

From Feeding to Nourishing

Improving quality and nutrition as the new National School Food Program scales

Commissioned by:





About the Institute for Future Food Systems (IFFS):

Because food systems change is among the most under-leveraged solutions to today's health, climate and economic crises, the Institute for Future Food Systems (IFFS) works as a strategic intelligence unit, making the strongest evidence and best practices easier to see, act on and spread. We are an independent non-profit that works with the networks, organizations and individuals best positioned to turn that evidence into action.

The following research was commissioned by World Animal Protection Canada, 2026.



About World Animal Protection:

World Animal Protection is an international animal welfare organization with 75 years of experience working to improve the lives of animals worldwide. In Canada, our work supporting healthier, more humane and sustainable food systems includes longstanding membership on the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC), collaboration with farmers and the agricultural sector, and advocacy with governments, retailers, restaurants and the financial sector to drive meaningful change. This includes increasing the production and consumption of plant-based foods, advancing higher-welfare production systems and supporting innovative solutions that benefit animals, farmers, people and the planet. Our Canadian work draws on international collaboration and expertise, including work with the Danish government to advance plant-based foods and sustainable food systems, alongside engagement with partners across the European Union.

Executive Summary

School meals are the most widely used child nutrition intervention in the world and, in the past four years, one of the fastest growing: the number of countries with a national school meals policy nearly doubled, from 56 to 107; children reached rose by 80 million to at least 466 million; and annual spending doubled to US\$84 billion – 99% of it from national budgets. Canada can learn from its peers at a critical juncture and while the program is still young.

Canada’s Momentum

Since school meals appeared in Budget 2019 without dedicated funding, Canada’s school food landscape has evolved rapidly. Roughly one in three students now participates, far short of universal but up from one in four before 2024. While average funding remains under \$1 per student per day (well below the \$4.50 minimum needed), it has more than doubled in five years. The past two years have been transformative, ushering in a national school food policy, program and permanent federal funding.

How Canada built a National School Food Program (NSFP) in three years

When	What
2024	Budget 2024 commits \$1B over five years. National policy released. First bilateral agreement signed. One-time School Food Infrastructure Fund launched.
2024-25	Remaining bilateral agreements signed. Year 1 starts on a different date in each jurisdiction. Federal transfers rise to \$140M.
2026	NSFP was made permanent through the NSFP Act. 2025-27 provincial action plans finalized. \$216.6M per year committed from 2029-30.
2027	The bilateral agreements expire on 31 March. Renewal covers 2027-2029.

Securing bilateral agreements nationwide in nine months is unprecedented for a policy of this scale. It arrived at a critical juncture, too: food prices are 31% higher than in 2020, one in three children lives in a food-insecure household and youth health is in crisis.

Historically, school food advocacy has focused on alleviating food insecurity rather than on what better food quality delivers for long-term health. While the national policy establishes a critical health foundation by committing to alignment with Canada’s Food Guide (CFG), a world-class standard, its translation into school settings has been weak. The CFG was not designed for large institutional service, acceptance and awareness of it vary across communities, and provincial application and regulation of it has been uneven. In short, Canada has built access at remarkable speed, but the foods that align most closely with the Food Guide are not yet easy to buy, prepare or serve within the system that access has built. The 2024 bilateral agreements were written in the same order: they funded access, committed to the CFG, but deferred the definition of quality:

"Canada and [Province/Territory] agree to work together, and with stakeholders towards the development of common quality and outcome measures that **could** be included in future agreements to reinforce the National School Food Policy's vision."

- Section 6.2 of bilateral agreements (emphasis added)

The 2027 renewal thus offers a pivotal window for governments to turn this health-promoting vision into reality by collaborating together to develop joint standards and measurable outcomes for quality with flexibility that can meet distinct regional and cultural needs of each province and territory.

Why Defining and Evaluating Quality is Critical

1. Need: Soaring Health Risks for Canadian Youth

Students are on a chronic disease trajectory before they finish high school. Childhood obesity has tripled since 1980, Type 2 diabetes has surged roughly 60% among Canadian children over the past decade, and cardiovascular markers historically confined to middle-aged adults are appearing in youth. These burdens disproportionately affect Indigenous and racialized children, deepening systemic disparities.

