2007). This framework has been developed for examining the K-12 school food environment in which children and youth access and consume food. However, underlying research on responsive feeding environments is most established for childcare settings, where early years pedagogy and responsive feeding research logically connect with kindergarten and primary grades. As this is also a formative period where children's eating behaviours and attitudes are likely to persist into adulthood (Haines et al., 2019), it remains the central focus of this paper's framework development. Further iterations would consider how responsive feeding principles shift as children age and take on more responsibility for their food choices. The school food care framework serves two purposes: (a) building the capacity of school communities for collaborative, evidence-informed inquiry into developing responsive mealtimes across interpersonal, institutional, community, and systemic levels, and (b) informing iterative policy recommendations that create and strengthen the structural considerations to establish and maintain those processes.

The second part of this paper provides analysis of Ontario's school food program policy landscape across federal, provincial, and municipal levels using the school food care framework, revealing how the current decentralized and inconsistent state of school food program policies inadequately address the complex realities of staff-child mealtime interactions.

Conceptualizing the School Food Care Framework

Reconceptualizing school food as care work is itself a political act that challenges neoliberal ideologies by making visible the feminized, relational, and emotional labour that has been systematically erased in frameworks that privilege measurable nutrition outcomes and cost efficiency over the care relationships essential to feeding. Subsequent recommendations will address how food care principles can be embedded across each framework level. This work contributes to a growing body of research involving Canada's school food programs with the specific lens of caring, responsive feeding relationships.

Education and Care

This work emerges from the author's experience as a parent and Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) in childcare and school settings, where feeding practices were often in conflict with evidence-based guidance and policies rarely reflected the lived realities of food access experienced by many families. This tension reflects a consistent pattern in which feeding children is care work, and care work, by virtue of being relational and feminized, has historically been denied sustained policy attention or adequate resourcing (Langford et al., 2018; Murray, 2021). The school support staff, volunteers, and early childhood educators at the heart of this framework are not separate from the conditions it seeks to address. Many of these workers experience low wages and poor working conditions (Childcare Research and Resource Unit, 2026), signaling that food insecurity may be as familiar to those implementing this framework as to the children and families it is designed to support. This is not a coincidence, but rather a lived consequence of systematically positioning care work as less worthy of compensation, policy attention, and professional recognition than academic work. The ethics of care challenge this hierarchy by insisting that caring relationships are morally and practically foundational rather than supplementary to human development and institutional life (Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1993). This principle is reflected in *How Does Learning Happen?* (HDLH), which informs Ontario's kindergarten program and positions caring, reciprocal relationships as essential to children's learning and well-being (Ontario Ministry of Education (OME), 2014). Within this paper, the ethics

of care provides the moral grounding that runs through the school food care framework, connecting food care, Satter's DoR, and HDLH within a shared commitment to why caring relationships must be protected at the policy level.

Langford et al.'s (2017, 2018) analyses show how the separation of education and care was replicated in the kindergarten program. Teachers, aligned with academic instruction, hold positions of greater professional recognition and compensation than RECEs whose work is grounded in care and relationships. Mealtimes inherit undervaluation by default. The school food care framework challenges this assumption directly by positioning responsive feeding as a form of pedagogical care work that demands professional knowledge, reflective practice, and sustained systemic support, mirroring HDLH's vision of the educator not as a technician to be instructed in correct procedures, but rather as a reflective, collaborative professional whose role is to observe children closely, respond to their cues, and engage in ongoing critical reflection and collaborative inquiry about practice (OME, 2014).

A Relational Systems Approach

Integral to this role is attention to the environment itself. HDLH's focus on the environment as the third teacher reminds us that whether children eat in crowded hallways or at shared tables, whether mealtimes are rushed or transitions protected, whether food honours cultural diversity or normalizes dominant preferences, the environment is not a logistical detail but an explicit pedagogy that current school food policy leaves entirely unaddressed. Black and Byun's (2025) theory of food care captures this complexity, situating children's food experiences within the systemic, community, and institutional conditions that either enable or constrain responsive feeding environments, rather than focusing solely on the feeding practices of individual adults.

