

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

Study written by Matthew Kemshaw
for the School Food Shift Coalition

Summer, 2021

Acknowledgements

This study was designed and reviewed by the members of the School Food Shift coalition, all of whom have given a great deal of time and energy to furthering the conversation about healthy food environments in schools in our region. These members, listed with their affiliated organization, are:

- Linda Geggie and Ana Mendez, Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable
- Leah Seltzer and Joan Stonehocker, LifeCycles Society
- Marcus Lobb, Farm to School BC
- Janelle Hatch, Island Health
- Kara Udell, Food Share Network
- Patricia Reichert, Saltspring Island Foodlands Trust
- Susan Tychie, South Island FarmHub
- Lauren Searle, South Island FarmHub
- Christine Van Poelgeest, Growing Chefs!

The coalition members would like to express their sincere gratitude to everyone who provided their time and input to this study. In total, 27 people were interviewed. We wish to heartily thank each of these people for their time, but more importantly for their commitment to the health and wellbeing of our youth and their communities.

We would also like to thank Samantha Gambling of the BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food for her significant support in reviewing drafts of this report and providing feedback and input throughout this study, from the initial design to final report. We would also like to thank Vanessa White and the Sooke School District for generously sharing data collected through discussions within their school district.

This work was supported by generous contributions from:



Table of Contents

- Executive Summary 3**
- Introduction 6**
 - Regional Context 6**
 - Why Food in Schools?..... 6
 - The School Food Shift Coalition 8
 - Methodology 9**
- Findings..... 10**
 - Assessing the Current School Food Landscape in the Capital Region 11**
 - Existing Need 11
 - Food Service in Schools 13
 - Developing School Meal Programs 17**
 - Framing the Conversation Around Food in Schools 18
 - Supporting Change in Large Institutions..... 19
 - Universal School Meal Programs 21
 - Regional Response to the COVID Pandemic 22**
 - The First Wave 22
 - Farmbucks Program..... 22
- Case Study Narratives..... 23**
 - PEI’s Healthy School Food Program 24
 - New Westminster’s Transition to *Fuel Up!* Program 26
 - Haida Gwaii’s Learning Circles and the Development of the Local Food to Schools Program 27
 - Craigflower Elementary Using Food as a Source of Connection 29
 - Reynolds Secondary’s Salad Bar and School Garden Program 30
- School Food Program Scan 31**
- Recommendations 36**
 - Broaden our Understanding of the Need for Food Service in Schools..... 36
 - De-Emphasize Champions 37
 - Broaden Participation Through an Open Learning Circle 37
- Conclusion..... 37**
- References 39**
- Appendix A - Provincial Programs and Policies 41**
- Appendix B - Federal Programs and Policies 47**
- Appendix C – Study Design 48**
- Appendix D – Interview Consent Form..... 52**

Executive Summary

The School Food Shift coalition is a group of organizations supporting efforts at the community level in partnership with school, health and food production sectors to improve school food environments. This study was designed by the coalition to support dialogue around and development of school meal programming in the Capital Region.

Children and youth need to be healthy in order to be able to learn and grow to their full potential. An important part of staying healthy is eating well. Children and youth consume 1/3 of their daily food at school each day. Canadian research has shown that at school, many children are not eating a healthy balance of foods; they are not getting the vegetables and fruit, whole grains, milk and alternatives that their bodies need to grow and be healthy (Tugault-Lafleur et al, 2019). Policies and programs that influence the food environment in schools are recognized by the government as important in influencing the health (and learning) of students, which is why the BC Ministries of Agriculture, Health and Education came together to administer the School Food Environment Survey in 2020. The purpose of this survey was to “Gain a better understanding of the food environments and local food procurement in BC public schools.” This survey explored areas such as infrastructure, policies, use of guidelines, procurement, meal and snack programs and funding. The findings from the survey will be used to inform policies, programs and guidelines for schools. The regional information provided in this report may be supportive to these developments.

The School Food Environment

Healthy eating according to Canada’s Food Guide is not just about what foods are consumed but also about how and where they are eaten. The physical and social environment can be an important enabler in supporting (or discouraging) healthy food choices and habits. Schools are a place for students to be learning how to stay healthy and food literacy is a key component in that learning. How students eat at school is an important moment of learning; a moment that is governed both by what is and what is not included.

In order to support the development of healthy food environments in the Capital Region, this study sought to gather insight into three focused research questions. Interviews were conducted with 27 champions of school food programming, and data from conversations with 12 school administrators were also included to support our findings. Below we list our three guiding research questions, followed by a brief synopsis of our findings under each.

What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats exist in the current school food landscape?

Existing Need: Those interviewed stressed a need for improved school food services and programs in our region’s schools. This need stretched far beyond the basic alleviation of malnutrition and hunger, to address nutritional quality and broader goals of connection and care. The need for better food encompasses cultural connection, environmental sustainability, social justice and individual and community health.

Food Service in Schools: There are a wide variety of food services happening across our region’s schools. Most are operated ad-hoc with support from a variety of school specific actors. These

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

include: breakfast programs, CommunityLINK funded lunch programs, Backpack Buddies, PAC supported initiatives, rescued food distribution and teacher funded supports. This study documents how these programs operate in our region.

What knowledge about this existing landscape might support the development of a regional approach to developing a universal school meal program in the Capital Region?

Framing the Conversation Around Food in Schools: Interviewees talked about the challenge of clearly articulating the benefits of school food services, as they are so varied and complex. Focusing on a values based approach and incorporating diverse voices in the determination of key values was highlighted as an important first step.

Supporting Change in Large Institutions: It is important to appreciate the complexity of formal education, and the goals of schools. Approaches aimed at trying to “fix” schools tend to be poorly received by school based actors. It may also be important to understand ingrained cultural beliefs about whose role it is to feed children and youth, appreciating that social programs in Canada focus support to families, and not schools, to ensure children and youth are fed.

Universal School Meal Programs: Conversations about creating universally accessible school meal programs focused on: opportunities to expand high school commercial kitchen production; supporting better collaboration among diverse sectors; Indigenous leadership, and; cost. Royal Bay and Esquimalt Secondaries are well positioned to support a growth of school food service to their feeder schools, though logistics and policies are a key barrier. The connection between food programs and decolonization was made, highlighting the potential of universal school meal programs to create culturally inclusive learning spaces. Cost and logistics are highlighted as key barriers to growth.

How did school districts manage to prioritize food during the Covid pandemic and how did they reach out to (and collaborate with) the community to support that? Can this be replicated and/or scaled up?

The First Wave: Respondents largely agreed that the first wave of the COVID pandemic, which precipitated the closure of all schools in BC from late March – June of 2020, created regionally unprecedented action from local school districts to support food insecurity, though this action was not sustained when students returned to school in September, 2020.

Farmbucks Program: During the early stages of the COVID pandemic, the South Island Farmhub secured \$125,000 to subsidize school purchases of local product through the Farmhub. Schools received credits to enable purchasing at half price, though most credits remained unused. The study highlights some of the challenges and opportunities for developing this program into the future.

Recommendations

Broaden Our Understanding of the Need for Food Service in Schools: Many school food services in our region focus primarily on addressing malnutrition and hunger. While this is obviously an important goal, this study highlights the possible benefits of broadening our understanding of the need for food services in schools from a narrow focus on hunger alleviation to supporting care,

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

inclusion and equity within schools. Food service in school has the capacity to support social cohesion and community wellness. The need for more inclusive food services in schools stretches far beyond just alleviating hunger, and may be viewed as a way to help address myriad complex challenges in our region's schools.

De-Emphasize Champions: Individual school food champions have carried much of the work of developing impactful school meal programs and services in our region. While these champions deserve to be celebrated, we must work to support a broader diversity of voices in participating in school food, and build institutional supports to ensure impactful programming is not reliant on a small handful of individuals, who inevitably retire or move on to new positions.

Broaden Participation Through an Open Learning Circle: Following the Haida Gwaii model of an open learning circle may be a useful way to broaden participation in our regional conversations about school food. With a collaborative, trusting group established, next steps may include:

1. Creating a clear values statement for school food services. Move from the elements of school food programming to highlight the core values that the group feels school food programs should uphold.
2. Collaborate to efficiently pool and share resources. Support more effective logistics and resource sharing across the many stakeholders interested in supporting school food work.
3. Share and discuss information. Create conversations about what is happening within the region and at the provincial and national scale.
4. Support pilot program development. Work with those schools who are ready to do more to support and learn from pilot programs in our region.

Case Study Narratives

Pages 22-28 of this study highlight five case studies, which were selected to support critical thinking about school meal programming and services.

1. Prince Edward Island's Healthy School Food Program: shows the steps taken in the province of PEI to advocate for and build a universally accessible school meal program. Also details how the program was operated in its first year (2020/21).
2. New Westminster's Transition to *Fuel Up!* Program: highlights some of the challenges encountered in transitioning towards a healthier school food program in the New Westminster School District, including considerations about the role of care in school food service, challenges of subsidy programs, and student awareness and attitudes related to school meal programs and services.
3. Haida Gwaii's Learning Circles: documents a unique process of community engagement to support collaborative development and problem solving related to school food programming.
4. Craigflower Elementary: local example of an elementary school that has used food as a key way to connect with the school community and provide care to its students.
5. Reynolds Secondary: local example of a secondary school that has developed a unique school garden and salad bar program.

Introduction

Regional Context

The Capital Region is a diverse area that stretches from the southern Gulf Islands in the northeast, to the urban communities around Victoria in the southeast, to Port Renfrew in the west. The region includes the traditional and unceded territories of the Pacheedaht, T'Sou-ke, Scia'new, Songhees, Esquimalt and WSANEC peoples.

There are four school districts that serve this region:

- The Gulf Islands School District (#64) operates schools on the southern Gulf Islands. They support 1,500 students in seven elementary schools, one middle school and two secondary schools.
- The Saanich School District (#63) operates schools on the Saanich Peninsula. They support 8,000 students in eight elementary schools, three middle schools and three secondary schools.
- The Sooke School District (#62) operates schools in Langford, Colwood, Metchosin, Highlands, Sooke and Port Renfrew. They support 11,300 students in 18 elementary schools, four middle schools and three secondary schools.
- The Victoria School District (#61) operates schools in Victoria, Oak Bay, Esquimalt, Saanich, Highlands and View Royal. They support 20,000 students in 27 elementary schools, 10 middle schools and seven secondary schools.

In public schools across the region, there are 39,300 students supported in 60 elementary schools, 18 middle schools and 15 secondary schools. This study did not look at or incorporate information from the various Independent and First Nations school programs that operate in our region.

Why Food in Schools?

Research increasingly demonstrates that school meal programs can be important for a wide variety of reasons. The National Coalition for Healthy School Food (2018) provides detailed evidence for the benefits of school meal programs, and organizes this evidence under the following five headings:

1. Health: defined narrowly here as the physical health of students;
2. Student Wellbeing and Success: encompassing academic achievement and cognitive development, mental and emotional health, interpersonal and social skills, attendance at school and cultural inclusion and understanding;
3. Environment: including school's ecological and carbon footprints as well as student attitudes and behaviors;
4. Economic Growth and Agriculture: demonstrating the opportunities for supporting business development, job creation and regional economic sustainability;
5. Women and Families: highlighting the challenge that many families face in juggling multiple priorities and providing consistent access to healthy, minimally processed

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

foods.

School food services and programs in our region are operated ad-hoc. The goals of these programs vary case-by-case. Many of the multi-year funding programs that support school food aim to address food insecurity, with the primary goal of preventing malnutrition and hunger. Other programs, primarily run by individual champions in schools, focus on improving nutrition across the school population, while others also aim to address social, cultural, economic and/or environmental issues through engagement with school gardens and local food systems.

In order to address food insecurity within our region, organizations are beginning to shift their focus from providing hand-outs of food to those in need to working collectively to understand and address the social, economic and environmental root causes that create social and economic discrepancies within our communities. It is increasingly understood that to alleviate hunger we must do more than offer free or cheap food to those in need. Within the Vancouver Island Health Authority, 13.2% of the population report experiencing food insecurity, with: 3.2% experiencing “marginal” food insecurity, 6.2% “moderate” food insecurity, and 3.8% “severe” food insecurity (the highest rate of severe food insecurity for any health authority in BC) (Provincial Health Services Authority, 2016). On southern Vancouver Island 10% of youth in grades 7-12 reported going to bed hungry at least sometimes because there was not enough money for food at home, including 1% who often or always went to bed hungry (McCreary Centre Society, 2018). Recent data collected through the BC COVID 19 Speak Survey (2021) shows that 10.8% of the respondents in our region stated that they are eating less fruits and vegetables compared to before the pandemic.

The McCreary Centre Society’s 2018 study *Balance and connection on southern Vancouver Island: The health and well-being of our youth* shows that

Compared to local results in 2013, there was an increase in the percentage of students [in grades 7-12] who ate fast food (43% vs. 38%) and food grown or caught by them or their family (17% vs. 13%)... Similar to the province as a whole, there was a decline from 2013 in the percentage of students who always ate breakfast on school days (51% vs. 56%) and a rise in the percentage who never did so (16% vs. 12%). As was the case provincially, males were the most likely to always eat breakfast on school days (e.g., 57% vs. 46% of females)... The 2018 survey asked for the first time about eating lunch and dinner. In South Vancouver Island, 65% of students always ate lunch while 4% never did, and 87% always ate dinner while 1% never did. Males were the most likely to always eat lunch and dinner. Around 4 in 10 students (39%) always ate three meals on school days, which was similar to youth across BC.

A majority of youth do not eat three meals on school days, which demonstrates that the need for nutritional programming and support reaches beyond the most vulnerable students to encompass all demographics. Evidence shows that Canadian youth across the socio-economic spectrum are not eating recommended daily amounts of nutritious foods on a regular basis (Everitt et al., 2020).

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

Within the Capital Region, a significant amount of infrastructure and organizational capacity has been recently mobilized to support food distribution, with the goal of building a strong, resilient local food system that may provide multiple benefits to our communities. A large warehouse at 808 Viewfield Rd in Esquimalt was purchased by the Mustard Seed in 2019, and this space is being utilized to rescue and redistribute thousands of pounds of perishable product from regional grocers *every day*. This product is distributed among Food Share Network members, who distribute the food in safe, context specific ways. The warehouse also hosts an emerging regional FarmHub and FoodHub. The South Island FarmHub is working to create efficient systems to aggregate and distribute local farm products. The South Island FoodHub is working to support food processors and other food related enterprises by providing access to needed infrastructure and storage space, to help local food businesses enter the marketplace and begin to scale.