The immediate costs land in the classroom, where poor nutrition is associated with weaker attention and memory, lower academic performance and higher absenteeism.

The larger costs land later, on an overburdened healthcare system. Healthcare spending reached nearly \$400 billion in 2025 (about 13% of GDP) and is growing 1.6 percentage points faster than the economy. Chronic diseases already cost the economy about \$190 billion annually, with diet-related disease specifically estimated at \$26 billion a year.

"Imagine the cost in twenty years if we don't well-nourish this generation."

- Wendy Smith (MEALSource, Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council)

Nutrition plays a major role for overall health. A NSFP that improves eating patterns and access to nutritious food can alter this trajectory. Children consume up to a third of daily calories and 28-36% of key nutrients at school. In 2023, Canada ranked 30th of 38 wealthy countries on child access to nutritious food, and fruit and vegetable consumption has declined with inflation and higher grocery prices. Through the NSFP, governments can reach the most children during the years when lifelong eating patterns form. Despite CFG recommendations for higher fibre, whole grains and plant-based protein, all three remain critically underconsumed. Just 5% of national protein intake, for example, comes from nuts, seeds and legumes, the plant sources CFG recommends most.

2. Speed: Building System Infrastructure Before Defining Standards

With the School Food Infrastructure Fund complete and school food programs (SFPs) expanding, Canada is building the pipes before defining what flows through them. Supplier lists, catalogue defaults and kitchen equipment specified today will shape meals for years. This speed, though, can be an opportunity: as a global latecomer, Canada can import proven solutions rather than rediscovering them.

3. Complexity: A Multi-Layered Ecosystem Without Unified Quality Control

Between funding and a student's meal there are many influences on food quality. Governments set policy and fund programs. Provincial ministries allocate funding and set standards. Delivery agencies distribute that funding and coordinate programs. School boards govern staffing, curriculum and, in some provinces, purchasing. Public health professionals advise on menus. Principals, coordinators and volunteers do the daily purchasing. Manufacturers, distributors and food service contractors decide what is available, at what price, in what format. Civil society sets shared standards, spreads practice and delivers much of the food. Researchers evaluate and supply evidence. Every lever shapes quality. The ministry that funds a program is accountable for it, but in most jurisdictions holds only one lever: it sets the standard, and, outside the provinces that write the menu themselves, neither buys the food nor verifies what is served.

These hands also shape only part of what children eat at school. When last measured (2004), most food comes from home, and the sold and fundraising streams sit outside program governance. Programs are the one stream public policy reaches directly, and their effect carries past the school gate – When children ask for foods they first tried at school, parents often buy them. As participation grows, program quality becomes the most direct lever for governments to shape what a school day's food looks like.

The sector's self-organization has been remarkable. Capturing the full value of the funding now needs greater alignment across it. Establishing common outcome measures through consensus between provinces can ensure equity in outcomes for students as well as harmonizing the many hands, support operators and maximize returns on public investment.

4. Opportunity: The Largest Gaps are the Least Expensive to Close

Adequately funded SFPs can return up to \$7 for every \$1 invested, with the greatest gains accruing to low-income children. Diversifying protein and increasing whole grains and fibre offer the most cost-effective nutrition levers while delivering powerful co-benefits:

- **Child health.** Higher fibre and lower saturated fat improve cholesterol, insulin sensitivity and markers for cardiovascular health and Type 2 diabetes without impacting growth or development. Dairy also accounts for ~41% of saturated fat intake for all Canadians.
- **Affordability.** Whole plant proteins remain significantly cheaper per gram of protein than meat, a gap the 2026 Food Price Report shows is widening.
- **Domestic agriculture.** Canada is a leading global pulse producer with minimal domestic institutional demand. The NSFP can strengthen the domestic market.
- **Climate and land use.** Plant proteins produce about one-tenth of the greenhouse gas footprint per unit of protein while requiring substantially less land and water.
- **Supply chain resilience and security.** Pulses and grains store longer, are grown domestically at scale, and are less exposed to the cross-border processing dependencies already identified as a vulnerability.