Although Black and Byun (2025) treat institutional and community processes as a combined level, this framework distinguishes between them to reflect their distinct roles in the school food context. Institutional conditions refer to school and board level policies, physical environments, and organizational structures. Community conditions encompass local food systems, community partners, and consideration of the cultural context of the school community, including the intergenerational knowledge

and food traditions that families bring to school food environments. At the systemic level, federal and provincial policies establish the legislative and strategic frameworks that are translated into board-level programs, school procedures, and daily practice. This separation allows for a more nuanced understanding of how different processes interconnect across the levels to shape the structural conditions for responsive environments.

Interpersonal Feeding Relationships

Strategies used to encourage children to eat, known as feeding practices (Vaughn et al., 2016), play a significant role in shaping children's eating behaviour and later health outcomes (Haines et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2022). Satter's DoR promotes healthy eating attitudes through responsive feeding practices that support children's development of eating competence through structure and autonomy (Haines et al., 2019; Satter, 2007; Vaughn et al., 2016). The adult is responsible for what, where, and when to eat and the child is responsible for deciding how much to eat, if any at all (Satter, 2007). Conversely, coercive feeding practices such as pressuring children to eat, increase children's risk of obesity (Smith et al., 2022; Vaughn et al., 2016) and disordered eating (Smith et al., 2022). Self-determination theory further supports responsive feeding by grounding it in children's fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Cormack et al., 2020). Within the school food care framework, autonomy is protected when children decide whether and how much to eat without adult pressure, competence is supported when adults observe and scaffold children's developing food skills, and relatedness is fostered through trusting, responsive feeding relationships. HDLH offers important conceptual resources for reconceptualizing who children and families are within this context.

HDLH defines the child not as a passive recipient of adult decisions but as "a capable and competent learner" (OME, 2014, p. 11) whose curiosity and agency extend to learning about food, bodies, and mealtimes. This understanding is fundamentally incompatible with feeding practices that, however well-intentioned, override children's hunger and fullness cues or treat their food choices as deficits in need of correction. This is particularly significant in school settings where children interact with multiple adults across mealtimes and food literacy activities, making consistent application of Satter's DoR across relationships essential.

Families are critical partners in this relational vision, recognized by HDLH as “the first and most powerful influence on children’s learning, development, health, and well-being” (OME, 2014, p. 6). They carry cultural knowledge, relational history, and an intimate understanding of their children’s food needs that no institutional policy can substitute for. The school food care framework accordingly positions children as capable participants and families as genuine partners in responsive mealtime environments, rather than targets of nutritional correction.

Taken together, these conceptual resources provide the normative and pedagogical foundation for the school food care framework. Black and Byun’s (2025) food care model provides the multi-level structure, Satter’s DoR clarifies relational roles within mealtimes, and the ethics of care establishes why responsive feeding environments are a matter of professional obligation foundational to children’s learning and well-being. The framework serves as an analytical lens for examining how school food policies enable or constrain school food care across five interconnected levels, with indicators revealing whether policies support responsive feeding or create space for controlling practices, detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 School Food Care Framework

Level	Definition and Indicators
Individual	Children’s autonomy and eating competence - Children decide whether and how much to eat from available foods - Mealtimes and transitions provide adequate time for skill development
Interpersonal	Reciprocal feeding relationships within the context of care - Adults decide what, where, and when food is offered - Adults engage in intentional pedagogical practice to create and maintain responsive feeding environments - Neutral, non-judgmental language to describe food is used
Institutional	School policies, resources, and environments support feeding relationships - Physical and organizational structures enabling responsive feeding practices including adequate staffing - Infrastructure supporting the division of responsibility in partnership with families
Community	Local food systems and cultural contexts inform collective care responsibilities - Community partnerships supporting school food programs - Families meaningfully involved in decisions about school food programs - Cultural and economic diversity of families is reflected in school food programs, resources, and relevant policies
Systemic	Federal, provincial, and board policies, right-to-food frameworks, and broader social norms ensure feeding is recognized as care work and adequately resourced across all system levels - Funding structures that support trained staff, mealtime conditions, and nutritious food - Policies include a focus on responsive environments such as feeding practices and neutral language

Examining the Current Food Policy Landscape

A grey literature search (sources outside of academic journals) was conducted to identify relevant policy documents through government websites, school board websites, and public health online resources using key words including “school food,” “nutrition,” “feeding,” “lunch,” and “health.” This search was supplemented by reviewing references and related policy documents identified within initial sources. Policies and supporting documents that directly referenced school food, nutrition, or were otherwise used to inform decisions regarding food in schools or classrooms were included.

