

Parents in Greater Toronto Area concerned about limited access to school food programs

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Selina Mae Quibrantar says a key theme that has emerged from the stakeholder study focuses on the need for universality in school food programs. Credit: Don Campbell

Early results from a University of Toronto stakeholder study on school

food programs find that parents and caregivers in the Greater Toronto Area are concerned about limited access to current programs and the ability of schools to provide culturally appropriate food, among other issues.

Based on online surveys and focus groups, the analysis is part of [a larger effort launched by U of T researchers](#) at the Joannah & Brian Lawson Center for Child Nutrition called Feeding Kids, Nourishing Minds, which looks at how school food programs function across Canada.

"The need for universality in school food programs has really been a key theme of our research to date," said Selina Mae Quibrantar, a master's student in the Temerty Faculty of Medicine who is leading the [caregiver](#) analysis with direction from Vasanti Malik, an assistant professor in the department of nutritional sciences. "Universality means broad access to programs, which was a problem before the pandemic and has since worsened—but also local flexibility so that schools can adapt programs for their physical environments and diverse student populations.

"A key goal with Feeding Kids, Nourishing Minds is a broadly inclusive approach, and I hope our study will help enable that—in particular through parental and community knowledge, which is often missing from policymaking on child nutrition."

Preliminary results showed child participation in school food programs in the Greater Toronto Area was about 65%. Many parents and [caregivers](#) commented on program reductions, noting less food and fewer days of access per week after the COVID-19 pandemic.

While public health restrictions forced some of those changes as the pandemic began, food inflation costs have since become a significant challenge to school food programs in Toronto and elsewhere, Quibrantar said.

In addition, some schools lack kitchen facilities and volunteers to help prepare food while meeting health and safety guidelines, the study showed.

Caregiver perspectives, especially those from ethnic minority households, have received little attention in [child nutrition](#) research, Quibrantar said. Here too, the stakeholder analysis is helping fill a knowledge gap.

The researchers recently ran four focus groups with caregivers from households that identify as South Asian and Southeast Asian, finding that participants stressed the importance of culturally adapted food in [school programs](#). "It's important to caregivers that children see their own cultures' food served in schools to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion," Quibrantar said.

As well, caregivers emphasized the need for an intentional approach when bringing foods from various cultures into [school](#) food programs.

"Caregivers want a program that is meaningful and does not run the risk of cultural appropriation," Quibrantar said. "They instead see programs as a way to teach [children] about [cultural heritage](#) and sustainability, such as where a food comes from and how it's made, or by taking time to learn about a culture while sampling the food."

Quibrantar has presented early results from a [pilot study](#) to colleagues in U of T's department of nutritional sciences and plans to share more findings at the [Canadian Nutrition Society annual conference](#) in May.

She and researchers from the Feeding Kids, Nourishing Minds project will assemble some of their findings into a dashboard to be shared with other researchers, schools, non-profit groups and policymakers later this year.

Provided by University of Toronto

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