Many stakeholders point to fibre as an ideal quality indicator. K-12 students consume about six grams of fibre during the school day and about 14 grams over the whole day, against recommended intakes of 19 to 38 grams, depending on age and sex. One cup of lentils alone provides 15 grams. Fibre is unmeasured in SFPs and can be tracked easily. Improving school food quality can also advance broader national priorities:

- **Food security:** support the National Food Security Strategy target to raise the domestically produced share of Food Guide-aligned healthy foods by 2032.
- **Procurement:** adapt the Low-Carbon Food Procurement Working Group criteria into institutional contract language and RFP guidance.
- **Public health:** support Health Canada's sodium reduction targets, reinforce mandatory front-of-package labelling, and strengthen the Joint Consortium for School Health standards.
- **Agriculture and innovation:** advance the promised Buy Canadian in School Foods Program and leverage Protein Industries Canada's mandate to build domestic plant-protein supply chains.

Risk: Scaling Program Access Without Quality Metrics

For the NSFP to survive political shifts, it must be defensible on its own evidence. When the 2012 US nutrition standards faced rollbacks, evidence of increased consumption of whole grains and produce served as their primary defence. In Canada, the immediate risk is compositional: expanding funding without measurement scales existing baselines. Establishing defensible standards requires roughly two years of baseline data, making it critical to begin collecting data, not just set thresholds, as soon as possible.

"Evaluation is what keeps school food programs alive across political cycles."
 - Daniel Sellen (Director, Joannah & Brian Lawson Centre for Child Nutrition)

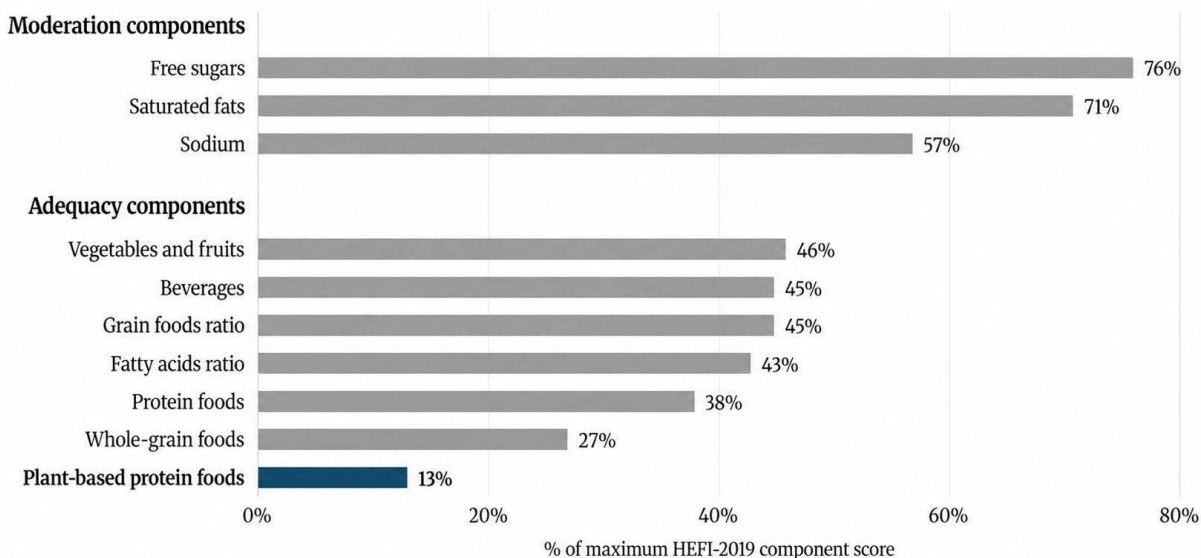
What This Study Measures

Core organizing question: *How well do Canadian school foods adhere to Canada's Food Guide, and what explains variation in adherence?*

Raising quality must start from a picture of what is currently served. Only one national evaluation of scale exists. Blais et al. (2025) analyzed 2022–23 menu data across 67 SFPs in 2,597 schools, over 20% of schools nationwide, and found about **51% adherence to the CFG** using the Healthy Eating Food Index 2019. This adherence is similar to general dietary patterns outside schools, a strong result given the chronic under-funding of SFPs. However, the component scores diverge sharply:

Healthy Eating Food Index (2019) component scores for school food programs

Mean HEFI-2019 component scores, pooled across breakfast, lunch and snack meals. Higher scores mean closer to Canada's Food Guide recommendations



Bars show the share of each component's available points, not the share of food served. The closer to 100%, the better. Adapted from Blais et al. (2025). See Appendix B for more on how HEFI works.