The following documents were reviewed chronologically to ensure clarity of historical analysis and intentions of subsequent documents: (a) *Healthy Food for Healthy Schools Act* (2008), (b) *School Food and Beverage Policy* (2010), (c) *Student Nutrition Program Guidelines* (2020), (d) *National School Food Policy* (2024). These findings were then compared with academic literature examining similar policies and school environments. Additional sources were selected to diversify the collection of evidence used to analyze the influence of school food environment on eating behaviours and subsequent outcomes relating to obesity, inclusion, and stigma. This process allows for empirical conclusions to be drawn that aim to reduce uncertainty when government decisions do not align with real-world conditions (Howlett et al., 2020). This analysis is shaped by the author’s positionality as a parent and RECE situated within predominantly white, English-language institutional contexts. The author does not claim to speak as or for racialized, immigrant, or otherwise marginalized families whose encounters with school food systems are shaped by dynamics of race, class, and culture beyond the author’s experience. This analysis draws on scholarship produced by and about these communities (e.g., Seko et al., 2025) and recognizes that the framework proposed here must be developed in ongoing dialogue with those communities rather than on their behalf.

Ontario’s Healthy Food for Healthy Schools

Ontario’s approach to school food has historically centred on what foods are available to students. Although intended to address childhood obesity through nutrition regulation, Ontario has produced policies that fail to address the complex realities of food insecurity and staff–child mealtime interactions. Provincial

initiatives to reduce obesity began with the *Healthy Food for Healthy Schools Act* (2008), which mandated 20 minutes of daily activity and restricted the amount of trans-fats in foods sold at school. This early policy established a pattern of treating childhood obesity as a technical problem, solvable through regulations about food content and daily exercise requirements within the institutional level. Community level interactions were identified by ensuring vendors providing food adhere to food regulations (OME, 2010). Additionally, the trans-fat regulation can be exempted for special event days. This exemption acknowledges that celebrations often centre around food. However, there is no mention of feeding practices. Failure to address the interpersonal context of food care on a systemic level created further implementation inconsistencies making it unclear how children’s eating behaviours are influenced at school.

Ontario’s School Food and Beverage Policy

The *Healthy Food for Healthy Schools Act* (2008) led to the creation of Policy/Program Memorandum No. 150 (P/PM 150), *School Food and Beverage Policy* (OME, 2010) that mandates all food for purchase in publicly funded schools must adhere to nutrition standards based on Canada’s Food Guide and restricts marketing of unhealthy foods (OME, 2010). School personnel must read food labels and ingredient lists and compare the information with specific nutrition criteria to determine compliance, although ultimate responsibility falls to the school principal. To support this process, there are three categories for food: sell most, sell less, and not permitted for sale (OME, 2010). The policy aims to create supportive school nutrition environments while allowing flexibility for special occasions and cultural events (OME, 2010). P/PM 150 includes little about how adults interact with children during mealtimes or how food is discussed in classrooms (OME, 2010).

Various government and non-government groups informed P/PM 150’s development, which included resource links and nutritional guidelines (Chaleunsouk & Kutsyuruba, 2014). Still, the implementation plan for P/PM 150 was unclear (Orava et al., 2017), and Ontario school boards needed to demonstrate compliance within a little less than a year (OME, 2010). Subsequent local policies were developed by school boards to support interpretation of P/PM 150 and improve skills, knowledge, and attitudes toward healthy eating (Chaleunsouk & Kutsyuruba, 2014).