These infrastructural and program developments have been facilitated by a desire to more effectively collaborate and share resources across those organizations working to build a more resilient local food system. Our regional Food Share Network now has over 100 member agencies, a majority of whom want to see an increase in the work that the network does to support schools (Kara Udell, personal communication). Many organizations in our region have played active roles in designing and developing the warehouse at 808 Viewfield Rd as an aggregator that can help build the resiliency of our region's food system. Now that thousands of pounds of product are being redistributed every day, the network is turning its attention toward the root causes of food insecurity, with interest in supporting systemic shifts in the ways we eat and learn about food in our region, to support a healthier, more resilient food system (Kara Udell, personal communication).

The School Food Shift Coalition

This study was led by the School Food Shift coalition. The School Food Shift coalition is comprised of community organizations and health professionals with an interest in supporting and advocating for systemic change in the ways students eat and learn about food at school. The School Food Shift collaborative is one of several key strategies to address the Good Food 2025 Collective impact initiative of the Good Food Network in the Capital Region¹. School Food Shift collaborators are working to promote healthy food environments in schools. This includes incorporating healthy, sustainable food into schools through policies, programs and built environments. We are seeking to weave food into the fabric of schools to help make students and staff healthier and schools more rooted in community and place. This work is directly linked with that of the broader Farm to School Network.

This study was launched to help advise the School Food Shift coalition's activities and support its goals in the coming years. We hope that the learnings from this report can support a deepening of relationships and allow us to better understand and support our regional school districts and their individual goals and challenges related to school food/meal programming.

The Good Food Shift coalition envisions a school food future for the Capital Region in which:

¹ The Good Food Network joins numerous organizations and individuals across the Capital Region with the shared purpose of connecting and aligning our efforts and work together towards a healthy and sustainable food system in our region. The members of the Good Food Network are diverse and span the food system.

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

- All students can access fresh, nutritious, culturally appropriate (and where possible local) foods without barriers.
- Food is a catalyst for creating connection and care.
- Food literacy is integrated in learning from K-12; students have opportunities to engage directly with the entire food cycle (from seed to plate to compost).

We value equity, resilience, sustainability and community food sovereignty. The co-collaborators believe that the School Food Shift is placed within efforts to build the social, environmental and economic well-being of our communities. It is essential that we work in collaboration with school districts, local food organizations, as well as diverse actors in the community to achieve our purpose. See Appendix C for a listing of the collaborators and their goals for this study.

While this study has been done to support the future work of the School Food Shift coalition, we hope that it may provide insight and utility to actors beyond this group. We see this study as a stepping stone that we hope will lead us into broader collaboration and action in the months and years to come.

Methodology

This study was designed in collaboration with the members of the School Food Shift coalition. Initial meetings with the coalition determined the focus and scope of the study, which was articulated in a short Study Design document (Appendix C). This document was reviewed and approved by the School Food Shift coalition prior to the study commencing.

Data collection began with an informal scan of school meal programs in BC and across Canada. This scan was done through snowball information gathering, seeking insight into promising practices and innovative approaches to developing school meal programs. Several thought leaders were interviewed as part of this scan, including academics and researchers familiar with emerging practices and principals in the development of universal school meal programs in Canada. Information gleaned from promising programs is presented on page 26 and snapshots of five case studies are presented beginning on page 19. A short description of relevant provincial and federal programs and policies is provided in Appendices A and B.

Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders were conducted while the program scan was ongoing. Interviews were designed to probe the logistics, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the school meal program(s) overseen by each stakeholder. Key stakeholders were selected by the School Food Shift coalition and in discussion with the stakeholders themselves (several of whom identified other stakeholders to interview), using the method of snowball sampling. In order to ensure informed consent, all interviewees were provided with an interview consent form prior to their interview (Appendix D), and asked to consent to the methods by which the information they provided would be stored and shared.

In the months of April, May and June of 2021, conversations were held with 27 people over 24 interviews (four interviews were conducted with two interviewees and one person was interviewed twice). Interviews were guided by three research questions:

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

1. What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats exist in the current school food landscape?
2. What knowledge about this existing landscape might support the development of a regional approach to developing a universal school meal program in the Capital Region?
3. How did school districts manage to prioritize food during the Covid pandemic and how did they reach out to (and collaborate with) the community to support that? Can this be replicated and/or scaled up?

Interviews were conducted using open ended questions, with questions tailored to the knowledge and experience of each interviewee. Prior to interviews, a short literature scan was completed to provide further background to interview questions. Detailed typewritten notes were taken by the interviewer during each interview.

Of the 27 interviewees:

- 4 were researchers working for academic institution (3) or private consulting firms (1);
- 2 were head chefs running culinary programs in secondary schools;
- 2 were farmers with a strong connection to a regional high school;
- 3 were secondary school teachers;
- 11 were staff of health (3) or non-profit (8) organizations that directly support school food programs;
- 1 was a middle school teacher;
- 1 was an elementary school EA;
- 1 was an elementary school principal;
- 1 was a school district wide principal;
- 1 was a healthy schools contractor with a local school district.

The relative scarcity of school based staff is a weakness in the data that we hope to at least partially overcome by the incorporation of data gathered through short interviews conducted by Vanessa White, SD62's Principal of Healthy Schools, with administrators at 12 schools in the Sooke School District. Vanessa's interviews sought to gather information about what was happening related to school food service in each of the schools.

Notes from all interviews were reviewed in June of 2021 and key themes that emerged from these interviews were identified. These themes, with bullet point explanations of each, were then shared with the School Food Shift coalition and the coordinator of the BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food for comment and discussion. An additional theme of equity and diversity was added at this time. Notes from all interviews were then reviewed again, along with all other data mentioned above. These themes were then used to organize the discussion of findings.

Findings

Key themes emerging from this study's data collection have been organized into three categories, which correspond with our three primary research questions. These categories are: 1) assessing the current school food landscape in the Capital Region; 2) developing school meal programs, and; 3) regional response to the COVID pandemic.

Assessing the Current School Food Landscape in the Capital Region

In this section findings related to what strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats exist in the current school food landscape are discussed. Much of the conversation with interviewees gravitated towards a desire to understand the existing need for food service in schools as well as the realities of food service provided to students in schools.

Oostindjer et al (2017) describe how school meal programs in developed countries have evolved through three phases: the first phase focused on food welfare programs and addressing food insecurity; the second phase (begun in the 1970's) focuses on food quality and improving the nutritional quality of foods eaten at school, and; an emerging third phase is now beginning to focus on integrating broader health and sustainability concerns into school meal programs.

Within our region, there is a patchwork of school meal programs operating on a spectrum of these three phases. Programs run with diverse, small pockets of support from a variety of actors. Each district has a slightly different approach to supporting food programs, which tend to focus on addressing food insecurity within the student population. In our two largest school districts, SD61 and SD62, provincial CommunityLINK funding is used to support a catered lunch service for those schools identified as having a high number of vulnerable students. Breakfast and snack programs are up to each school; whether they have them, how they are funded and what they look like varies school-to-school. School food programs in our region often depend upon a champion within the school community: teachers, administrator, PACs, culinary arts programs and/or local community organizations (including service clubs, faith groups, businesses and not-for-profit societies) all play a role in ensuring students are fed. The goals of these programs vary from school-to-school; while a majority of programs focus on supporting food insecure students, others aim to improve the nutrition or broader health and sustainability of the school population. Funding for these programs is ad-hoc and often supported by community actors. Individual schools are driven to address their perceived needs, though food programs are also strongly influenced by the values and perspectives of those individual champions who run them.

Existing Need

The school food champions interviewed almost universally agreed that there is a much higher need for food provision in our schools than we are able to reach. Interestingly, this perspective conflicts with interviews conducted by Vanessa White, who spoke with administrators of 12 schools, where only two of whom felt their schools were not meeting the food needs of students. The difference may be explained by Vanessa's framing of the question, which asked explicitly if students were still going hungry at school. While a majority (though not all) of the administrators surveyed felt their school was able to address severe hunger during the school day, the majority of those interviewed for this study felt that much work remains to support the health and nutrition of students at school.

Those spoken with recognized a need across the socio-economic spectrum in their schools. They spoke about how many students are unable to function as well as they could due to a lack of nutritious food. Secondary school teachers were especially concerned about the food habits of their students, who often skip meals and rely on relatively empty calories from vending machines to get them through the day. "If (students) knew they could go and get a healthy meal or snack for free, it may be a great benefit." Robin Ruff (DATE), a secondary school teacher in Colwood,

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

went on to wonder “what changes when you have money as the relationship mitigating the exchange? The role of this exchange reduces the element of care that food can bring. It’s so important for us to be cared for and care for things. This is a part of the magic of gardens.”

Expanding further upon this understanding that there is a need to think of food as more than basic nutrition, Patrick Gale, a secondary school teacher in Sooke, articulates concerns raised by several interviewees:

One thing that is super important to me that may get lost in the rest is that growing community and connection through food is so important. For a lot of students, the experience of eating is so isolating and disconnecting. There is so much opportunity for food to bring us together... When we look at the rise in loneliness and how that connects to eating and depression... even small changes where schools include the time when kids are eating lunch as instructional time, so the kids are eating together with teachers. Eating healthier food takes more time. It may be important to set aside additional time to eat together. Providing opportunities to share around the same table can be transformative (Patrick Gale, DATE).

While conversations about the existing need for food programs in schools touched upon the social, health, economic and environmental impacts, many of those whom I spoke with were still concerned by the prevalence of hunger in schools and eager to see an evolution away from band-aid solutions that feed students while in school towards more systemic shifts aimed at addressing the structural issues that cause food insecurity, which for most included the ways in which young people learn about food and health. Of those asked by Vanessa White whether students were going hungry, six of 12 acknowledged that it was an exceptional effort from one or few key people that was keeping kids from going hungry. As a Healthy School consultant working with SD62, Cindy Andrew sees that “there isn’t a shortage of food, there is a shortage of coordination and infrastructure to support distribution.”

Many interviewees touched on the challenge of school food programs that were run by individual champions, and dreamed of a more cohesive program that brought together actors across municipalities, school districts, businesses and not-for-profits to build a cohesive, well supported program that could support the distribution of quality food to students across the region. Regional geopolitics was brought up by three separate interviewees working in schools in our region’s western communities, who saw that much more support and effort was dedicated towards schools in the urban core surrounding Victoria. Kara Udell, the Executive Director of the Food Share Network, acknowledged that

We need to come together to have a little more transparency and blunt conversation. We’ve been trying to operate and stretch individual resources that are not sustainable for everyone. If we could pool resources and put all the pieces on a table and draw a map for where foundational organizations might be to support smaller (or stretched) organizations we may be able to accomplish more (Kara Udell, DATE).

Conversations echoed a recent report by the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) in which “three key themes emerged as teachers discussed their experiences with, and perspectives on, food security in BC public schools.” The first theme takes a rights-based approach, which is “about addressing the structural issues that drive food insecurity.” Champions stress the importance of addressing not just *what* students are eating but *how* they eat and learn about food

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

in schools. Building on this, the second theme aims to support universal school meal programs, not targeted at specific groups but offered to everyone. This would greatly reduce the stigma that can be created by targeted meal programs and ensure every student can access healthy food. The third theme focuses on making school food place-based and culturally relevant (BCTF, 2020). Many of the school food champions that I spoke with aligned with this BCTF perspective, and recognized that the need for school food programs extends beyond the alleviation of malnutrition and hunger to encompass cultural connection, environmental sustainability, social justice and individual and community health.

Food Service in Schools

Conversation about food service tended to fall under one of three distinct theme areas: 1) food services provided by culinary arts programs, 2) food services to address malnutrition/hunger, and 3) school run salad bar programs. Below are findings organized under these three theme areas.

Culinary Arts

In this study we spoke with two chef instructors running culinary arts programs and two food studies teachers with knowledge of culinary programs in the region. Culinary arts programs are run out of some (but not all) secondary schools in our region, and aim to provide students with the experience of working in a commercial kitchen. Students in these programs work with chef instructors to prepare meals that are sold to staff and students within the school. Sales are managed to allow these programs to break even or make a small profit, which is then reinvested into infrastructure to support the program. Food services run by culinary arts programs are responsible for purchasing food and packaging, though labor is not included in the pricing of meals/snacks (as chef instructor time is covered by the school district and students work as part of their culinary arts course work).

Most of the culinary arts programs in our region strive to do everything from scratch using the best possible ingredients. The programs get a small amount of money for each student participating, but this is not enough to cover costs so they rely on profit from food sales (snacks and lunch) to operate. The price for a main dish is usually around \$6/plate, with snacks and smaller items offered for less. The school chefs whom I spoke with also support free meals for students in need: at Esquimalt 30 students are fed utilizing CommunityLINK funding while at Royal Bay, students are given pre-loaded cards (by school counsellors) to purchase meals and the cafeteria just absorbs the cost of feeding these students. Profit margins vary considerably depending upon what is served. Chefs described how soups can be produced for pennies/bowl, which can allow a significant profit. In a normal year Royal Bay's culinary program will do 70-75 hot lunches plus another 30 wraps, 10-15 salads and another 5-10 vegetarian dishes every day. This is one of the larger production kitchens in our region. Their chef instructor estimates they serve about 125-130 meals at lunch and another 30-50 breakfasts at the break each day, 4 days per week (these numbers reflect normal operations – during the Covid pandemic they were only serving food to staff, as students were not in the building over the lunch hour).

The infrastructure available for food processing in culinary kitchens varies school-by-school across our region. Very few schools in the region have significant cold storage capacity, which all knowledgeable interviewees cited as a primary barrier to increasing the production of commercial kitchens in schools. Royal Bay secondary is a unique example of a school with a

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

well-resourced kitchen and sizeable cold storage capacity. Commercial kitchens in schools are not well utilized outside of school hours, and some logistical issues for this were cited, including the challenge of school kitchens not having their own entrance/exit or being able to be locked off from the rest of the school building. The challenge of sharing tools and keeping a clean, organized work space was also cited as a barrier to school kitchens being used outside school hours (though interviewees felt this could be overcome with good systems).

Addressing Malnutrition and Hunger

Within our region, there are many different programs operating with support from many different actors. Almost every school has a variety of stop-gap measures in place to ensure students are not experiencing extreme hunger while at school. These programs are described below, alongside insights gleaned through this study. Students who need nutritional support at school are often supported by school counsellors, who work with administrators, teachers and other support staff to ensure these students can access the food programs in place in the school. The ways in which students are identified as in need of food resources, and the ways in which these food resources are offered to students, are determined case-by-case in each school. Universally accessible programs that are open to all students have the benefit of not stigmatizing youth in need. Where resources do not exist to support such universal accessibility (which is everywhere in our region) schools do what they can to offer these programs in a non-stigmatizing way. This is an ongoing challenge (Kara Udell, personal communication).

