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**For immediate release**

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### **Access to healthy food in schools is increasing thanks to provincial and federal funds**

Comox Valley, B.C. – Comox Valley Schools is grateful to the many staff, families, and volunteers who are assisting with the implementation of expanded school food programs, made possible by the Province of British Columbia's Feeding Futures initiative and now further supported by the Government of Canada's Healthy Meals for Kids program. Together, this provincial and federal funding is helping the district provide nutritious meals to more students than ever before in stigma free ways, directly within our schools.

"The Feeding Futures funding has been instrumental in expanding our food programs, and we are hopeful this new federal funding will further allow us to address the growing needs of our students effectively," said Michelle Waite, Board Chairperson, Comox Valley Schools. "I would like to thank our food services coordinator, food service workers, school staff, and many parents who are creating meaningful food experiences and working with our community partners to provide nourishing food that is now fueling our learners at school."

Following the allocation of \$1.14 million annually from the Feeding Futures fund, Comox Valley Schools conducted a thorough assessment of its food programs and facilities to identify specific needs across the district. As a result, the district has hired a dedicated food services coordinator to help expand food programming in the district, as well as food service workers to support programs at Valley View Elementary, Mark R. Isfeld Secondary, Glacier View Secondary, Highland Secondary, and Aspen Park Elementary. These professionals play a vital role in preparing and distributing meals, ensuring that students have access to nutritious food while allowing support staff to focus on classroom activities. Throughout the district, many local Parent Advisory Council members, along with other parents and volunteers, are assisting with meal preparation and distribution at schools.

In January 2025, Arden Elementary launched a universal, pay-what-you-can lunch program, ensuring that every student receives the same meal regardless of their ability to pay. This initiative promotes inclusivity and reduces stigma by allowing parents to contribute anonymously, whether by covering the full cost of a meal, paying a partial amount, or paying nothing at all. Meals are varied and nutritious, combining locally catered and in-house creations, while a dedicated food staff member on-site provides flexibility to meet individual needs and creates unique learning opportunities for students.

Community partnerships continue to strengthen school food programs. Such as the Courtenay Elementary Community School Society hot lunch program that runs every day and is available

to all students and staff for either minimal cost or free of charge without stigma for families who require support.

As part of its evolving food strategy, the district has shifted funding from the LUSH Valley Good Food Box program into school-based initiatives. Originally introduced during the pandemic to support families while students were learning at home, the program served an important role during a time of unique need. However, as students returned to classrooms full time, the district refocused its approach to prioritize meals delivered directly within schools. This change aligns with the mandate of the Feeding Futures initiative, which requires school districts to prioritize feeding the 20 per cent of students who are facing food insecurity, and to do so in a way that is inclusive and free from stigma. Several factors contributed to the decision, including cost – Comox Valley Schools was paying significantly more than is paid by the public – and the fact that some families found items in the boxes difficult to prepare or incorporate into meals. The district continues to partner with LUSH Valley in other areas of food programming. Redirecting this targeted funding into school-based programs ensures a more equitable, sustainable model that maximizes impact for students each day.

Comox Valley Schools remains committed to purchasing Canadian, B.C., and locally produced food whenever possible and is further seeking ways to support local growers through expanded school-based programs. The recent announcement that British Columbia will be joining the federal Healthy Meals for Kids program further strengthens school food initiatives helping build long-term sustainability into school meal programs.

We remain committed to student well-being and continue to focus on providing nutritious, sustainable, and stigma-free meal programs directly within schools. The Feeding Futures funding has been instrumental in expanding these initiatives, ensuring that students have access to the healthy food they need to succeed. Thank you to everyone throughout the district who is helping feed more students in our schools this year.

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**Photo below for use courtesy of Comox Valley Schools (Mircale Elementary Beach Salad Bar)**