For this paper, two board level policies were reviewed for interpretations of P/PM 150. Limestone District School Board's (LDSB) *Administrative Procedure 210–Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment* includes indicators from P/PM 150 regarding the sale of foods but fails to address eating environments or feeding practices (LDSB, 2018). Modeling from educators is included but only refers to adults eating foods with high nutritional content, rather than relational approaches to feeding practices (LDSB, 2018). In comparison, Toronto Catholic District School Board's (TCDSB) policy *Cafeteria Services and Food and Beverages Sold in Schools* outlines indicators from P/PM 150 and references collaborating with community partners and parents as a necessary component to a healthy eating environment (TCDSB, 2025). However, there are no specific details of what this collaboration entails (TCDSB, 2025). While policy ambiguity can in theory protect space for locally responsive collaboration, without explicit guidance and family partnership, this space is more likely to be filled by dominant social norms about food and feeding, reproducing rather than disrupting existing power imbalances.

P/PM 150 addresses the institutional level by mandating nutritional standards for food sold in schools but says nothing about how adults interact with children during mealtimes. P/PM 150 acknowledges the community level by stating, “[s]chool boards and schools are encouraged to continue to work with students, parents, school staff, community members, public health professionals, and food service providers to ensure that appropriate strategies are in place” for successful implementation and monitoring (OME, 2010, para. 6). However, there is little clarity as to what that might look like in practice at a local level. As a result, local policies lack clear monitoring strategies and guidance on the collaborative reflection necessary to develop and maintain responsive mealtimes.

Monitoring Food Policy Implementation

Principals by nature of their job description are commonly named as those responsible for monitoring and evaluating the food environment. However, Chaleunsouk and Kutsyuruba (2014) interviewed principals and vice-principals and found that other issues often took priority for these administrators, with some participants indicating that it was unreasonable to expect monitoring of all food and beverage items sold. Minimal time for dissemination and training was

also identified as a key challenge as available resources were not referenced prior to implementation. Many participants indicated that a gradual implementation process would have been helpful not only for school staff but also to increase parent education and engagement. Orava et al. (2017) evaluated 25 elementary (n=8) and secondary (n=17) schools and found similar results. Healthy eating did not take priority, and many of the resources made available were not utilized consistently (Orava et al., 2017). Dissemination of this policy was likely unclear because none of the participants used or were aware of the online modules and resources provided by the Ministry (Chaleunsouk & Kutsyuruba, 2014). Without a detailed dissemination strategy or mandated training on how to implement nutrition policy in ways that respect children's dignity and family circumstances, even clear nutritional guidelines can cause unintended harm.

This lack of prioritization is not surprising. Viewing care work as a key component for mealtimes is necessary for children to develop a positive relationship with food, health, and their bodies (Murray, 2021). Without this explicit guidance on the processes of food care (such as how to talk about food with children, create inclusive mealtime environments, and avoid stigma) well-intentioned policies will remain a lesser priority.

Beyond monitoring challenges, the vague language in local board policies that support P/PM 150 created interpretive problems at the institutional level that directly impacted the individual experiences of children. The policy's “80/20 rule” allowed exceptions for school wide special occasions to include food and beverage items of less nutritional value (OME, 2010) but was often interpreted differently by principals (Chaleunsouk & Kutsyuruba, 2014).

Another item left open to interpretation falls under the heading “Practices for Consideration” (OME, 2010). Framing the avoidance of food rewards as a consideration rather than a requirement leaves room for the practice to continue. This pattern was confirmed by Orava et al. (2017), who found that some teachers indicated the use of food as rewards. Rewarding children with food (typically for behavioural compliance) undermines children's self-regulation and is often associated with poorer dietary outcomes, including obesity (Vaughn et al., 2016). Similarly, P/PM 150 offers no guidance on classroom celebrations, how staff should respond to packed lunches of varying

nutritional quality, or how to discuss food with children without moralizing, shaming, or increasing obsession with foods of lower nutritional value.