Breakfast programs. Many breakfast programs in our region are supported by Breakfast Club of Canada, a national not-for-profit organization that provides financial supports for infrastructure and food purchasing for school breakfast programs as well as resources to support program implementation. Many schools in our region operate breakfast programs. These programs are usually run by school staff, some of whom are given a small portion of their work time to coordinate the program (often this paid work is held by educational assistants, while others do it “off the side of their desk”). These staff are often responsible for: food procurement (purchasing and donations), food preparation, food service, clean up and communication. The most formal programs with paid staff positions allocated to supporting them tend to operate in schools with high populations of vulnerable students, where CommunityLINK funding or other grants are allocated to support staff time to run meal programs. Many other schools operate with food donations from local food banks, businesses and/or community members and rely upon staff to coordinate and distribute food.

Lunch programs supported by Provincial CommunityLINK funding. Some schools who receive CommunityLINK funding use a portion of their funds to purchase hot or cold meals prepared by Truffles catering (though a few schools have used their portion of CommunityLINK funding to produce food in house - ie. Colquitz and Esquimalt). The chefs, teachers and community members interviewed acknowledged that the quality of food offered through this catering service is often relatively poor (several interviewees talked about finding a lot of it in the garbage, they hypothesized that this was due to student’s picky eating and/or the quality of the food). One meal from Truffles costs \$4.80 per student; this includes costs of food, production labor, distribution and profit margin (Laura-Lyn Helton, personal communication). An entrée from a culinary arts program costs \$6 and does not include any labor, distribution costs or profit margin (Rowan Bezeau, personal communication). This discrepancy in cost highlights the gap in quality between these two options. Brandon Aris, the chef instructor at Esquimalt Secondary, has been using

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

CommunityLINK funds to produce meals in house at Esquimalt Secondary for the last eight years. “Every day we do a lunch to feed 25-30 people food. The school counsellor serves the food and connects with the students in need.” Brandon figures he “could probably do 60 meals with the amount of need that there is.”

In School District 61, how much each school gets each year from CommunityLINK funding comes in as a formula based on each school’s vulnerability index. A staff committee (which is enshrined in union rules) provides recommendations to administrators on how these funds should be used. Administrators get the final call. Craigflower Elementary’s Principal Tim Murphy described how “CommunityLINK gives us a lot of flexibility. We can use it to purchase: food, EA time, VP time, Youth and Family counselling, learning support... It’s a discretionary fund that we can use as our staff see fit.” Each year staff make an assessment and try to use these scarce resources to “limit the most barriers possible.”

In the Sooke School District (#62) five schools use CommunityLINK funds to provide free meals for select students every day (Vanessa White, personal communication). In the Victoria School District (#61) eight schools use the funding for free meals each day (Greater Victoria School District, n.d.).

CommunityLINK is a discretionary fund, which means that the relatively scarce dollars it provides are stretched to support a variety of needs in schools. With mental health concerns growing in youth across our country (and region), dollars that were once going to food resources are increasingly being allocated to supporting other pressing concerns in schools. In SD61, only eight of the 17 schools who receive CommunityLINK funds use a portion of these funds to provide meals (Greater Victoria School District, n.d.). The BC Chapter for the Coalition for Healthy School Food has recently advocated for the creation of a dedicated provincial School Food Fund that could support existing programs as an important first step towards the creation of a universal, cost-shared, healthy school food program for the Province (Samantha Gambling, personal communication).

In BC, a dedicated School Food Fund --distinct from existing CommunityLINK funding which often competes for other priorities --could offer essential support for schools, districts and community organizations to continue, expand and enrich existing school food programs. This Fund would provide small grants for infrastructure, equipment, as well as expenses associated with staffing, administration, research, evaluation and other needs identified in the recent Tri-Ministry K-12 Public School Food Survey (Gambling, 2020).

Backpack Buddies. Currently Backpack Buddies serves 12 schools in SD61 and 62. The program focuses on bridging the weekend hunger gap - acknowledging that the community has worked really hard to feed kids while they’re in school but that less support exists for weekends. Parents are not always at home during the weekend, as they have to work. So the meals are ones that can be prepared by kids, to keep it accessible. Backpack Buddies provides two meals and snacks, though with COVID this has been increased to three meals. Meals are all non-perishable foods, ie: Kraft dinner, packaged soups, rice and tuna, mixes of dry cereal and oatmeal. The program is trying to lean more towards nutritious options, but it’s a tricky balance because of the need for it to be accessible to kids and something that they can prepare on their own. There is also the challenge of having to balance limited budgets. Backpack Buddies are working to build

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

connections locally to support an improvement of the nutritional value of the food they are providing.

The program is run in partnership with schools. Each school has its own process to identify where the need is and how backpacks are distributed. As the regional program coordinator Kara Udell describes,

We usually hear from a school saying there is a need and so we start with the principal, who connects us with someone within the school to coordinate. Sometimes a counsellor, sometimes a teacher. They work within the school on how to identify the need and coordinate the distribution. Some keep it really confidential and kids pick up from the school counsellor. Others send out a broadcast email and put bags in the hall for all who say yes, we want some.

The program is looking to expand into other schools in our region and sees a larger need than they are currently meeting (Kara Udell, personal communication).

Rescued food distribution to families. Some schools have partnered with local grocers, bakeries and/or the Food Share Network to support food distribution to families through the school. This type of food distribution is primarily focused upon the distribution of foods that would otherwise go to waste, and is usually focused in schools with high vulnerability indices. As Cindy Andrew points out “a lot of community partners service the same families” as schools. Cindy sees a significant opportunity to align efforts and support cross sector collaboration to more effectively reach these families. Schools often have a privileged ear to the ground when it comes to assessing and serving family needs, which provides significant opportunities for reaching vulnerable families. Cindy’s vision echoes Kara Udell, the Food Share Network Executive Director, who was quoted earlier talking about the need to come together and pool resources more effectively. One challenge with this kind of coordination effort that several interviewees discussed was that it relies upon organizational capacity. There currently is not one organization or position that could support more efficient connection and distribution of food within school districts or across our region. So some schools are continuing to seek food donations and distribute food in their community as an important measure to address barriers to education in their schools.

PAC Supported Programs. A majority of the schools surveyed by Vanessa White had Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) that supported food service in schools. These programs fell into two categories: 1) PAC allocated funding to support emergency food resources, usually a small annual budget to support a snack cupboard in the school that could be drawn upon to help students who forgot their lunches or who came to school without food, and: 2) Hot lunch fundraisers of pizza, hot dogs, or other “kid friendly” foods.

Teachers. Two teachers interviewed in this study acknowledged the investment that they personally make every year in supporting student nutrition. Teachers do purchase food for students out of their own pocket to ensure their students do not go hungry. A 2015 survey by the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) found that of 778 teachers surveyed in BC, 40.2% brought food for students at school.

About two-thirds (69.1%) of these teachers spend ‘Up to \$25 per month’, one in five (21.6%) spend ‘\$26 to \$50 per month’ and about one in ten (9.3%) spend ‘Over \$50 per

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

month.’ 17 teachers reported spending over \$100 per month on food to bring to school for students who are hungry. (BCTF, 2015)

School Run Salad Bars

Within our region there are two examples of school run salad bar programs that have operated successfully for more than two years. These programs share similar values and goals. Following from Farm to Cafeteria’s definition, they aim to provide “a model of food service where students choose from a variety of healthy foods and serve themselves whenever possible. Foods served... are ideally sourced from local food providers” (Farm to Cafeteria Canada, 2021). These two programs also strive to connect students to whole food cycles (from seed, to plate, to compost), providing food literacy education and opportunities for students and staff to connect with the social, economic and environmental impacts of different food systems. These programs are examples of an emerging focus on integrating broader health and sustainability concerns into school meal programs.

The salad bars at Colquitz Middle and Reynolds Secondary schools were able to operate on similar scales, serving 100-150 people 16-20 meals per school year. Both found that charging between \$4-5 per plate provided enough money to purchase food, food service equipment and food processing infrastructure. Both programs relied upon a highly-committed teacher champion to implement and run. In both circumstances this teacher champion was able to connect the salad bar to their curriculum. At Reynolds, Heather Coey integrated the salad bar and school garden into the Flexible Studies Program and supported her students in growing, processing and serving food in the salad bar. At Colquitz, Laura-Lyn Helton integrated the salad bar and a connected school garden into a new exploratory prep course she developed called Sustainable Resources.

Heather talked about how much easier it was to administrate a pre-paid program utilizing existing open access software to support ordering. Both teachers are recognized in the community for the herculean effort they have made to get these programs off the ground (Janelle Hatch, personal communication). Both teachers are planning to retire in the near future, and both hope that their salad bar programs can be taken up by their school’s foods class(es). They also acknowledge that for this kind of program to be successful in existing school settings, a champion teacher needs to be willing to go above the call of duty.

After several years of running these salad bars, both teachers have shifted away from a traditional salad bar program. This was partially brought on by the COVID pandemic, though both teachers acknowledge that their adapted programs are now a lot more manageable for them to run (and require much less evening and weekend time spent sourcing food and organizing materials). At Colquitz, Laura-Lyn now works with her Sustainable Resource students to prepare food just for the class, rather than trying to feed 120 people. At Reynolds, Heather is now offering 16 food boxes (eight for families and eight for staff) instead of the salad bar for up to 150 people. For more information about the evolution of Reynolds’ garden and salad bar program see the case study detailed below.

Developing School Meal Programs

This section reviews findings that might support the development of universally accessible school meal programs in the Capital Region. There were a number of relevant themes that

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

emerged from interviews. School food champions wondered about how to frame the conversation around food in schools to advocate clearly for change. Discussions explored what levers of change exist within large institutions to promote new meal programs. Other conversations focused around what assets currently exist and how they might be leveraged to support pilot program development in our region.

Framing the Conversation Around Food in Schools

Many interviewees talked about the challenge of clearly communicating about the need for school food programs. Dr. Jennifer Black put it well.

I've been thinking a lot about what we are saying these programs are for: Ministry of Education will say it's for educational ends; dietitians will talk about health; others focus on social justice, or poverty reduction. We need a clearer, broader framing to collectively articulate what it is that we are trying to do. There is currently no clear document or framework that is articulating who and what these programs are good for.
(DATE)

For Janelle Hatch, Healthy Schools Coordinator with Island Health, this is somewhere we should look to start as a community. Several interviewees (including Janelle) felt that the best way to convey the diverse benefits of school food would be to clearly articulate the *values* that would be important to associate with a school meal program. Health researcher Dr Rachel Engler-Stringer felt that rather than thinking about the elements involved in different school meal programs (ie cooking, gardening, etc) we could shift the focus towards a values-based approach. Rachel is working on a book chapter with Dr Jennifer Black and Dr Sinnika Elliot to articulate the values that might allow all the documented elements of good practice for school meal programs to be incorporated. The values they have synthesized are: centering childhood, a holistic vision of health, and justice. But even Rachel acknowledges that it is hard to synthesize the conversation in a way that can be conveyed to a broad audience; she catches herself speaking to different stakeholders differently depending upon their perspective. Several interviewees felt that to get the ear of policy makers and practitioners you need to package the communication to fit with their interests. Janelle Hatch described how “with SD61 the focus has really been around mental health, so it's important to make a connection to this issue. With other audiences, finances are primary.”

Understanding what kinds of issues require agreement at different geographical scales is another important aspect of how the conversation about universal school food is framed. Jennifer Black stressed that we “have to ask what do we need National agreement on? Provincial agreement on? What should be the core and what should be flexible and/or needs to be decided on the ground in the local context?” These are big questions which will require collaboration at many levels. Interviewees stressed the importance of critically examining who is involved in shaping these programs, pointing out the importance of inclusion, equity and diversity (youth and Indigenous perspectives were often cited as critically important and often underrepresented in current conversations). The Coalition for Healthy School Food has made strides towards synthesizing the values associated with universally accessible school food programs, and regional actors may benefit from continuing to align efforts with the national coalition and provincial chapter to define and communicate the values associated with universally accessible school meal programs. With these values clearly articulated and supported by all stakeholders, we might then be able to craft a compelling narrative to advocate for change. As our regional Farm to School animator

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

Marcus Lobb points out, “part of the challenge is creating a story, or a culture that is supportive of the work.” With clearly articulated values we may be in a stronger position to craft a compelling narrative.

The importance of inclusion and diversity in determining the guiding values and shaping the future development of school meal programs cannot be overstated. Many interviewees echoed Marcus Lobb’s statement:

What I see a lot in schools is a champion. You see a lot of work has been done and think wow, this must have been a real concerted school wide effort, but often it is just one or two people who have really put a lot of time into it. Much of the work is put on these champions, which makes the program and work precarious as a result. (DATE)

Another challenge with this “champion model” is that the values and practices of school meal programs become defined by this small handful of champions. While it may be important to celebrate and support these champions, we also need to acknowledge that their voices are dominant (even in this study), and not nearly representative of the diversity of groups for whom school food programming is important.

Supporting Change in Large Institutions

Interviewees had several compelling insights regarding approaches to support institutional change within school districts and larger provincial or national institutions. Echoing the above conversation, there was often a concern expressed over the champion model that currently dominates school food programming. Many interviewees acknowledged that real change requires a push from multiple points in order to draw action and create change. Building broader interest and buy-in to the importance of healthy food is something that multiple interviewees acknowledged was important to supporting change, which is discussed at some length above.

Vanessa White and Cindy Andrew generously shared their perspective from within school district leadership. These two were the only people with positions in school district head offices who were willing to be interviewed, and their discussion may point to why other school district leaders declined to participate. Cindy began by encouraging that

The education system lens, first and foremost, is what should guide this work... Consider their mandate, *which includes the health and well-being of kids*, but it’s not their core mandate. Their core business is the educated citizen. It’s about helping kids learn and become flourishing, productive, contributing citizens. So... every school will tell you that they have all these causes coming at them and we are expected to fix them. So it’s important to be mindful to their mandate, the complexity of the organization... and being mindful of the context they are working in. I’ve heard for 30 years now community organizations struggling with just “how do we get into schools.”

