

Care is the secret ingredient in school lunch programs

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

"Now you just have to starve," a student told us bluntly when we asked about their new school lunch program.

The [school](#) had recently transitioned from an in-house program, with meals prepared and served by [lunch](#) staff, to an externally catered

program where lunches were ordered online and dropped off. With the loss of familiar lunch staff, [children](#) no longer knew who to turn to when they got the wrong lunch order, didn't have lunch at all or their sandwich from home was moldy.

These kids taught us an important lesson: [school food](#) programs work better when they actively nurture care and connection.

We study the [impacts of school food programs on the well-being of children and families in British Columbia](#). In 2019, we documented lunchtime in three different schools to learn what mattered to students as they transitioned to a new model of school lunch.

As we were [writing our report of the study's findings](#), what struck us most was how often students talked about food as a source of care.

Kids talked about care

At its most basic, care is any activity done to support and promote life, argues University of Minnesota political scientist Joan Tronto who examines the [role of care in democratic societies](#). By this definition, [feeding children is a crucial aspect of caring for them](#).

Yet surprisingly, care is often overlooked in public conversations about school food. [School food advocates](#) typically focus on the potential of schools to provide nutritious food and alleviate hunger. But the caring labour of connecting kids with food is absent in this argument.

In contrast, in our research, we found care was a constant refrain in children's talk about lunch. Students told us how much it meant when parents packed foods they enjoyed, when classmates looked out for each other and shared food, and when the former lunch workers paid attention to what they liked and kept a watchful eye out for students. These acts of

care are likely even more important now, amidst the stressors of going to school in the pandemic and as children adjust to life at school after months of lockdown.

Our research indicates that when school food programs value and facilitate human connection, they can help improve children's access to healthy food and nurture their [sense of security and well-being](#).

Relationships behind the food

[Students benefit](#) when they know that trusted adults are looking out for their food needs. Lunch workers in the schools we studied connected with students in other ways, too. Cheery personalized notes handwritten on paper lunch bags by former lunch staff put a smile on students' faces. Many students talked about the care and thoughtfulness of the staff in knowing them and their food preferences.

Students valued the caring work of school lunch so much that it shaped their ideas of the food itself. To our surprise, when we visited schools during lunchtime and asked students what they thought about the catered and in-house programs, some students had very different impressions of the food from the two programs—impressions that didn't really align with the actual food.

"It's airplane food," one [student](#) said, referring to the catered food. "It's less homemade," said another.

"Homemade" typically means made from scratch using fresh ingredients. In fact, the new catered program involved more scratch cooking and fewer prepackaged foods than the old program.

Yet students responded not to what was on the menu, but to the relationships behind the food. The lunch worker who used to make their

brown-bag lunches was widely known and liked by students. The meaning of the food changed for them when they didn't view it as part of the school's caring web of support. Now it came from an anonymous, for-profit catering company.

Limited influence over catering

The new program was intended to broaden the reach of school meals to more students, yet fewer children opted into the program during its first few months. Both the new and old programs were voluntary, and students in need could receive reduced price or free lunches.

We spoke to school staff after the catered program was implemented. With the change, they found there were hoops to jump through to make adjustments and they worried this affected students' access. From frozen accounts due to nonpayment, to students getting the wrong meal with no option to whip up a substitute, school staff felt they could no longer properly care for students.

Staff expressed distress at not being able to help their students. As one staff member told us, "We just want to help people. We just want to feed the kids."

Because the program was operated by the catering company, school staff had limited influence over it compared to the former program. The changes made it hard for them to meet their students' basic needs.

Care on the menu

Designing effective meal programs to ensure no child misses out means acknowledging that feeding children requires nurturing, caring relationships. School lunch workers aren't the only ones who can do this

work, but our research suggests that they can serve at the heart of vibrant care infrastructures in schools that anticipate, identify and meet children's diverse needs for food and connection.

But this requires giving them the time and autonomy to craft and run programs that work best for their students. Sadly, school lunch workers—like care workers in general—are often [overworked, poorly paid and undervalued](#).

As children acclimatize to being back to school after months of [social isolation](#), parents, schools and [policy makers](#) need to work collectively towards policy actions to lessen [the impacts](#) of the many stressors that children faced during school closures and as the pandemic continues.

In the United States, health policy experts [consider federally run school food programs](#) to be a key element of the country's COVID-19 response and strategy to support children through the pandemic.

[UNICEF](#) also recommends prioritizing child nutrition and feeding programs as a core strategy for supporting school children globally, regardless of whether schools remain open or are closed due to COVID-19.

Canada now has a valuable opportunity to recognize school [food](#) programs as part of the national COVID-19 strategy. The recipe for successfully supporting children through this pandemic and beyond should not overlook the special ingredient of care in school lunches.

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