Plant-based proteins (13%) and whole grains (27%) scored lowest of any category, and plant proteins account for just 2% to 5% of reference amounts served. The bilateral agreements committed school food funding to Food Guide adherence, but did not define what that means or how it can be measured. This study therefore focuses on protein diversification, whole grains and fibre as key proxies for food quality: they address the largest dietary gaps, draw on accessible labelling data, and carry the strongest return.

Design and Methodology

Because SFPs vary so widely and so many stakeholders influence food quality, this study took a national lens and prioritized depth, tracing how quality is affected from policy to plate. Four provinces were also explored, to understand program design differences:

- **Ontario:** non-profit lead agencies distribute provincial funds to volunteer-run programs.
- **British Columbia:** boards receive funds directly and contract a mix of non-profit and for-profit providers.
- **Nova Scotia:** the province runs a universal lunch program through staffed kitchens.
- **New Brunswick:** a contracted non-profit delivers breakfast and the province is currently launching a new lunch program.

Evidence base. The analysis draws on: 152 peer-reviewed and grey literature studies; the NSFP bilateral agreements, provincial action plans and nutrition standards; 35 interviews and 5 written surveys across 37 experts and practitioners covering most of the roles in the school food ecosystem; and on comparative evidence from global school meal systems. Findings were coded into a ledger of more than 1,150 claims, with each pattern reported here backed by 5 to 24 independent data points.

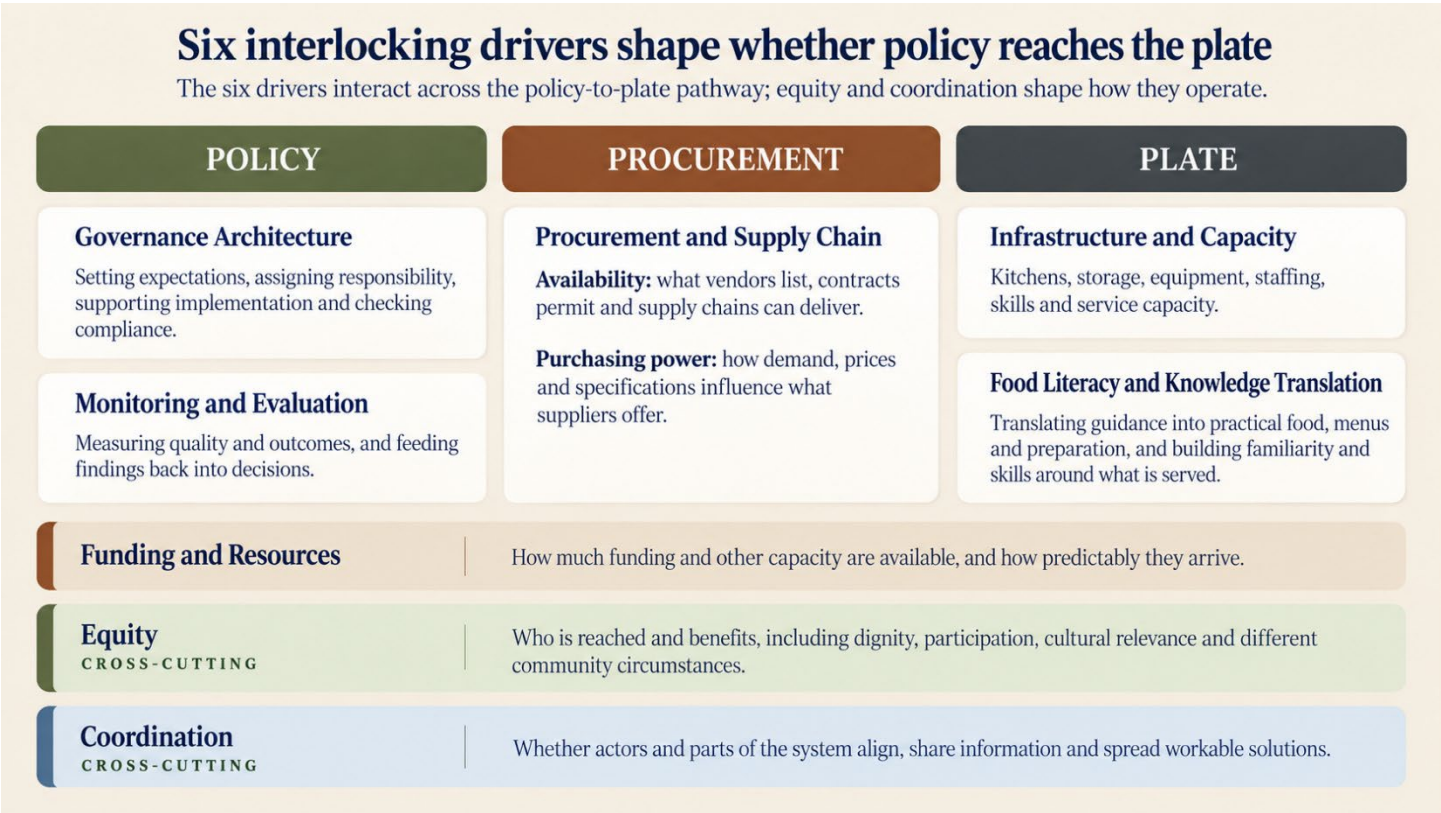
Value. The study: amplifies strong existing research and policy analysis, adding a qualitative layer that published literature calls for; assesses gaps and opportunities for the 2027 renewal; connects