This really struck a chord with Vanessa, who continued

If I had a dollar for every meeting I’ve sat in that began with “do you know what schools should do? Schools should...” and it’s like okay, what you’re meaning by that is schools should teach a lesson on that and it will fix it. And the reality is, it doesn’t. We can teach. We teach health and nutrition K-12 and we still end up with kids with

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

unhealthy diets. We're just one small piece, and yes we can do lessons and bring stuff into the classrooms but we're *one piece*. And it's often like schools have not done their part because we've ended up with this.

Cindy added further:

So you can understand why barriers go up to wanting to work with other organizations and systems. The draw bridges go up and they say "back off" and "leave us alone." Not to mention there's lots of different causes... all trying to get into the schools. An approach that I feel is more helpful... is that notion of coming alongside a system to say "boy you do a lot and this is an issue that we know you care about as much as the rest of us. How is it going and what would be helpful?"

Cindy also acknowledged that it was important for school-based actors to be mindful of the challenges and complexities of those working to support schools, and that collaborative work requires an empathic and compassionate view of each other's challenges.

Laura-Lyn Helton from Colquitz Middle School stressed that "schools are the individual experts in the needs of their students and should be respected and given flexibility to serve those needs in their unique context." Robin Ruff who teaches at Royal Bay Secondary did wonder about "how we could be more critical about all the implicit ways we organize around food." During a talk she attended by a public health dietitian Robin found herself thinking about the messages that were being sent in the school at the time and feeling frustrated by the lack of intentionality placed on food environments and food literacy at school. Robin felt that it "would be interesting to have someone like a public health dietitian come in and audit the school food environment and provide recommendations." Appreciating some of the concerns above, Robin also expressed how important it would be to ensure people could be receptive to the feedback. Robin saw that inviting participation throughout the process and taking an approach of "coming alongside a system," as Cindy describes above, would be key to ensuring receptivity to feedback.

Another challenge implicit to change in large institutions, which came up often throughout my interviews, was budgetary restrictions. Many interviewees argued that dedicated staffing and resources to support coordination and collaboration were essential to moving any expanded food programming forward. The importance of financial resources was often cited as key to the long-term sustainability of food programs and was seen by many as a key enabler that could support change.

Culture was also cited as an important driver of change in large institutions. As a country without a universal school meal program, Canada is in a unique position in the developed world. Most other developed countries chose to allocate resources to school meal programming as their social safety nets were being built. Canada has historically chosen to allocate this funding to families, and so there is a cultural understanding in this country that the role of feeding kids is held by families – not schools. Samantha Gambling who coordinates the Provincial Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food sees that this cultural assumption is beginning to shift, and momentum is growing for building school's capacity to feed students across the country. But this ingrained cultural belief, which has been built (at least in part) by an institutional decision to allocate resources in a certain way, likely needs to shift to support schools in playing a more committed role in feeding students.

Universal School Meal Programs

Conversations about creating universally accessible school meal programs focused on: opportunities to expand high school commercial kitchen production; supporting better collaboration among diverse sectors; Indigenous leadership, and; cost.

Both the chef instructors interviewed (from Esquimalt and Royal Bay High Schools) felt that their culinary kitchens could scale up to serve other schools in their catchment. Both agreed that this would require additional staffing to support a scaling up of production. Depending upon cold storage capacity and logistics planning, staff may need to start earlier than the school day to prep meals for distribution that same day. Where cold storage allows, Rowan Bezeau felt that meals could be prepped the day before with students, frozen and then shipped and heated at the recipient school. Both chefs were excited by the idea of expanding their kitchen's production and serving food to those schools in their catchment, or community, and had already taken steps towards exploring this. Both pointed to logistics planning as the primary barrier that had prevented them from growing production to serve more meals to other schools. Organizing vehicles, equipment and human resources to transport all the food safely from the high school to its feeder school(s), and then getting equipment back, required coordination and financial resources. Both chef instructors actually pointed out that navigating union and school district policies was potentially an even more challenging barrier, as they had both had community actors express interest in supporting these kinds of logistics, but ran into challenges with outside actors providing the service that union staff traditionally carried. Both Esquimalt and Royal Bay secondary are positioned well to pilot an expansion of school-based meal preparation to serve their local schools, but the complex challenges associated with logistics planning and funding will likely necessitate policy and procedure development at the school district level.

In our region there is a diverse group of community organizations who are interested in supporting food access and programming in schools. Within the Food Share Network membership base of over 100 organizations, 53% want to see an increase in the work they do in schools (Kara Udell, personal communication). As was discussed in the section on the existing need in our region, many interviewees talked about the opportunities of more effectively collaborating across sectors to support school food programs. Many actors also addressed the concern that this work needs to be adequately supported and championed by school districts themselves, not outside actors. Certainly everyone I spoke with who works inside school districts would love to do more, but as Cindy and Vanessa describe above, schools are complex organizations facing many important priorities. As has already been stressed, funding is a major barrier and building commitment for feeding students is a complex endeavor.

Dr Rachel Engler-Stringer highlighted

One potential way forward is thinking through decolonization and how we can decolonize our food systems and education systems. Not an obvious connection but when I talk to Indigenous educators they make the connection. They say you can't have the kind of education that we know is culturally appropriate without also connecting it to school food programs, having kids involved in learning about cultural food practices, country foods... So I have this feeling that if we ever do get a national school program for Canada, it will happen through comprehensive programs in Indigenous communities that will spread.

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

The opportunities to support decolonization and Indigenous leadership over school food programs are compelling and in need of deeper work in our region.

Study participants often spoke about the power of cheap, or ideally free, universally accessible food in schools. Interviewees pointed to the significant research showing benefits to academic achievement, health, well-being, society and even the local environment (The Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2018). Both teachers and researchers talked about the power of offering food for free; they talked especially about how such an offering significantly helps students feel cared for and included in a community. While many could appreciate the value of such an offering, no one seemed to believe that a universally accessible, free meal program was within reach. Participants acknowledge the cost of such a program as an extreme barrier, and so hypothesized a variety of strategies for enabling cost sharing with those who could afford it, while offering food that is cheap or free to those in need, without creating stigma or barriers to participation.

Regional Response to the COVID Pandemic

In this section I discuss findings related to the impact of the COVID pandemic on school food programming. Most interviewees did not have much to say about the impacts of the pandemic. It is possible that many were still trying to make sense of what impacts the pandemic was having, as interviews were being done just one year into a pandemic that had continually shifted the approach to education in our region. Certainly many respondents felt that the pandemic had helped to highlight the important role that schools play in supporting food security. Participants saw that the pandemic had drawn multiple societal actors, including municipalities, businesses, schools and the not-for-profit sector, into a position of greater curiosity about how we might support the alleviation of food insecurity in our region.

The First Wave

Respondents largely agreed that the first wave of the COVID pandemic, which precipitated the closure of all schools in BC from late March – June of 2020, created regionally unprecedented action from local school districts to support food insecurity. With schools closed school districts worried about students who depended upon food resources at school and acted quickly to re-allocate the existing resources that support food distribution through their schools. This coincided with a growing need in the community, as people lost work because of the pandemic schools saw a large increase in demand for food (Tim Murphy, personal communication). Schools stepped up and supported this need in myriad ways, often working alongside community actors to increase food distribution. However, when students returned to school in September of 2020, the focus on food distribution did not continue. Schools were concerned with safety protocols and keeping up with changing approaches to educating students. From September 2020 forward, most food services to students in schools were reduced from pre-pandemic levels, due primarily to COVID safety concerns or changes to the structure of the school day.

Farmbucks Program

During the early rise of the pandemic, a regional Farmbucks program was created by the South Island FarmHub. The program split \$250,000 of rapid relief funding from the federal government between local charities and schools, to support them in offsetting the higher costs of

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

local food. Schools in our region were allocated \$125,000 in funding, and MOUs were drafted with each of the region's four school districts to determine how these resources would be fairly distributed. A steward at each district supported the allocation of credits to schools within their district, and schools could then use these credits to purchase food at 50% of the full cost through the South Island FarmHub. The program was designed as a way to support more local food getting to schools, and was also built to support farmers accessing new markets during a time that restaurant sales were plummeting due to the pandemic.

While the program was successfully utilized by local charities, schools did not take advantage of their credits in the same way. Most schools chose not to use their credits at all, while others used them only sparingly. By the end of the program implementation period, many of the credits for schools remained unused. In my interviews with stakeholders in schools, several points were raised about the Farmbucks program and its implementation in schools:

- Several teachers noted that there was limited selection and quantity of foods during the school year (though others credited the Farmbucks program for working to bring in new products like eggs and meat).
- Many suggested that the price was definitely prohibitive without the 50% discount, and even with the discount it was possible to get items cheaper from other (non-local) sources.
- Several teachers expressed a desire to purchase direct from farm and “skip the middle man” commenting that the 20% overhead fee charged to cover South Island FarmHub costs was a pain point.
- Both teachers and the Farmbucks program coordinator felt that the onboarding of schools and orientation of how to use the South Island FarmHub ordering system could have been made clearer to encourage greater participation.
- Delivery service directly to schools was cited as really useful by four teachers.
- The \$200 purchase minimum set by the FarmHub is a large barrier for most schools (especially smaller Elementary and Middle schools).
- FarmHub staff felt that the existing systems and labor of managing many unique school relationships is prohibitive for effective administration of the program.
- The lack of security about school's future ability to access the program presented a barrier to participation; some teachers did not want to change their ordering systems for something that would not last.
- Staff changeover at school districts made stewardship of the program difficult; several of the key program stewards changed (or left without being replaced) during program implementation.
- Community actors noted how cheap or free things that provide measurable benefits don't necessarily get taken up by schools – for new programs to receive buy-in they may have to be easy and not create additional work for taxed school staff (there may be other factors at play here, too).

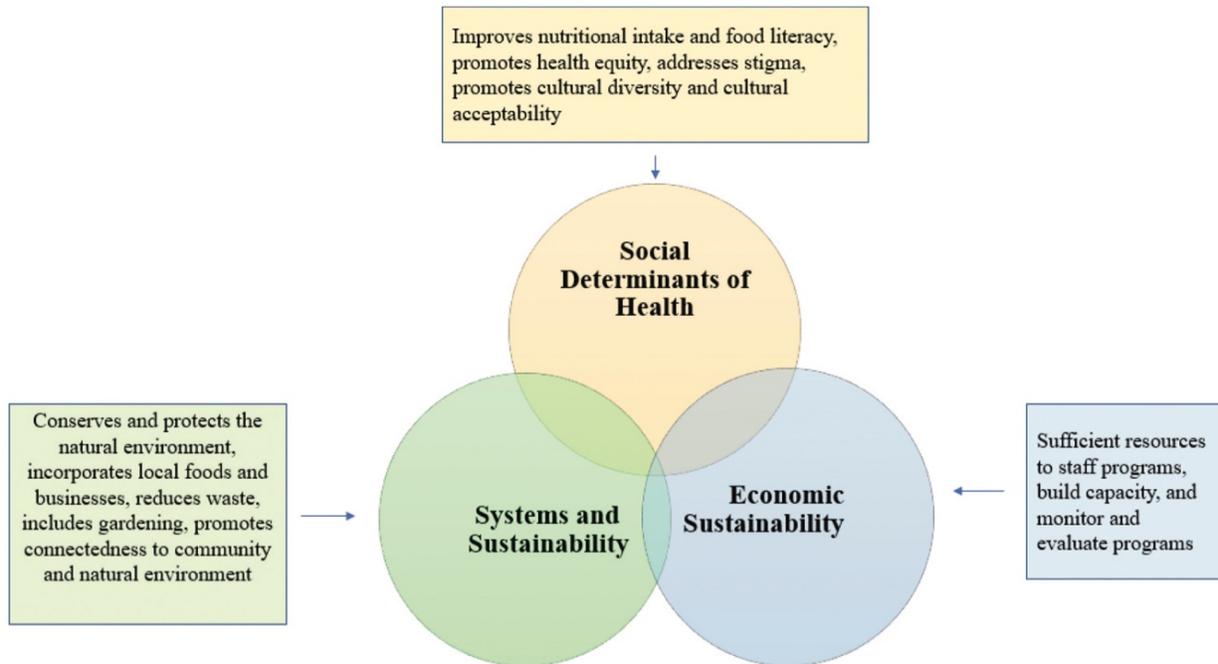
Case Study Narratives

This section presents five case studies of school food programs that may support further critical thinking about the future of school food in the Capital Region. Given the dearth of coordinated school food programs in Canada there is no consensus on so-called “best practices” for running

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

school food programs in this country. Researchers instead point to “promising practices” and a need for further study and evaluation of school meal programs.

In a scoping review to determine promising practices for Canadian school food programs, Everitt et al. (2020) present the below image depicting important considerations for creating school food programs.



What follows are five short narrative descriptions of school food programs that highlight both promising practices and potential pitfalls in school food program development.

PEI's Healthy School Food Program

The Healthy School Food Program is a universally accessible school food program available to all students across Prince Edward Island during the 2020/21 school year. The program runs utilizing three different food preparation models: 1) food is made by in-house food services led by chefs employed by government; 2) food is made by school lunch vendors in community centres located within schools; 3) food is made by local restaurants and catering companies (<https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/education-and-lifelong-learning/healthy-school-food-program>). The majority of schools are served by restaurants and catering companies.

The Province wide initiative was initially proposed by the PEI Home and School Federation. The Federation is the umbrella organization of local "home and school" and "parent council" organizations in 56 English schools across Prince Edward Island. Their goal is to “bring together parents, guardians, teachers, administrators and staff to promote the total well-being of children and the highest standards of education for each child in the province” (<https://peihsf.ca/about/>).

At the 2015 Annual General Meeting of the Federation, members adopted a [resolution calling for the establishment of a universal free school lunch program](#). Since that time the Federation had advocated/lobbied for the implementation of this project (<https://peihsf.ca/topics/universal->

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

[school-lunch-program](#)). Below is a listing of the steps taken (initially by the Federation – then by Government) to support the development of PEI’s Healthy School Food Program.

