

Bill 17

The Public Schools Amendment Act (Nutrition Equality for Lasting Learning Outcomes)

April 2025



The Manitoba Federation of Labour (MFL) is Manitoba's central labour body, with more than 30 different affiliated unions, representing more than 130,000 unionized workers from every sector and every region of the province in the public and private sectors, as well as the building trades.

The MFL wholeheartedly supports this bill's goal of ensuring that Manitoba's universal school nutrition program continues well into the future, no matter who forms government.

Children can't learn on empty stomachs, and Manitoba's universal school food program will make a huge difference in the lives of children and working families. Nutritional meal programs in schools can lead to improved attendance, health, learning and behaviour for students.

Free meal and snack programs also help ensure students have access to essential nutrients throughout the day and can lead to food skills education opportunities while introducing them to new and healthy food choices. And because this program is universal, rather than income tested, it ensures that it will help working families across the board.

Studies show that children who are well-nourished have improved memory, problem-solving skills and creative abilities. However, prior to the introduction of the universal school food program, 31 per cent of elementary students did not eat breakfast daily. The universal school food program will change that. And I need to make special mention of former Minister of Education Nello Altomare and of the Manitoba Teachers' Society for their advocacy about the need for a universal food program

Poverty is one of the biggest barriers to learning and Manitoba has the highest child poverty rate among all Canadian provinces at 27 per cent. Our province's child poverty rate is well above the national average of 18 per cent, based on 2022 Statistics Canada data¹. The percentage is even higher among Indigenous communities where one in two First Nations children, one in four Métis and one in four Inuit live in poverty, all higher than Canada's national average.

This universal school meal program will help reduce barriers to education and help to build a more equitable Manitoba. Proper nutrition also supports student learning and can improve children's long-term health, school attendance and social cohesion.

And we are glad that the government is taking steps to protect this universal school food program, because we know that, shocking as it sounds, other governments have been opposed to feeding hungry schoolchildren.

¹ 35 Years In: Manitoba needs an anti-poverty strategy that works. Manitoba Child and Family Poverty Findings and Recommendations, Campaign 2000 Report, November 2024.

Former Premier Brian Pallister was clear in his opposition to a universal school program, saying in this very Legislature that “if children are going to school hungry, then parents aren’t fulfilling their responsibilities” and criticizing the idea of a universal school program as “state-funded cafeteria meals.”² Former PC cabinet minister James Teitsma said a universal food program for Manitoba students was “a bad idea.”³

While most Manitobans know that it is important to provide the kind of social safety net that ensures children do not go hungry at school, it is important to be reminded that there are politicians who will try to undo the important work that has been done with this universal school food program. While it is unfortunate that the PCs think it is okay for schoolchildren to go hungry, the MFL is glad that the NDP government has stepped up to ensure our province’s universal school food program is protected now and into the future.

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² Manitoba Hansard, March 4, 2020

³ Tory MLA calls proposed breakfast program a ‘bad idea’. CTV News Winnipeg, February 27, 2020