protein diversification and fibre to quality, as measurable adherence metrics (not preferences); and identifies what distinct stakeholder groups can do now, and what needs new funding to do at all.

Limitations. The dietary baseline measures menu offerings rather than what children eat, and predates the National School Food Program. Stakeholder evidence is qualitative.

Findings

Evidence reveals six interlocking drivers of quality, organized into three operational domains (Policy, Procurement, Plate) anchored by Funding as a precondition alongside Equity and Coordination as cross-cutting multipliers. Together they explain why the foods the Food Guide asks for are not yet easy to buy, prepare or serve.



Cross-Cutting Conditions: Funding, Coordination, and Equity

Funding is the precondition for quality. No process reform substitutes for adequate funding. At under \$1 per student per day, a program often cannot buy the two food groups a compliant snack requires, let alone a three-group meal. Many operational improvements can begin now, but long-term impact requires bridging the chronic funding gap. The qualitative and quantitative data from this study supports the Coalition for Healthy School Food’s call to increase federal annual investment to \$400 million and launch a new round of infrastructure funding. Nothing would affect quality more.

Coordination generates immediate, low-cost gains across a complex system of stakeholders. Proven practices exist, but their spread mostly relies on individual champions. Reducing information asymmetries requires action on two key fronts: resourcing established nonprofit networks to scale shared infrastructure; and collaborating across ministries to align health, education and procurement, including formally embedding nutrition professionals in planning and menu development. Many schools still do not have a menu, let alone access to a nutrition professional.

Equity dictates real-world uptake, dignified access and supply-chain reach. Stigma depresses meal uptake. SFPs ultimately require universal delivery and payment systems that protect dignity. Menu standards also need to be balanced with community traditions. While some stakeholders view plant-forward meals as culturally restrictive, others identify them as universally accessible. Flexible, community-sourced recipes can help bridge the gap. Targeted funding pathways are also needed – for Black school foods and for distinct, self-determined Indigenous programs – which move on their own track, and lower prohibitive procurement thresholds for Black and Indigenous producers.

Policy: Who sets the standard, who enforces it, and who checks

The NSFP sets no enforceable national nutrition standard; federal funding lands on thirteen different provincial and territorial systems. Several provinces now require funded SFPs to follow nutrition standards through program requirements (Manitoba), mandatory policy (Nova Scotia) or funding conditions (Ontario). Others rely on advisory guidance or local implementation, with requirements varying in scope, strength and CFG alignment. Canada has school food standards, but no consistent quality floor or common measures of what students are served.