- A “summit meeting” of primary producers, educators, chefs, dietitians and others in June 2015 to talk about the broad challenges and opportunities of the program.
- Participation in the Canada-wide [Coalition For Healthy School Food](#)
- Screening of the film [Cafeteria Man](#) in the fall of 2016.
- Organization of a visit by U.S. Chef Tony Geraci, the subject of Cafeteria Man, in October 2016 for a weeklong series of meetings with students, teachers, parents, administrators, chefs, farmers and producers, processors and politicians.
- A short video of Chef Tony's visit by Jeff Eager, Hummingbird Productions (In Production)
- Featuring a prototypical healthy, local school lunch at the Fall 2016 Semi-Annual Meeting of members.
- An [Environmental Scan of School Food on PEI](#) and [School Food Fact Sheet](#), compiled by Tracy Michael of Nourished Kitchen.
 - Survey of all schools to gather information on meal programs and followed up with to fill gaps
 - Also analyzed school lunch menus, following model of New Brunswick Medical Society project [Make Menus Matter](#)
- Letters of support from [Parker Grimmer](#), Chief Operations Officer, Public Schools Branch and [John Jamieson](#), Deputy Minister, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.
- Creation of [PEI Home and School Federation Guiding Principles for School Food](#) in Prince Edward Island.
- [Student School Food Think Tanks, Fall 2018](#): Hundreds of students participated in the events at [East Wiltshire Intermediate](#), [Kinkora Regional High](#), and [Montague Regional High](#).
- [Centralized kitchen being tested for hot lunches at Charlottetown Schools](#)
- [Letter to Premier Dennis King, September 17, 2019](#): Meeting request concerning implementation of Universal Healthy School Lunch Program
- P.E.I. government launching \$5 healthy school lunch program in January 2020
- Department of [Education and Lifelong Learning Mandate Letter](#).
- [Education minister promises P.E.I. school food program for fall 2020](#).
- [Healthy School Lunch Program is a universal school food program available to all students across Prince Edward Island during the 2020/21 school year](#).
- A non-profit organization called the PEI Healthy School Food Program is established to oversee the delivery and development of the program from July 1, 2021 onward.

For the first year, the program was housed within the Province’s Ministry of Education, and is primarily supported by three staff positions: a dietitian in the role of School Food Program Manager, a Chef in the role of School Food Coordinator, and a School Health Specialist in the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning as the overall Project Manager. The vision is to shift the management of the program to a non-profit organization, to enable donations and allow for easier collaboration with community groups (personal communication). This vision was realized in the summer of 2021, with the creation of the PEI Healthy School Food Program non-profit organization.

Staff estimate that the program has cost between \$1-2 million to get started (personal communication). The program implemented a pay-what-you-can model, in which

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

parents/guardians are asked to sign up for their child to get a meal at school. They set the price at \$5/meal and ask parents to pay what they can. In their projections, based on previous work in PEI and experience in other jurisdictions, the program developers thought they would get, on average, \$4/meal. Essentially, they figured that 80% would pay the full \$5. So far they are not seeing that level of cost recovery (they hypothesized the pandemic, high levels of debt, and a certain level of abuse or refusal to pay for a government program were three probable reasons for the less than estimated level of cost recovery). They estimate that the cost for running the full program for one year has been “north of \$1,000,000” (personal communication).

The menu is set by the School Food Program Manager in consultation with the program Chef. In the vendor model, they pay all vendors \$5/meal plus a delivery fee. When designing menus, they aim for about a 33% food cost, with the remainder going to all other costs associated with food processing and distribution. The managers of the program find that the vendor model is the cleanest and simplest to manage (as compared to the two other delivery models mentioned above). They have worked to try to create menus to incorporate local products where possible, but in the end, these decisions are up to the vendors (and price is often paramount). All vendors are provided with the costing for each standardized recipe, and they use local suppliers as much as possible to create this costing.

Currently there are ~20,000 students (grades K-12) in PEI and the program is hitting 10-15% participation. Some schools have participation as low as 2-3% while others are as high as 30-40%; Elementary schools have the highest level of participation, with the age of students being the strongest determinant of participation (personal communication).

New Westminister’s Transition to Fuel Up! Program

In 2019 the New Westminister School District #40 shifted from an existing school lunch program (funded by CommunityLINK) to a new program that aims to “ensure that no child is hungry and every child eats healthy.” The district has partnered with a catering company to provide parents with the option of ordering food (online) for their child on a daily, weekly, monthly or occasional basis. The menu offers flexibility and some variety, and aims to meet BC School Nutrition Guidelines.

Insights about school lunch experiences from three schools with pre-existing lunch programs during the 2019 transitions to the Fuel Up! School Nourishment Program in New Westminister were gathered by a team of researchers from the University of British Columbia (Black et al., 2020). These researchers performed a detailed analysis of students while eating their lunch pre and post program implementation. A survey of parents and interviews with teachers/adults/students in schools were also completed, and a detailed report was then written detailing the researcher’s findings. Interesting insights from this report include:

- **The important care role provided by adults serving school meals.** Students knew and identified with the adults who ran the original food program. The food distribution method of the new program did not create meaningful connections between adults and students and resulted in students feeling less cared for.
- **The stigma associated with subsidies.** The need to ask for a subsidy created stigma and was a barrier to participation for those who used the previous program. Many parents

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

reported that they understood the need for a subsidy program but it did not work as anticipated.

- **Students and parents appreciated more choice** and ability to mix and match sides with meals.
- **The new program viewed as healthy** by both parents and students. Analysis of whether it actually was was not completed.
- **Students were highly aware of what others were eating.** They spoke of food trends in their classroom and were clearly cognizant of how certain foods created a sense of being “in” with specific groups. A lot of informal learning and identity formation seemed to be happening around meal times. Students were watching and highly aware of who gets the program food, creating much potential for stigmatization.
- **Key barriers to participation.**
 - Waste (food and packaging), selection (lack of diverse options), structure/reliability of delivery provided barriers to student/parent participation.
 - Cost was the key barrier; many parents cited this.
 - There was a perception among parents of not enough “kid friendly” options.
 - In a diverse school district, it was difficult of appeal to culturally diverse tastes.
 - Lack of safe options for students with dietary restrictions.
 - Preference for home cooked lunches was common.
 - Importance of first impressions with new program. The structure/reliability of delivery was an issue at beginning, which seemed to have lasting implications for the way the program was viewed by some parents.
- **Time for students to eat a concern** for parents, not enough time allocated for lunch.
- **Notes on universal accessibility** and argument that this program is not universal (because of the cost), though the district continues to advertise it as such.
- **Left overs and the challenge of safe storage.** Students were bringing food from lunch home after being out of refrigerator for several hours.

While data about the usage of the new program was not complete in the study, it was clear that a majority of students continued to bring meals from home. “After Fuel Up!, the frequency of ordering school lunch declined, varied across schools, and did not yet reach all potentially vulnerable students” (Black et al., 2020). Many parents chose not to use the program, or to use it only infrequently, while some parents who most needed the support were unable to access the program (perhaps in part because of the stigma created by the need to ask for a subsidy).

Haida Gwaii’s Learning Circles and the Development of the Local Food to Schools Program

Community members in Haida Gwaii have crafted a unique engagement model to support cross sector and cross cultural collaboration to promote healthy, local food in schools. They call their approach “learning circles,” which have brought together Indigenous leaders/elders, teachers, administrators, farmers, dietitians, and others - more than 70 people – in dialogue and discussion. Originally four learning circles were hosted from 2014-2016, with financial support provided by Farm to Cafeteria Canada. The program was originally called Farm to School, but was quickly changed to Local Food to Schools to acknowledge that much of the traditional foods of Haida Gwaii are not farmed, but are fished, hunted and foraged. ([VIDEO](#)) According to Shelly Crack, a Northern Health dietitian and co-facilitator of Learning Circles with Kiku Dhanwant, “a learning

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

circle is a model of collaboration, where the food and school community come together to create a shared vision and goals” (Hammond, 2019).

Over the course of these first four learning circles, the community identified key issues and supported creative problem solving to meet goals of integrating local foods into schools. Through the learning circles a connection with the school district courier service was made, which enabled this existing transportation network to begin distributing local foods to schools (the logistics of moving food around the islands was a barrier identified during learning circles). Through learning circle discussions the community prioritized the creation of local food pantries to help source, store and distribute foods in schools. Food safety protocols for food handling - including wild game – were also created to enable a large increase in traditional foods being used in school cafeterias and kitchens. The original learning circles also supported the development of food literacy workshops and trainings. Learning circles have continued on Haida Gwaii, with more recent work focused on getting better food into hospitals, and transitioning the work to Indigenous leadership (Logan, 2021).

In her PhD research, Louise McEachern studied the use of the learning circle model to support four Indigenous communities in improving the health of their school food systems. She describes the learning circles as

A community engagement practice that worked at the community level with a collective aim to promote partnerships between community members with common interest. The model evolved from the ‘learning labs’ of the Farm to School programs that began in the United States and transitioned to Canada under Farm to Cafeteria Canada. The name ‘Learning Circle’ started in Indigenous communities and was used to reflect the co-operative nature of the practice, and the importance of grounding the practice in local knowledge, traditions and culture. For the learning circle initiative discussed here, partnerships were generated around a shared interest in increasing the availability, acceptability and consumption of local, healthy and traditional foods by school-aged youth and adolescents in each community. Haida Gwaii, B.C. pioneered the first learning circle in an Indigenous community and acted as an exemplar community for this initiative. A Learning Circle Evaluation Facilitator (LCEF) was employed in each community and given responsibility to initiate community meetings in which matters relating to local, healthy and traditional foods were discussed. Community members with an interest in local food were invited through formal and informal networks, and invitations. Priorities for that community were agreed upon over the course of a workshop, usually day-long, needs and activities were discussed and goals set. The core group met several times between 2016 -2019 to re-evaluate the aims of the group and discuss progress.

In her work, McEachern found that learning circles are “a flexible initiative that engages the broader community in planning and implementation to build upon community strengths and consolidate local food efforts, previously happening in an ad hoc way within the community, among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members; the learning circle approach also reaches beyond individual communities and includes sharing across communities. Data from Haida Gwaii show that sustainable initiatives can emerge from grassroots movements given enough funding, time, and commitment... Partnership development and relationship building are an essential early component of a successful learning circle; community togetherness (including Indigenous ownership of the initiative) and multiple local champions are vital, and capacity

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

building is important in smaller communities that face a number of social challenges” (McEachern, 2021)

The learning circle model has helped to slowly build relationships and support healthy food in schools in Haida Gwaii and has been helpful in forming relationships and building trust between community members and school staff. In McEachern’s research, the model was “adapted according to the wishes of the community and was therefore able to accommodate diversity in context” (McEachern, 2021), showing its utility to other communities and contexts. The dialogical approach of the learning circle model, which evolves over the course of several years, has helped to slowly invite broader participation and ensure that over time, everyone is welcome and able to participate at the table. It will be informative to watch the Haida Gwaii community as they work to transition the initiative to Indigenous leadership. The learning circle approach has supported strong relationships with Indigenous community members and may be a useful approach in urban contexts, where finding ways for a broad spectrum of diverse stakeholders to collaborate effectively is often a challenge.

Craigflower Elementary Using Food as a Source of Connection

Craigflower Elementary is a school rich in history and culture, and is located in Saanich, alongside the beautiful Gorge Waterway. Craigflower School has a range of ethnic backgrounds, and is located on the traditional territories of the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations. The school is proud of their diverse student population, many with rich Aboriginal cultures, and they strive to share and celebrate this throughout the school and curriculum (School Website). As the elementary school in the catchment area of the Songhees and Esquimalt reservations, building connections and relations with these communities is of particular interest to the school (personal communication).

At Craigflower food provides an important connection between community and school. On the last Friday of every month, the school hosts a community breakfast. Two to three volunteers from the local Rotary club come and help serve this breakfast, and six Saanich police officers cook it. The event is well attended, with many parents bringing their kids and families to create a lively community atmosphere. Everyone enjoys breakfast together then gathers in a circle for the monthly Feather Ceremony. The ceremony is a way to celebrate a group of students and the work they are doing in the school (they make sure that every student gets recognized each year). In addition to this monthly gathering, the school also hosts a winter solstice meal with support from Rotarians and the local Kiwanis clubs. Thrifty Foods donates 20 turkeys for this winter feast, which is another great community building event. They also host an annual feast in June, which often highlights local and traditional foods. That feast has been going on for 30 years and also incorporates some fundraising elements to support programming for students in the schools.

The school’s Principal Tim Murphy knows “food is huge. As it is with every indigenous community. Politics get put aside and people just connect. And honour one another and mother earth.” In addition to supporting community building, food is regularly served and distributed at Craigflower elementary, in order to support community needs and ensure students are well nourished at school and at home. Tim is honored to work in this community, which he describes as having “A lot of humility and non-judgement. [Feeding students and distributing food to families] “has become an important aspect of the work we do” (personal communication). The school has built strong connections with the Food Share Network and distributes 20-28 banana

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

boxes of perishable product to families every week. The school also participates in the backpack buddies program and runs a daily breakfast and lunch program for students.

Reynolds Secondary's Salad Bar and School Garden Program

Reynolds is a school of ~1100 students located in Saanich, on the traditional territories of the Esquimalt, Songhees and WSANEC Nations. Led by the teacher champion Heather Coey, and supported by diverse community organizations over the years, the school has developed a unique garden and salad bar program. Begun in 2006 with support from LifeCycles and Leadership Victoria, the school created a vision for stewarding food and Indigenous plant gardens in a large inner courtyard and adjacent the school's main entrance. Students in the school's Flex program, run by Heather Coey, supported the planting and care of the school's courtyard garden for the first ten years of its existence. Flex students were able to establish a salad bar program utilizing local farm product and produce grown in the garden. Both the garden and salad bar were important elements in the Flex program's curriculum.

Around 2015, a local urban farmer accepted an invitation to farm inside Reynold's courtyard garden (a connection facilitated by the regional Farm to School BC animator). Growing space was increased at this time, and a larger focus was placed on producing significant harvests. While the logistics of farming in a relatively small inner courtyard did not work long-term for the urban farmer, they were able to establish systems to support higher yields (irrigation improvements and more garden bed space). When the urban farmer left, the local non-profit LifeCycles stepped back in to support Reynolds food production efforts. Since this time (2016) LifeCycles has supported the establishment of a second micro-farm site in partnership with TOPSOIL Urban Agriculture, utilizing TOPSOIL's innovative container growing method to produce larger yields at the school. LifeCycles has also supported the development of Seed the City, a successful summer work experience program, in which participating students can earn a course credit for their participation. "During this 8-week summer program, students build community and transferable skills through growing and selling food that is produced on school grounds, and participating in field trips and workshops at local farms" (<https://lifecyclesproject.ca/our-projects/growing-schools/seed-the-city/>).

Harvests are now managed by LifeCycles staff, with support from students in the Seed the City Program (through the summer) and Flex students (through the school year). A portion of the harvest is sold back to Reynolds during the school year for incorporation into their salad bar, while other harvests are sold through TOPSOIL's restaurant connections and at local markets. The unique relationship between LifeCycles, TOPSOIL, and School District 61 has been established through a formal MOU.