Limited supervision was also brought up as a concern by parents at a board-level Education Policy and Operations Committee meeting. Parents became aware that school staff were playing videos or shows for children to watch during lunch in place of adequate supervision, raising concerns that this practice distracts children from recognizing their hunger and fullness cues and removes opportunities for social connection (Burra, 2024). The Director called for a review of best practices for lunch supervision to address these concerns (Burra, 2024), but no follow-up was found. Additionally, Seko et al. (2025) found that immigrant parents in Ontario expressed concerns that limited supervision during lunch times subjects their children to food shaming by their peers. This often led to children requesting packed lunches that incorporate more Western food items (Seko et al., 2025). This example clearly highlights how a systemic-level policy such as inadequate funding for staffing interacts with a child's choices on an individual level. Calls for increased staffing and reduced class sizes from frontline educators reflect the same pattern of systemic underfunding that leaves mealtime supervision inadequate and contributes to rising violence in schools (ETFO, 2025). In combination with the lack of monitoring, the mealtime environments and interactions that children experience appear dependent on the interpretations and practices of individual staff members and the number of available staff. This variability means some children may encounter respectful, supportive adults and peers while others face pressure, restriction, or judgement. Policy omissions in the areas of supervision and other uses of food leave critical interpersonal food care practices unaddressed.

Ontario's Student Nutrition Programs

Ontario's P/PM 150 focuses primarily on foods that are for sale, however locally developed policies also include references to foods that are available to children as part of Student Nutrition Programs (SNP) intended to alleviate hunger for students experiencing food insecurity (Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS), 2020). Currently, school boards work with community partners to develop SNP that provide free nutritious foods for all students (MCCSS, 2020).

Since food in this program is not for sale, the nutritional standards outlined in P/PM 150 do not apply. Instead, nutritional quality is to be followed as outlined in the *Student Nutrition Program Guidelines* (MCCSS, 2020). SNP can offer combinations of snacks, breakfast, and lunches. Funding sources for these organizations vary, comprised of contributions from MCCSS, SNP grants, donations from fundraising events or individual community members, and, in some cases, municipalities (Carducci et al., 2025; Coalition for Healthy School Food, n.d.; Rutez & McKenna, 2021). Funding is mainly used to procure food items since many individuals who operate these programs are volunteers (Orava et al., 2017; Rutez & McKenna, 2021).

This funding model presents challenges across multiple levels. Schools in low-income areas face the greatest need for nutrition support while having the fewest resources to fundraise, attract volunteers, and prepare food, essentially compounding existing inequity and limiting the nutritional quality of food available to students who need it most (Everitt et al., 2022). This model positions school food as a charitable intervention rather than as a right or public good, contributing to social stigma. Additionally, without paid, trained staff, SNP creates variability in the nutritional quality and feeding practices children experience.

Notably, the SNP guidelines do contain some guidance related to feeding practices. For example, the guidelines state "a pleasant eating environment is encouraged, where children are supported to respond to their internal cues for hunger and fullness" (MCCSS, 2020, p. 4). This language aligns with responsive feeding principles in Satter's DoR. However, this language is not reflected in Ontario's P/PM 150, nor has it been found in local board policies. Even where this language does exist, the lack of consistent monitoring strategies leaves room for de facto policies where school staff monitor the consumption of packed lunch content before children can access SNP or generally use coercive feeding practices. The presence of responsive feeding language in the SNP guidelines demonstrates awareness that how food is offered matters, not just what food is provided. This awareness is disconnected from the broader school food policy landscape and not currently included in monitoring or evaluation procedures provincially or locally.

Across Ontario's school food policies, the limitations of a nutrition-focused approach emerge. Almost fifteen years after the implementation of Ontario's P/PM 150,

Canadian obesity rates, which can increase children's risk of physical and emotional health problems, have remained relatively unchanged (GoC, 2023). Although factors that influence childhood rates of obesity are not limited to school policy outcomes, considering unintended consequences of policy decisions can help identify alternatives. For example, the intended outcome of influencing student selection by restricting the sale of school foods to those that are most nutritious is to reduce obesity. Unfortunately, this does not stop children from choosing to eat less nutritious foods outside of school. Chaleunsouk & Kutsyuruba, 2014 found that "students are voting with their feet" by walking to nearby food establishments when healthy school options were unappealing (p. 23). Similarly, Micha et al. (2018) found that while policies setting nutritional standards for school meals reduced caloric intake at school, these policies did not significantly reduce children's total daily caloric intake, suggesting children compensate outside of school. This is consistent with evidence that restriction and control can have the opposite effect, often leading to binge eating or increasing obsession with less nutritious foods (Birch & Fisher, 2000; Public Health Ontario, 2024).