Federal money reaches every jurisdiction by the same formula and lands on thirteen different systems. Provincial commitments run from less than ten cents to more than \$3 per student per school day. The four highest commitments are the four universal-lunch jurisdictions. The route money takes decides what can be known: direct-funding jurisdictions collect the least data, and only Prince Edward Island reports meal type to Canada. Most of the measures this summary asks for already operate somewhere in Canada – the 2027 renewal has to decide whether they become common.

No agreements or action plans examined report the composition of what is served. The nearest indicators are counts: schools that accommodate diverse dietary needs including vegetarian foods; Ontario's fruit and vegetable servings; New Brunswick's self-reported adherence to Policy 711; and Nova Scotia's tested recipes. In fact, Ontario's 2024–25 plan stated directly that reporting "will not capture metrics against Objectives 3 and 4..." (where Objective 3 is nutrition).

Data collection should not wait for 2027. Jurisdictions must use annual action plans now to close key baseline gaps, including menu disclosure costs and donated food composition. Building a defensible quality standard requires baseline data. Every year of unmonitored expansion erodes the benchmark.

Procurement: Where what gets bought is decided, and on what criteria

Food reaches a school through at least five parallel channels: group purchasing organization contracts, regional vetted catalogues, general distributor catalogues, volunteer retail purchasing

and donations. Only the first two, among the smallest, carry a nutrition screen at the point of purchase. The largest, the general distributor catalogue, carries none. One agency estimates that only 30–35% of donated food met guidelines.

Fragmented purchasing compounds these limits: individual schools buying at retail or via gift cards lock capital into retail channels, missing wholesale opportunities while facing strict regional supplier preferences. Meanwhile, organized commodity sectors (e.g. dairy, eggs) reach schools directly via donations, rebates and equipment loans, while plant proteins lack equivalent supply pipelines.

Nutrition and procurement remain structurally disconnected. Unlike long-term care, where provinces such as Ontario require dietitian oversight of menus, SFPs operate without required nutritional oversight in all provinces examined. Federal labelling classification gaps also prevent pulses from being marketed as the high-protein sources they are, while provincial approved-product lists screen out sugar, sodium and fat but do not set proactive thresholds for fibre or plant proteins. This study also found that the most powerful mechanism to shift foods purchased and supplied can be the evaluation criteria itself. Expanding purchasing criteria from price to include other social values or quality indicators (e.g. plant proteins) can fundamentally alter supplier contracts.

Plate: What a program can offer, and whether students eat it

Infrastructure limits restrict operational choice. Roughly 30% of programs lack necessary preparation equipment. Over 70% serve pre-packaged foods. Without kitchens, storage or assigned staff, operators cannot pull the fresh foods they want, and menus can default to the cheapest compliant items.

Staffing models are equally constrained, and SFPs still rely heavily on volunteers. One regional lead agency overseeing 160+ schools operates with 5 paid staff and about 1,500 volunteers with high turnover. While pre-packaged food can be expensive per serving, it is easier to serve within tight bell schedules. Transitioning to fresh, whole foods requires preparation time that unpaid models struggle to absorb. Experienced researchers emphasize that staff and volunteer training, retention and stipends are essential for program sustainability, yet training budgets often do not even exist. Combining low-cost “kitchen-lite” equipment with dedicated, trained staffing capacity can create immediate, high-leverage wins for meal quality and consumption.

“We don’t focus enough on page 2 of the Canada Food Guide, on the ‘how’ to eat.”

– Brent Mansfield (Co-founder, LunchLAB)

The lever that most moves food from served to eaten is hands-on food literacy and engagement. Low-cost experiential levers such as taste tests, student preference surveys and chef-mentored models build familiarity, appetite and long-term uptake.

Recommendations

While the report's recommendations target all stakeholders, this summary focuses on federal, provincial and territorial (FPT) governments. The study's findings support existing recommendations from the Coalition for Healthy School Food and add detail on how quality can be specified and measured. The mechanisms already exist. The bilateral agreements classify food by the CFG, list staffing and quality assurance as eligible expenditures, and allow action plans to be amended with federal approval. They make Annual Reports mandatory and let Canada withhold payment where reporting fails.