The salad bar at Reynolds is hosted one day per week for eight weeks in the fall and eight weeks in the spring. Students in the Flex program prepare 3 big recipe salads and serve these salads for \$4.00 per plate. Each week they serve 100-120 staff and students, on average. All proceeds are used to purchase foods and any additional revenue is reinvested into infrastructure to support food growing, preparation and service. During Covid, health and safety concerns forced the closure of the salad bar. Students began in this time to offer a weekly food box to staff and families. In the spring of 2021 the school was able to offer a pre-paid food box to 12 staff and 12 families.

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

School Food Program Scan

Below you will find a table detailing all of the food programs reviewed for this study, with short descriptions of each.

Location	Organization	Website	Notes
Cowichan Valley	Nourish Cowichan	https://sd79.bc.ca/partnership-means-increased-food-security-for-students/	Converted metal shop at Ecole Mount Provost to kitchen run by Nourish Cowichan. Pilot breakfast program begun in 2016 is expanding, now in five schools. Provide breakfast for \$1.
Central Okanagan	Hope for the Nations - Food for Thought	https://www.hopeforthenations.com/agents/food-for-thought/	Providing 1700 breakfasts for students in 30 schools prior to pandemic. Multiple school food initiatives. Based in Central Okanagan.
Squamish	Mamquam Edible Schoolyard - Squamish Climate Action Network	https://www.squamishcan.net/mamquam-edible-schoolyard	Large food production garden utilized by many schools in Squamish
Vancouver	Lunch Lab	https://lunchlab.ca/	In LunchLAB, students learn to grow their own food, supplement that food from local farms, and with the support of their teacher and chef-in-residence, learn to cook for themselves and their peers. With the closure of schools due to COVID-19, Fresh Roots and Growing Chefs, pivoted our innovative LunchLAB in-school meal program to offer students and their families delicious, healthy, chef-prepared meals out of school. Working with the Vancouver School Board and a fantastic team of collaborators and supporters (including Italian Cultural Centre and Ono Vancouver), LunchLAB: Chefs for Families is providing more than 5,000 meals to 260 families each week.
New Westminster	Fuel Up!	https://newwestschools.ca/programs-services/fuel-up/online-ordering/	We're proud to partner with Simply Foods to provide parents with the option to order a healthy and nutritious lunch on a daily, weekly, monthly or occasional basis. Our budget-friendly and healthy daily lunch options meet the BC School Nutrition Guidelines – with menu options available to order through an easy-to-use online platform. Program evaluation by Jennifer Black et al shows some weaknesses of the approach taken.
Vancouver	Fresh Roots	https://freshroots.ca/about/our-vision/	We enact our mission through Schoolyard Market Gardens, educational farms that we utilize as pathways to youth empowerment and employment. We facilitate outdoor experiential learning with teachers and students; mentor youth leaders through garden clubs and summer programming; host internships for high school-aged youth, fostering self-confidence, leadership, and employment skills; and empower Vancouverites to grow their own food through our volunteer programs. All our food is sold into the school community—into cafeterias, food-access programs, markets, and to our neighbours. We also work with other schools and organizations to develop their own market gardens and associated programming. We are a thought leader in institutional food-systems change and outdoor experiential learning.

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

PEI	Provincial Government	https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/education-and-lifelong-learning/healthy-school-food-program	The Healthy School Food Program is a universal school food program available to all students across Prince Edward Island during the 2020/21 school year. Runs utilizing 3 different models: 1. In-house food service: Chefs are preparing food at Kinkora Regional High School for those students, as well as delivering food to Somerset Consolidated, Amherst Cove Consolidated and Englewood. 2. Regular school lunch vendors: Community centres and regular school lunch vendors are preparing and providing meals to École La Belle Cloche, École Evangeline, École Sur Mer, École Pierre Chaissons, École Francois Buote, and Montague Regional High School. These schools follow their own menu. 3. Local restaurants prepare and deliver meals to schools: Local restaurants are preparing and delivering meals to all other PSB school and École St. Augustin.
Westshore	SD62 Healthy Schools	http://healthyschools.sd62.bc.ca/#healthy-eating	Healthy Eating is one of the 3 pillars of the Sooke School District's approach to comprehensive school health (the other 2 are Physical Literacy and Social/Emotional Literacy). Their CSH approach weaves common goals throughout each school and community while allowing for customizable ways of addressing the unique needs of our students, schools and communities. The environment is highly flexible and adaptable. Our approach is aligned with the Ministry of Education belief that the development of the whole child is paramount for our education community.
Westshore	Ruth King Elementary	http://ruthking.sd62.bc.ca/programs/meal-program/	Ruth King is one of the lucky schools to receive a Brown Bag Lunch Program delivered to our school every day. This program is sponsored/subsidized in part by the Community LINK Program and the Sooke School Board. This year the brown bag lunch program is \$80.00 per month per child. Families who use the program because it is easier than making lunch at home are asked to pay the full amount requested each month per child. All other families are asked to contribute their fair share based on their need.
Westshore	Millstream Elementary	http://millstream.web.sd62.bc.ca/pages/hot-lunch-online-ordering-system/	At long last, the Millstream Hot Lunch program is ready to launch! Protocols have been developed to allow for a safe hot lunch program and delivery process this year. The hot lunch program offers many benefits to the Millstream school community: It's a valuable PAC fundraiser, funding important initiatives for your kids It offers tasty food, and kids love it! It supports local restaurants, who need our support more than ever Best of all, it offers a much appreciated lunch-making break for parents!
Victoria/Saanich	SD61 CommunityLINK	https://www.sd61.bc.ca/programs/student-services/communitylink/	Hot and Cold School Meal Programs are offered at 8 Schools; over 300 lunches are served daily. COVID Food Distribution: https://www.sd61.bc.ca/news-events/news/title/greater-victoria-school-district-provides-thousands-of-meals-weekly-for-families-amid-covid-19-pandemic/
Peninsula	SD63	https://www.sd63.bc.ca/news/2020-04/food-provision-program-saanich	Any family can request additional support by contacting their child's school principal, Parent Advisory Council or Confederation of Parents' Advisory Councils

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

National	Breakfast Club of Canada	https://www.breakfastclubcanada.org/	Provides funding, kitchen equipment, training, tools, and food donations to schools providing daily breakfast programs. Schools must meet standards (program is available daily for all students in the school, promotes healthy eating and positive role modeling, is food safe, financially accountable, culturally appropriate, accommodates allergies, and offers adequate time to eat). In 2016 In BC, the program reached 6,000 children in 132 schools. In 2016 there was a waiting list for program support of 132 schools. Only 2% of funding from government grants.
National	Presidents Choice Children's Charity School Nutrition Grant	https://www.pcchildrenscharity.ca/grants-for-school-nutrition/	In 2016, Breakfast for Learning programs fed 12,251 BC children at 205 schools. PC Children's Charity offers two grant streams. School Nutrition Grants are intended to supplement funding of existing programs and can only be used to purchase food and consumable supplies. To be eligible, the applicant program must be available at least 3 days per week, be universal and non-stigmatizing, meals must contain 3 of 4 food groups, and have diverse funding sources (PC Children's Charity, nd). Community Fund grants are available to NGOs operating nutrition programs to children outside of school hours, including education initiatives (PC Children's Charity, nd-b).
Provincial	BC School Fruit and Vegetable Nutritional Program	https://www.bcaite.ca/bc-school-fruit-vegetable-nutritional-program	The BC School Fruit and Vegetable Nutritional Program (BCSFVNP) is a province-wide program that delivers fruit and vegetable snacks to participating schools 12 times per school year. In addition, every grade K-5 student receives a small cup of milk 12 times per year. The mandate of the program is to increase children's acceptability and exposure to fruits and vegetables, increase their availability in schools, increase awareness of local varieties and safe handling practices, and build relationships and capacity in the local community. The program reaches almost every BC student: 549,000 children at 1,464 schools (BCSFVNP, 2017). The BCSFVNP is funded by the BC Ministry of Agriculture and administered through the non-profit BC Agriculture in the Classroom Foundation. The program is provided at no cost to schools, but is reliant on volunteers, with over 1,241 volunteers assisting in the 2015/2016 school year (BCSFVNP, 2017). The BCSFVNP is funded by the BC Ministry of Agriculture and administered through the non-profit BC Agriculture in the Classroom Foundation. The program is provided at no cost to schools, but is reliant on volunteers, with over 1,241 volunteers assisting in the 2015/2016 school year (BCSFVNP, 2017).

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

Stratford Ontario	Screaming Avocados	http://screamingavocado.blogspot.com/p/farm-and-garden.html	The Screaming Avocado offers healthy and delicious daily lunches to the student and staff of Stratford Northwestern Secondary School in Stratford. Our goal is simple. Connect youth to good, clean and fair local food and develop their ability to prepare healthy meals from scratch. Their assignments are to bring the recipes home and to prepare them for their families. To prepare healthy meals and enlighten their parents, grandparents and in the future their kids to fresh yummy food. They are the cross generational tool of change. Canada. Our students using locally sourced ingredients from farmers, producers and our own Seeds of Change Garden and Mud To Mouth Farm Project prepare the meals. The Screaming Avocado feeds up to 300 patrons every lunch hour from a black board menu which offers daily gourmet specials ranging from the more commonplace pasta, sandwiches, and pizzas to the more risky rabbit braised in white wine with olives, confit of duck, Moroccan lamb couscous, sushi, calamari sandwiches to name a few. Our goal is simple. Connect youth to good, clean and fair local food and develop their ability to prepare healthy meals from scratch. Their assignments are to bring the recipes home and to prepare them for their families. To prepare healthy meals and enlighten their parents, grandparents and in the future their kids to fresh yummy food. They are the cross generational tool of change. The Screaming Avocado is an extension of our thriving, innovative high school culinary arts program that has grown to include over 200 students per year; a large kitchen classroom; 3000 square feet of organic garden; an organic greenhouse; a six acre school farm initiative; a culinary club with national and international experiences; outreach programs to elementary students and support for our culinary club dinners from world renowned chefs including: see website about.
Ontario	Fresh from the Farm	https://www.freshfromfarm.ca/About.aspx	A school fundraiser that supports distribution of Ontario produce, with portion of sales going to school as fundraiser. Also support food literacy in schools.
Maskwacis, Alberta	Nanâtohk Mîciwin - Universal School Foods Strategy	https://www.maskwacised.ca/branches/Isservices/usfs/	Provides healthy meals, snacks and beverages for all 11 MESC schools. Along with providing comprehensive food education, Nanâtohk Mîciwin includes students in growing and preparing meals. CBC article: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/universal-food-program-maskwacis-school-student-erminekin-1.4880982
Northwest Ontario	Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program	https://www.nwhu.on.ca/ourservices/HealthyLiving/Pages/Northern-Fruit-and-Vegetable-Program-(NFVP).aspx	The Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program (NFVP) is a free, school-based program that gives out two servings of fresh fruit or vegetables to every elementary school student per week. The program runs for 20 weeks from January to June and focuses on giving out Ontario-grown produce.
Southwest Ontario	Ontario Student Nutrition Program	https://osnp.ca/	The Ontario Student Nutrition Program – Southwest Region (OSNP-SW) administers funding and provides program support to 480+ schools across Southwestern Ontario. OSNP-SW is a program housed within the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON), Windsor-Essex site. VON is 1 of 14 Lead Agencies part of the provincial body Student Nutrition Ontario (SNO) who administer provincial grant funds to support the development and implementation of healthy breakfasts, snack and at times, lunch programs across the province.

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

Newfound-land	School Lunch Associaiton	https://schoollunch.ca/	The School Lunch Association is a registered charity whose mission is to operate a non stigmatizing program that provides a hot, nutritious lunch for school children, regardless of a families' financial situation. The program serves over 6,300 meals each day, in 36 schools across Newfoundland.
Haida Gwaii	Local Foods to School	https://vimeo.com/164774819	Diverse community stakeholders gathered in Learning Circles to talk about integrating local food into schools. This brought together indigenous leaders/elders, teachers, administrators, farmers, dietitians, etc - more than 70 people over 4 learning circles hosted in 2014-2016. Learning circles identified key issues and supported creative problem solving to meet goals of integrating local foods into schools. Established a connection with school district courier service to help distribute foods to schools. Created local food pantries to help source, store and distribute foods (as well as create food safety protocols for food handling - including wild game). Also supported development of food literacy workshops and trainings. More recent work includes working to get better food into hospitals, and transitioning the work to Indigenous leadership.
Haida Gwaii and 3 other regions	Louise McEachern's PhD research into Haida Gwaii Learning Circles	https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/handle/10012/16839/McEachern_Louise.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y	Learning Circles: Local Health Food to School (LC:LHF2S) is a participatory initiative to build capacity within First Nation school communities to improve access to healthy, local and traditional foods. Based on an exemplar project in Haida Gwaii (HG), BC, LC:LHF2S Facilitators in HG, Hazelton/Upper Skeena, BC, Ministikwan, SK and Black River, MB worked with local stakeholders to plan, implement and document food-related activities. 'Learning Circles: Local Healthy Food to School' (LC:LHF2S) was an innovative community engagement practice that worked at individual and community levels with a collective aim to promote partnerships between community members with a common interest in food. In each of four participating communities, a Learning Circle Evaluation Facilitator(LCEF) was employed to initiate community meetings in which matters relating to local, healthy and traditional foods were discussed. The LCEF worked with diverse stakeholders to plan and implement a range of activities aimed at enhancing access to local, healthy and traditional foods in school communities. The model could be adapted according to the wishes of the community and was therefore able to accommodate diversity in context.
Victoria/Saanich	Criagflower Elementary	personal communication	Food has become a central pillar supporting community dialogue and connection in this school. They provide breakfast and lunch programs, as well as backpack buddies and food distribution in partnership with several different community organizations. (Food Share Network, Cobbs Bakery, Rotary Club, Root Cellar).
Victoria/Saanich	Seed the City	https://lifecyclesproject.ca/our-projects/growing-schools/seed-the-city/	Seed the City is a program for high school students where they can gain work experience in gardening and farming, earn credits towards graduation, and become part of the local food movement in their city. During this 8-week summer program, students build community and transferable skills through growing and selling food that is produced on school grounds, and participating in field trips and workshops at local farms. Through this program, students in the Greater Victoria School District are eligible to receive high school course credits.
Westshore	Royal Bay Secondary	personal communication	Large commercial kitchen with walk in refridgerator and freezer. Culinary program serves 70-75 hot lunches plus another 30 wraps, 10-15 salads and another 5-10 vegetarian. So about 125-130 meals at lunch and another 30-50 breakfasts at the break. 4 days per week.