Ontario's experience reflects a broader national pattern. Carducci et al. (2025) found that among evaluated Canadian school food interventions, results related to dietary intake and measures of children's physical growth and weight status were mixed with many showing no significant long-term effect, while Everitt et al. (2022) found that health equity outcomes, social benefits, and cultural knowledge and practices have rarely been evaluated. What these findings make clear is that nutritional standards alone are insufficient, and that monitoring and evaluating school food programs is complex in part because how children experience food at school matters as much as what food is provided. This demonstrates the need to reconceptualize school food as relational care work, and to develop monitoring frameworks that reflect the multi-level contexts through which children's food care needs are met.

Preliminary Review of Canada's National School Food Policy

The National School Food Policy envisions that all children in Canada will "have access to nutritious food at school, in an inclusive, non-stigmatizing environment that fosters healthy practices, while strengthening connections with local food systems, the environment and culture" (GoC,

2024, p. 14). Still, the level of funding allocated to these programs will not sufficiently support this vision. Blais et al. (2025) found that the initial bilateral agreements fall short on what would be considered enough to cover the cost of a nutritious meal. For example, the combined federal and provincial funding would cover \$0.51 per student per day. According to Blais et al. (2025), this might amount to "half of a medium-sized apple" (p. 2). Canada's current level of funding cannot support the institutional infrastructure (such as adequately trained and compensated staff) required for comprehensive food care. The inadequate funding ensures that programs will continue to rely on volunteers and charitable donations, replicating the model that has created inconsistency and inequity at the provincial level.

Additionally, the third objective in the policy aims to support children's development of healthy food-related behaviours and attitudes including enjoying meals and snacks with others, being open to trying new foods, and taking time to eat (GoC, 2024). These indicators acknowledge the relational aspects of eating, with little guidance provided about mechanisms for how adults should support them. The school food care framework offers a structure for examining what that coordination would require across interpersonal, institutional, community, and systemic levels.

Discussion

The previous chronological examination of Ontario's school food policy landscape reveals challenges to fostering responsive feeding environments. Policies at provincial and now federal levels address nutrition and access but neglect relationships that are foundational for comprehensive food care and related positive health outcomes. The school food care framework shifts the understanding of children's food needs from a technical nutrition focus to a relational care model. Fundamental to this reframing is ensuring school staff understand responsive feeding practices and the factors that influence them through access to professional development opportunities. Current evidence in childcare settings highlights the significance of this. For example, Levin et al. (2024) identified a variety of factors that influence educator feeding practices within childcare settings, interviewing 45 early childhood educators and finding they often receive training focused on nutrition rather than responsive feeding strategies. Levin et al. also identified

misconceptions among educators about what constitutes pressure to eat. When educators lack training or clear policy guidance, they tend to rely on personal beliefs (Dev et al., 2017; Love et al., 2020) and childhood experiences (Zhang et al., 2023). In doing so, they inadvertently impose dominant standards of what constitutes a “healthy lunch” or “appropriate food” on children and families whose lived experiences may differ significantly. Although all children and families can experience negative outcomes, marginalized groups face greater risk. Immigrant children often experience lunch-shaming from peers when parents pack cultural foods (Seko et al., 2025), and the physical, mental, and emotional labour of meeting lunch expectations without fear of judgement from teachers or peers compounds existing pressures on families already navigating the cost of food (O’Rourke et al., 2020; Niimi-Burch & Black, 2024). Failure to provide explicit guidance within policies enables existing power imbalances to operate within daily mealtime interactions, transforming what should be caring relationships into mechanisms that reproduce inequity.

Given that schools have larger child-to-adult ratios and less relational focus than childcare settings, these patterns likely represent a conservative estimate in schools. Responsive feeding practices in school settings remain largely unexamined empirically, pointing to the need for research in this context.

Moving Forward with the School Food Care Framework

The school food care framework proposed in this paper provides a conceptual foundation for understanding what comprehensive food care in schools requires (Table 1). Centring care in school food policy requires resisting mechanisms organized around productivity and efficiency (Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1993; Held, 2006). These recommendations are therefore grounded in the understanding that educators, families, and school communities are not subjects of policy surveillance, but capable professionals and partners whose relational expertise needs to be supported, not simply directed.