1. Define and measure what gets served.

To define quality, FPT governments must translate the Food Guide's direction to choose protein foods that come from plants more often into a standard that programs can plan against and report on. Section 6.2 currently commits the parties only to measures that **could** be included in future agreements.

- **Add flexible quality measures developed jointly with provinces into the indicator set.** Including adding composition indicators to the federal common reporting template and to Annual Report contents at 5.2.2, where the withholding provision at 4.3.5 already applies. Amend 5.4.1 so provinces can evaluate and share findings annually leading to higher equitable outcomes. **[Fed + P/T · 2027]**
- **Set the standard at the food level using Food Guide ratios.** Specify target shares of plant-based proteins and whole grains, using Food Guide ratios and avoiding nutrient thresholds that can be met by reformulation. **[Fed + P/T · 2027]**
- **Start baseline procurement and menu data collection through action plan amendments.** Clause 5.1.6 permits mid-agreement amendment. Collect composition from distributors and buying groups (NB already collects sourcing data) and document menus where they already exist. **[Fed + P/T · Now]**

2. Extend values-based procurement to food composition.

Institutional buyers already evaluate bids on more than unit price (e.g. compliance, delivery, sourcing, environmental standards). SFPs can shift the food system by including more social and composition criteria alongside cost per serving, specifying how products are evaluated rather than what schools must serve. The Nourish low-carbon procurement guide¹ already drafts three versions of the criterion.

- **Give preference to buying models that can score more than one criterion.** Transfer conditions should favour purchasing through group purchasing organizations and vendor-of-record arrangements, and fund lead agencies to join them. **[Fed · 2027]**
- **State a food-composition criterion for procurement using bilateral funds.** The National Food Security Strategy commits Canada to work with provinces and territories on public procurement. Add composition – fibre and protein diversification – to that work and to the

¹ Nourish, Guide to Best Practices and Green Criteria for Low-Carbon Food Procurement (2025). *Developed for Buyers for Climate Action.*

promised Buy Canadian in SFPs. Provinces can write it into tender templates now. [Fed · 2027 | P/T · Now]

- **Fund the nutrition professional who applies it.** Staffing and quality assurance are already eligible expenditures at 2.2.2; name the role there explicitly. Provinces will need to lift their own caps and reduce constraints on how the federal permission can be used. [Fed · 2027 | P/T · Now]

3. Make Food Guide foods more visible to purchasing systems.

Procurement systems cannot prioritize a category they cannot see, and processors cannot invest against demand no one has counted.

- **Require purchases made with bilateral funds to be reported under a plant-protein category.** The distributor catalogues and buying-group classifications examined carry no such line. A reporting requirement creates it, because suppliers build the category to serve the report, and it makes the ratio in 1.2 computable. [Fed · 2027]
- **Add a whole-food fibre threshold to product screening lists and a plant-protein frequency to menu standards.** Screening lists already cap sodium, sugar and fat and can add a fibre floor. Serving frequency (a plant-based protein main X times a week) belongs in menu standards where they exist. Report first, enforce at renewal. [P/T · Now, then 2027]
- **Publish a national school food demand forecast for plant proteins.** Commission Protein Industries Canada or Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) to project the plant-protein volumes programs will buy, using purchasing data collected under 1.3. The Collaborative Food Innovation Fund is one option. [Fed · Now]

Conclusion

Canada has done the hard part. Establishing a permanent NSFP with a formal commitment to the Food Guide is a monumental policy achievement, built on the dedication of under-resourced frontline operators.

The near-term risk, however, is acute and structural. Public funds are flowing into a system that cannot measure meal quality, through supply chains that fail to categorize key Food Guide recommendations, and into school programs where high standards depend on champions. Expansion without clear and measurable standards will scale today's baseline.

The mandate, the funding base and the public support already exist. Nothing would affect quality more than closing the funding gap, and the Coalition's call for \$400 million a year and a second infrastructure round is the first ask. What the renewal can add – at low cost – is the assurance that every dollar, current and new, turns food served into lasting health, performance and well-being for Canadian children: the standards, procurement rules and operational infrastructure that make nourishing choices easier.

The 2027 bilateral agreement renewals can shape one of the largest new social programs Canada has built in decades.