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

Sooke	EMCS	personal communication	Commercial kitchen without walk in refrigerations. Culinary program prepares break and lunch food service Monday-Tuesday. 34 out of 40 weeks of the year. Baked good and coffee. Salad bar which had been increasing in popularity maybe doing 100 salads per week and then hot main, breakfast, and soups: ~30-40 portions of each. Serving ~100-150 ppl per day.
Victoria/Saanich	Reynolds	personal communication	Pre Covid salad bar served 3 big salad features at \$4/plate. Ran for 8 weeks in Fall and another 8 weeks in the spring. Served 100-120 ppl at each instance. Now doing a pre-paid food box for 12 staff and 12 families on pilot basis.
Victoria/Saanich	Vic High	personal communication	Very little food service provided in school. Mason Street farm works with Food Studies classes a few times through the year, and aims to attract a few interested students to get more involved. The Food Studies programs grows some of their own food in a garden adjacent to Mason Street, and has access to the farm product.
Victoria/Saanich	Colquitz	personal communication	Laura-Lyn ran a large salad bar program, that was put together by her sustainable resource class. Served 120 students every other week for several years. It was a herculean effort. Has shifted to making meals with her grade 8 sustainable resource class, and not doing the huge salad bar, and prefers this.
Capital Region	South Island FarmHub	personal communication	Covid disaster relief allocated \$125,000 to schools to support 50% discount on local farm product purchased through South Island FarmHub.

Recommendations

Within the findings of this study there are many suggestions for ways to move forward with supporting school food initiatives, some overt and some less so. This section aims to synthesize several key recommendations.

Broaden our Understanding of the Need for Food Service in Schools

When speaking about the need for food service in schools, it is easy to think about the important work of preventing hunger and malnutrition. Vanessa White's interviews with administrators in School District 62 point to the goal of alleviating hunger as a primary focus of much school food service. By service we explicitly mean serving food to students in school. While other school food programs are also seen as important, these programs are often not related to food service. They include school gardens, which often produce little food for consumption by students, or food literacy curriculum, which rarely if ever coincides with a school meal.

Most of the people interviewed for this study and all of the academic literature reviewed pointed to the importance of broadening our understanding of the need for food service in schools from a narrow focus on hunger alleviation to supporting care, inclusion and equity within schools. Food service in school has the capacity to support social cohesion and community wellness. The need for more inclusive food services in schools stretches far beyond just alleviating hunger, and may be viewed as a way to help address myriad complex challenges in our region's schools.

Integrating food service with school garden programs and food literacy curriculum may be one place to start. Examining policies and procedures which separate school meals from the rest of the school day may also be important. Certainly individual schools and school districts are the ones who should make decisions about how to drive this shift, but appreciating that the need for

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

healthy food service in schools stretches beyond helping the most vulnerable students to supporting the entire student population is an important shift that requires further work.

De-Emphasize Champions

School food champions have been carrying a heavy load in our region for a long time. They work well above the call of duty and have achieved some incredible results. Yet their work often hinges upon their continued, tireless commitment.

It may be important to support these champions in blending into the background, and in so doing, learning how to create a robust, multi-sector base of support to carry their work forward. If we can identify several key champions who achieved profound things and work with them to build long term institutional supports to keep their work running sustainably, we may be able to learn important lessons about how to collaborate effectively and de-emphasize the role of champions in making innovative school food programming a reality.

Broaden Participation Through an Open Learning Circle

Haida Gwaii's model of collaboration emphasizes ongoing learning and collaboration across sectors and provides an inspiring example of a process for broadening participation in our regional school food conversation. It may be important to find a culturally inclusive coordinator to support the facilitation of learning circles regionally. It may be important for this coordinator to be a neutral party entering the conversation, and someone who is able to connect with diverse cultures and perspectives, while welcoming participation and inclusion.

With a learning circle established to connect a broad group representative of school and community food actors, we may begin to develop a more empathic approach to working alongside each other (and together). With such a base of trust and mutual appreciation established, next steps highlighted by this study include:

5. Create a clear values statement for school food services. Move from the elements of school food programming to highlight the core values that we feel school food programs should uphold.
6. Collaborate to efficiently pool and share resources. Support more effective logistics and resource sharing across the many stakeholders interested in supporting school food work.
7. Share and discuss information. Create conversations about what is happening within the region and connect these with work happening at the provincial and national scale.
8. Support pilot program development. Work with key champions to support and learn from pilot programs in our region.

Conclusion

This final section briefly describes a key limitation of this study and discusses next steps for translating and sharing its contents.

As has been mentioned, this study relied heavily upon input from the so-called "champions" of school food programming in our region. Perspectives from these people are valuable, but are not nearly representative of the diversity of actors interested in this topic. Important voices are not

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

included in this work. Absent voices include those of: Indigenous community members, youth, parents and teachers from diverse backgrounds, among others. We hope that this report will provide a foundation for further discussion and collaboration in our region, and be viewed not as a prescription of what to do but rather an invitation for further discussion and collaborative action.

In order to support this collaborative process, we hope to translate the content of this report into presentations and short documents that can be shared with interested groups. The process of translating and presenting this information to various stakeholders will undoubtedly generate further insights and support collaborative action to build a healthy, resilient food future for our region's children and youth.

References

- Black, J., Elliott, S., Heckelman, A., & Mazac, R. (2020). *SD40 school nourishment program 2018-2019 report: Insights about school lunch experience from three schools with pre-existing lunch programs during the 2019 transition to the Fuel Up! School nourishment program in New Westminster*. Retrieved from the University of British Columbia's website: <https://ifs-jblack.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2020/10/BC-School-Lunch-Program-Full-Report-June-2020.pdf>
- British Columbia Teachers Federation. (2015). *Hungry students in BC public schools and the adequacy of school meal programs to support them*. Retrieved from the BCTF website: <https://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/SocialJustice/Issues/Poverty/Research/BCTF%20Poverty%20and%20Education%20survey--Chapter%203.pdf>
- British Columbia Teachers Federation. (2020). *Planting the seeds: The role of teachers and the union in food security in BC*. Retrieved from the BCTF website: <https://bctf.ca/publications/ResearchReports.aspx?id=58945>
- Everitt, T., Engler-Stringer, R., & Martin, R. (2020). Determining promising practices for Canadian school food programs: A scoping review. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*. DOI: 10.1080/19320248.2020.1823925
- Farm to Cafeteria Canada. (2021). *Farm to School Salad Bars*. [website post]. <http://www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca/our-work/farm-to-school-canada/farm-to-school-salad-bars/>
- Gambling, S. (2020). [Letter to select standing committee on finance and government services regarding 2021 BC government budget priorities]. Retrieved from the Coalition for Healthy School Food website: https://2edb03c8-6d8c-411f-88a8-2708d30ad344.filesusr.com/ugd/e7a651_32c7e5c8f3714eb8bc4c7a767cd6f59c.pdf
- Greater Victoria School District. (n.d.) *CommunityLINK* [website post]. <https://www.sd61.bc.ca/programs/student-services/communitylink/>
- Hammond, S. (2019) Local foods to school and pantry program: Learning and growing. *Haida Gwaii Trader*. Retrieved from: https://haidagwaiitrader.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=351:local-foods-to-school-and-pantry-program-learning-and-growing&catid=45:articles&Itemid=121
- Logan, C. (2021). Why bringing traditional food into Haida Gwaii hospitals and schools matters. *Toronto Star*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2021/02/19/why-bringing-traditional-food-into-haida-gwaii-hospitals-and-schools-matters.html>
- McCreary Centre Society. (2018). *Balance and connection on southern Vancouver Island: The health and well-being of our youth*. Retrieved from the McCreary Centre Society website: https://www.mcs.bc.ca/pdf/balance_and_connection_southvancouverisland.pdf

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

McEachern, L. (2021). *An exploration of context, food and diet among Indigenous youth across Canada* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada.

Oostindjer, M., Aschemann-Witzel, J., Wang, Q., Skuland, S.E., Egelanddal, B., Amdam, G.V., ... Van Kleef, E. (2017). Are school meals a viable and sustainable tool to improve the healthiness and sustainability of children's diet and food consumption? A cross-national comparative perspective. *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition*, 57(18), 3942-3958. DOI: 10.1080/10408398.2016.1197180

Provincial Health Services Authority. (2016). *Priority health equity indicators for British Columbia: Household food insecurity indicator report*. Retrieved from the BCCDC website: http://www.bccdc.ca/pop-public-health/Documents/Household%20food%20insecurity%20in%20BC_full%20report.pdf

The Coalition for Healthy School Food. (2018). *The Research*. [website post]. <https://www.healthyschoolfood.ca/the-evidence>

Tugault-Lafelur, C., Barr, S, & Black, J. (2019). Examining differences in school hour and school day dietary quality among Canadian children between 2004 and 2015. *Public Health Nutrition*. 22(16), 3051-3062. DOI: 10.1017/S1368980019000788

Appendix A - Provincial Programs and Policies

BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food (BC-CHSF)

The BC-CHSF is the first provincial chapter of the national Coalition for Healthy School Food, a group of organizations seeking federal investment in a Universal Healthy School Food Program to support the health, well-being and education of all Canadian children.

In BC, 75% of school districts report having a school meal program in at least one school. These programs are run at a classroom, school or school district scale and largely rely on parents and other members of the school community to develop and fund. This patchwork of programming does not meet the needs of all students. The BC-CHSF is advocating for the development of national standards, as well as significant investment from federal, provincial and municipal governments and collaboration between stakeholder groups to create a universal program for all children and youth.

The BC chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food is bringing together stakeholders from diverse regions and sectors across BC to engage in dialogue, share resources, and collaborate on collective advocacy, research and pilot projects. Building on existing programs across the country, the BC-CHSF's vision is for all schools to serve a healthy meal or snack at little or no cost to families. These programs should include food education and serve culturally appropriate, local, sustainable food to the fullest extent possible, in accordance with the Coalition's [guiding principles](#). The BC Chapter provides a united voice for those on the ground, to advocate and work collectively towards the development, expansion and enrichment of school food programs that meet the diverse needs of BC's school communities. For more information about the group's goals and structure, see their [terms of reference](#).

In June of 2020 the BC-CHSF was invited to make a written submission for the 2021 BC budget consultations, after positive feedback from meetings with the three political parties represented in the BC legislature. They write “the BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food is calling upon the Government of British Columbia to commit to a universal, cost-shared healthy school food program for all K-12 students, based on a shared belief that all children and youth in BC should have daily access to healthy food at school. We recommend that the Government of BC invest in the first steps towards a universal, cost-shared, healthy school food program via 1) six new school food pilot projects, 2) a dedicated provincial School Food Fund for existing programs, and 3) the assembly of a multi-stakeholder provincial school food task force. This investment would advance multiple provincial priorities including promoting the health, well-being and education of BC children, strengthening and stimulating local agriculture and food sectors, and building a low carbon economy. The investment would also significantly reduce the \$3.3 billion in costs of the treatment and productivity losses due to nutrition related conditions in BC, including excess weight and low fruit and vegetable consumption (BCCDC, 2018).” Click here to read [the full written submission](#).

Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools

The Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools define the nutrition standard that schools are required to use to determine what food and beverages can be sold to students. This

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

document contains information, tools and fact sheets to support implementation of the Guidelines across the school setting.

Page 62 has recommendations for: students, parents, teachers, administrators and food service providers on how to support implementation of guidelines:

All members of the school community need to work together to build a healthy school that supports healthy eating. A healthy school environment includes healthy eating. Students can provide great ideas that can be included in the planning process. Involve students in helping to decide which policies, actions and food and beverage options are best for their school. Students, teachers, parents, administrators and food service providers can promote and model healthy eating behaviours at school, during after school activities and at home. Everyone can take action to promote healthy eating and implement the Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in B.C. Schools.

Here are some examples of what these groups can do:

Students

- *Start a student advisory group. Advocate for healthy food and beverage choices in the cafeteria, vending machines, school stores and at school events.*
- *Voice your opinion. Participate in events such as taste testing of potential cafeteria recipes for menu planning and filling out surveys about what healthy food should be available in the schools and at events.*
- *Raise awareness in your school about the impacts of marketing unhealthy food and beverages to students.*
- *For more information about how to take action and apply the Guidelines, check out these resources:*
 - ***Boosting the Sales of Nutritious Food in Schools***
 - ***Planning Healthy Cafeteria Menus***

Parents

- *Get involved. Join a committee to support a healthy school nutrition policy and the implementation of the Guidelines in all school food venues.*
- *Assess your school. See where students may be exposed to marketing of unhealthy food or beverages. Consider ways your school may restrict the influences of marketing.*
- *Use the **Checklist** when preparing freshly made food to be sold at school events such as bake sales. You can also use pre-scored recipes from **Bake Better Bites** and **Tips and Recipes for Quantity Cooking**.*
- *Involve students in food preparation for school events and talk to them about the four food groups from **Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide**.*
- *For information on how to take action in implementing the Guidelines, see:*
 - ***Selling Food and Beverages at School Sporting Events***
 - ***Making Bake Sales Delicious and Nutritious***

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

Teachers

- *Choose nutrition education strategies that are hands-on. Encourage students to work with food service staff and food and beverage vendors on marketing healthier food as part of school projects.*
- *Use the Guidelines in class projects. For example, students can apply their math, writing and business skills by evaluating and reporting on food and beverage items' taste, price, appeal and compliance with the **Nutrient Criteria and Checklist**.*
- *Use a **Comprehensive School Health** approach to find opportunities for healthy eating across the whole school*
- *Teach students about healthy eating principles and growing, preparing and composting food.*
- *Teach students about local food systems through **Farm to School** programs. Many resources are already available to guide program start-up.*
- *Encourage parents to refer to the Guidelines to support healthier choices when they are participating in school events where food and beverages are sold such as sporting events, bake sales and other school fundraising events.*
- *Arrange for a nutrition workshop that incorporates the Guidelines as part of professional development activities, such as the one offered through **Action Schools! BC**.*
- *Engage a group of students to start a committee for healthy eating action in the school.*
- *Advocate for the inclusion of healthy eating in school goals and policies.*
- *Launch or participate in a **Healthy Schools Network** inquiry process.*

School Administrators

- *Form a committee to develop and monitor healthy school policies. Include at least one representative from each of the following groups: school administration, parents, students, teachers, food service staff and school support staff.*
- *Partner with the school board and district to promote the implementation of the Guidelines by working with food and beverage vendors in your district.*
- *Support school-wide nutrition education.*
- *Consider **building on the Guidelines** to include other policies such restricting the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages in your school.*
- *Encourage and work with teachers to integrate nutrition education materials and the Guidelines throughout the curriculum and in student school projects and presentations. Promote and support the use of available teaching tools. Provide teachers with the time and resources to learn and apply these tools in the classroom.*
- *Integrate healthy eating into school goals or policies.*
- *Participate in the **B.C. School Fruit and Vegetable Nutritional Program**, begin a **Farm to School** program and register with **Action Schools! BC**.*
- *Promote the **Healthy Schools Network** inquiry process to school staff.*
- *Designate half of a Pro-D day to school wide planning and discussion about supporting healthy eating.*

Food Service Providers:

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

- *Provide a variety of healthy food that incorporates the four food groups from **Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide**. Make sure to reflect student preferences and cultural backgrounds.*
- *Score food and beverages using the Guidelines. For freshly made food, use the **Checklist** to score recipes and use the **Nutrient Criteria** to score prepackaged food.*
- *Use recipes from **Bake Better Bites** and **Tips and Recipes for Quantity Cooking** to provide healthy menu options.*
- *Provide appropriate serving sizes and avoid “super sizing.”*
- *Involve students and teachers in developing marketing techniques for new menu items.*
- *Work with students and parents to select and evaluate menus. Use strategies such as taste testing and client satisfaction surveys.*

All bolded resources above are available as appendices or hyperlinks in the [Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools](#).