First, exploratory research is needed to document current mealtime practices and role perceptions among parents and school personnel across diverse school contexts. Such inquiry should be designed collaboratively, centring the voices of educators, families, and children, including those from racialized,

immigrant, and food-insecure communities whose experiences are most directly shaped by existing policy gaps. Findings from this research can identify tensions that undermine mealtime responsiveness while surfacing the knowledge and relational capacities already present in school communities.

Second, it is recommended that Ontario school boards revise procedures governing school nutrition environments to reflect evidence-based responsive feeding principles. Drawing on public health evidence (MCCSS, 2020; Public Health Ontario, 2024) and the College of Early Childhood Educators’ (2025) *Professional Advisory on Practices that Harm Children*, board policies should establish clear expectations that ensure: (a) adults actively support children in recognizing and responding to their own hunger and fullness cues; (b) families’ food choices are respected without comment on content or quantity; (c) children are supported to eat from offered foods in the order of their own choosing; and (d) food is never used as a reward or withheld as punishment. These expectations should be framed as professional standards that protect children’s dignity and autonomy, consistent with HDLH’s understanding of children as competent and capable learners (OME, 2014).

The mechanism for implementing these standards matters as much as the standards themselves. Compliance reviewed through top-down monitoring sits at odds with both the ethics of care and HDLH’s pedagogical model, which positions critical reflection and collaborative inquiry, not surveillance, as foundational to transformative practice. This requires educators to observe children closely, sit with difficult questions about their own assumptions, and revise their approaches accordingly (OME, 2014). School personnel involved in SNP require dedicated time to reflect on mealtime practices, and develop consistent, responsive approaches across the school day. For RECEs, daily planning time is equally essential — not only for responsive feeding environments but also for effectively implementing play-based programming alongside their teaching partner.

Families must be central to this process, viewed as competent and capable partners whose cultural knowledge and values must be honoured (OME, 2014). Family engagement should be genuinely participatory where possible, creating space for families and educators to learn alongside one another

as co-inquirers and decision-makers in shaping mealtime culture, rather than positioning families as passive recipients of nutrition information or parent education programming. Genuine partnership requires recognizing the range of barriers that shape families' food choices, including cost, culture, and meeting school lunch expectations, while trusting that families are doing the best they can within those constraints.

Third, the provincial government should increase funding for staffing in school food programs. Not only could this staffing ensure school food programs have the personnel needed to make nutritious foods available, each elementary classroom could have at least one staff member present at all times to supervise and support peer interactions, effectively reducing stigma around diverse foods (Seko et al., 2025), reduce instances of violence (Bas, 2018; ETFO, 2025), and address lunch-time technology use (Burra, 2024) that has been observed. Without adequate staffing, the vision of the educator as a reflective, responsive professional embedded in both ethics of care and HDLH cannot exist.

Finally, offering nutritious food in an environment that is stigma-free, inclusive, and fosters healthy practices requires a relational focus that recognizes care and education as inseparable. Countries with universal school food programs like Japan, Finland, and France demonstrate this approach through family-style meals, educators eating with children, and community involvement in planning and implementation (Hoyer et al., 2025). These examples illustrate what is possible when school food is integrated into the curriculum.

Realizing this vision means Canada invests in a school food program as a public good and a site of pedagogical care work, not a charitable supplement to what families are presumed to be unable to manage on their own. Allocating resources to ensure this investment is guided by comprehensive food care principles rather than nutrition standards alone represents a critical step toward creating school food programs where all children experience responsive relationships with food, develop eating competence, and build foundations for lifelong health and well-being.

Conclusion

This paper proposed a school food care framework grounded in ethics of care to analyze Ontario's school food policy landscape, revealing that policies consistently privilege nutrition standards over interpersonal feeding relationships, creating conditions that risk reproducing the inequities Canada's National School Food Policy aims to address. The recommendations establish a research agenda focused on documenting current feeding practices and how educators and families interpret shared mealtime responsibilities. Making this possible requires that Canada's historic investment in a school food program be guided not only by nutrition science but also by a commitment to the responsive relationships that nourish children's sense of belonging and their relationship with food. The proposed school food care framework offers a starting point for that reorientation, one that must be examined, refined, and co-developed with the school communities, families, and children it is designed to serve.

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