Healthy Families BC

The Healthy Families BC [website](#) encourages families to work together to create healthier lives, schools, communities and workplaces for all British Columbians. The website provides practical tips on health and learning, healthy eating and healthy lifestyle choices and is part of the Province's health promotion plan to encourage British Columbians to make healthy choices. Healthy Families BC aims to help British Columbians to better manage their own health and reduce chronic disease by focusing on four key areas: healthy eating, healthy lifestyles, resources for parents, and fostering healthy communities.

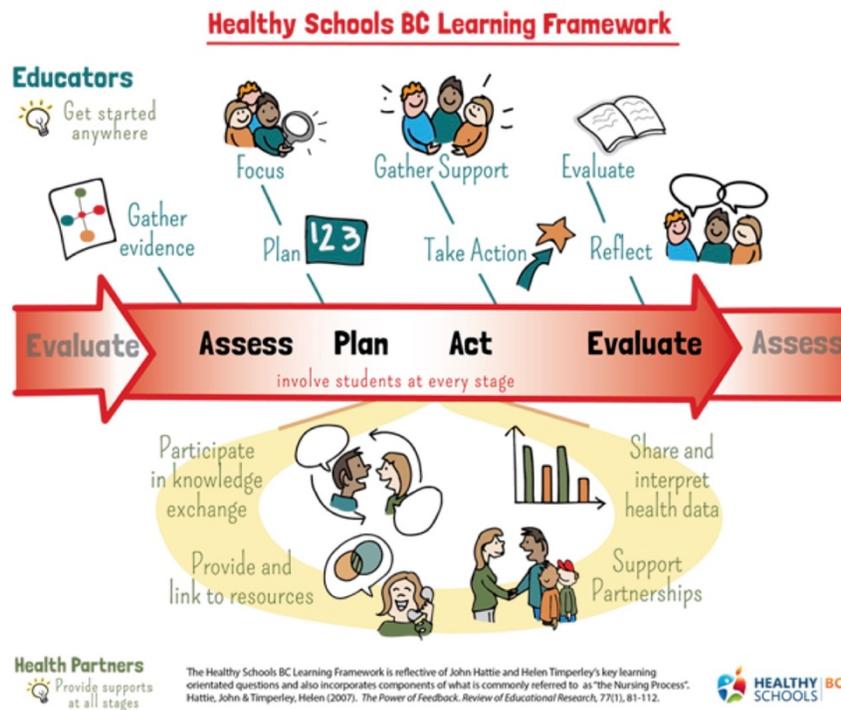
Healthy Schools BC

[Healthy Schools BC](#) involves a partnership between the ministries of Health and Education, DASH BC, health authorities, education partners, and other key stakeholders. Their website provides a collection of healthy schools information and resources to help support the health and learning of students, including:

- [Healthy Living Performance Standards](#) to support evaluation of K-12 learners on key healthy living outcomes.
- The [Healthy Schools BC Action Guides](#) share evidence-based practices and promising innovations that are showing results in creating healthy schools in BC, structured around the comprehensive school health framework. The guides are organized into four topic areas, click on each of the topics below to view the corresponding action guide.
 - [School Connectedness](#)
 - [Healthy Eating](#)
 - [Physical Activity](#)
 - [Injury Prevention](#)
- The Healthy Schools BC Learning Framework (pictured below) outlines the shared involvement of educators and health partners in creating healthy schools, and engaging students in their health and learning. For educators, the Learning Framework is reflective of an inquiry approach as it walks through the Healthy Schools Process. For health

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

partners, the Framework showcases the types of supports that can be provided to aid schools and students in addressing healthy living topics.



Healthy Eating at School

[Healthy Eating at School](#) is designed to inspire and enable school communities in BC to take action on school nutrition policy and practices. It provides connection to resources on issues such as healthy fundraising, the school environment, nutrition education, food at school, community partners and school nutrition policy. The website is presented by the BC Dairy Foundation, the Ministry of Health and Knowledge Network.

Traditional Foods and Indigenous Recipes in BC's Public Institutions

“This report summarizes a qualitative study (2020) of the barriers and facilitators to serving traditional foods and Indigenous recipes in public institutions in British Columbia, with a focus on health care and post-secondary institutions. The study explored the following:

- Applicable B.C., federal, or other legislation and regulations that prohibit or support the use of both non-market (donated) and market (purchased) traditional foods;
- Current programs in B.C. public institutions that offer traditional foods or Indigenous recipes, focusing on health care facilities and post-secondary institutions and extending, if possible, to K-12 schools and correctional facilities and other public facilities;
- Limited consultation to identify current practices, including discussions with Indigenous people and Knowledge Keepers in B.C. working to preserve or increase access to traditional foods and staff from health authorities (including the First Nations Health

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

Authority [FNHA]) and post-secondary institutions that oversee food procurement and menu planning; and

- A jurisdictional scan on traditional food programs that have been implemented in Canada, documenting their success and challenges.”

Appendix B - Federal Programs and Policies

Canada's Food Guide

Recently revised to be more inclusive and promote food habits and food environments as important issues to consider, [Canada's Food Guide](#) is a part of Health Canada's Healthy Eating Strategy. Updates to Canada's Food Guide include recommendations on eating together, paying attention to your food habits, and discouraging eating too many processed foods.

Health Canada's Healthy Eating Strategy

[Health Canada's Healthy Eating Strategy](#) aims to improve the food environment in Canada to make it easier for Canadians to make the healthier choice. Their goals are:

- improving healthy eating information
- improving nutrition quality of foods
- protecting vulnerable populations
- supporting increased access to and availability of nutritious foods

A primary focus of Canada's Healthy Eating Strategy is food labeling, with work ongoing to implement front of package labels for sugar, saturated fats and sodium, to support a reduction in Canadian's consumption of these unhealthy products.

Appendix C – Study Design

School Food Shift Study

This study will explore the assets and opportunities present in the existing systems and players serving school meals in the Capital Region, in order to help advise the future development of a universal school meal program that is responsive to our regional contexts and values.

We seek to understand:

1. What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats exist in the current school food landscape?
2. What knowledge about this existing landscape might support the development of a regional approach to developing a universal school meal program in the Capital Region?
3. How the school districts managed to prioritize food during the Covid pandemic and how they reached out to (and collaborated with) the community to support that? Can this be replicated and/or scaled up?

Context

This study begins one year into the global COVID pandemic (March, 2021). This pandemic has highlighted the key role that schools play in supporting food insecure children and youth in our region. We hope that by examining the programs and logistics that have supported school meal programs, we can support further systemic changes in the ways students eat and learn about food at school. Healthy food environments in schools are supportive of student health, wellbeing and learning and contribute positively to local community and economic development.

Methodology

We will begin by performing a scan of school meal programs in BC and across Canada, seeking information and insight into promising practices and innovative approaches to developing school meal programs. Key stakeholders from these programs and researchers with insight into school meal programs will be interviewed to gain further understanding.

Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders will then begin to support school food programs in the Capital Region. These will be conducted to probe the logistics, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the school meal program(s) overseen by each stakeholder. Key stakeholders will be selected by the School Food Shift coalition and in discussion with the stakeholders themselves (who may identify other stakeholders to interview), in a method of snowball sampling. Our study lead will take detailed notes during each interview, and archive a voice recording of the full interview for later reference as needed. In order to ensure informed consent, all interviewees will be asked to sign an interview consent, which will detail how the information they provide will be stored and shared.

Key Stakeholders:

- Coalition for Healthy School Food lead (Samantha Gambling)
- Research leaders
- Leaders of promising practices from across Canada

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

- South Island Farm Hub
- Farm Bucks school recipients
 - Teachers
 - Chefs
 - School Administrators
 - School Board Leadership
- Local Farmers and Food Producers supplying schools
- Existing school meal program leads and administrative supporters (School District staff and supporters)
- School Food Producers (ie. Seed the City, Mason Street City Farm)

In addition to gathering data through semi-structured interviews, we will compile information about school meal program delivery, including (but not limited to) information about:

- Cost and sources of financial support
- Logistical capacity and systems (including infrastructure assets and challenges within schools)
- Administrative overhead and systems
- Type and quantity of food served
- Numbers of students and others served
- Demographic information about students and others served
- Integration with student learning and school curriculum and pedagogy
- Outcomes related to physical health, mental health and learning
- Evaluations of large school food interventions in BC

We will also be supporting a survey of all school actors participating in the Farm Bucks program.

All data will be gathered and analyzed by our study lead, who will provide an overview summary of themes from the data and propose a layout for structuring a final paper on this report. Final layout will be advised by stakeholder interest, with the goal of presenting information in as useful a way as possible to support the development of pilot school meal programs in the region. This summary and layout will be discussed, amended and agreed by the Good Food Shift coalition, and the study lead will then compile a final report on the study's findings.

Projected Timeline

March: Feedback on study design and key stakeholders gathered from School Food Shift Coalition.

March-April: Scan meal programs across Canada and perform interviews with program and thought leaders in BC and from leading programs across country.

April-May: Perform stakeholder interviews, gather school meal program data, distribute survey to Farm Bucks program participants.

May: Compile preliminary report on school meal program scan and data gathered to date for review by School Food Shift Coalition. Present ideas for final report structure and gather input from Coalition.

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

June: Complete data analysis and compile final report.

Study Foundations

The Good Food Shift coalition is comprised of community organizations and health officials with a primary focus on supporting and advocating for systemic change in the ways students eat and learn about food at school.

We are seeking a bioregional approach to the development of a universal school meal program for the Capital Region. In this effort, we are driven by three core principles:

- Health Promotion: school meal programs should promote and support the health of individuals, the health of their communities, and the health of the local and global environment.
- Food Literacy: all students in the Capital Region should understand how to prepare and eat healthy foods and understand the dynamic food systems that feed our local communities, and the world. School meal programs should be informed by the [Comprehensive School Health](#) framework.
- Universal School Meal Programs: all students should have equal access to healthy, fresh food at school, in a non-stigmatized way.

Members of the Good Food Shift Coalition are:

- Linda Geggie and Ana Mendez, Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable (CR-FAIR)
- Leah Seltzer and Joan Stonehocker, LifeCycles Society
- Marcus Lobb, Farm to School BC
- Janelle Hatch, Island Health
- Kara Udell, Food Share Network
- Patricia Reichert, Saltspring Island Farmland Trust
- Susan Tychie, Capital Region Food Hub
- Lauren Searle, South Island FarmHub
- Christine Van Poelgeest, Growing Chefs!
- Matthew Kemshaw, School District 62 Garden Coordinator

Interview Questions

Below are a sample list of questions. Questions will be individually tailored to stakeholders and advised further by school food program reviews and discussions with key stakeholders.

Can you describe the school food service supported by (you/your organization/your school)?

How is this (are these) program(s) supported (financially, logistically)?

What are your impressions of this program? How is it working?

What are its strengths and weaknesses?

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

Have opportunities been created as a result of this school meal/food program development?

What threats do you see for this school meal/food program development?

From your perspective, what is required to support the development of a universal school meal program in the region?

How has the response to the Covid pandemic effected school meal programs and services?

Is a regionally specific approach to developing a universal school meal program possible? By regionally specific I mean one that tries to source from the region and be adaptable to our local contexts.

What strengths and opportunities currently exist for the development of such a program?

What weaknesses and threats currently exist for the development of such a program?

Knowing our interest in supporting the development of a regional approach to developing a universal school meal program in the Capital Region, is there anything else you feel is important to discuss?

Appendix D – Interview Consent Form

Project Title: School Food Shift Study

Funded by: *Victoria Community Food Hubs Society (with support from the Vancouver Foundation)*

Researcher: Matthew Kemshaw

- Contact: matthewkemshaw@gmail.com / (250) 661-8282

Collaborators: Members of the Good Food Shift Coalition

- Linda Geggie and Ana Mendez, CR-FAIR
- Leah Seltzer and Joan Stonehocker, LifeCycles
- Marcus Lobb, Farm to School BC
- Janelle Hatch, Island Health
- Kara Udell, Food Share Network
- Patricia Reichert, Saltspring Island Foodlands Trust
- Susan Tychie, South Island FarmHub
- Lauren Searle, South Island FarmHub
- Christine Van Poelgeest, Growing Chefs!

Purpose and Objective of the Research:

This study will explore the assets and opportunities present in the existing systems and players serving school meals in the Capital Region, to help advise the future development of a universal school meal program that is responsive to our regional contexts and values.

We seek to understand:

1. What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats exist in the current school food landscape?
2. What knowledge about this existing landscape might support the development of a regional approach to developing a universal school meal program in the Capital Region?
3. How the school districts managed to prioritize food during the Covid pandemic and how they reached out to the community to support that? Can this be replicated and/or scaled up?

We will be conducting a survey, interviews and collecting data about school food programs in the Capital Region. A report will be compiled detailing key insights learned through the research process, along with information about promising school meal programs across Canada. This report will be made publicly available, and also synthesized into more digestible communications for a wider audience.

Participation:

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

- You have been requested to participate in this research because of your valuable knowledge in this subject area, particularly as it relates to: school food programs; and/or school program administration and support; and/or food handling.
- Participation in this project is entirely voluntary.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your position [e.g. employment, class standing] or how you will be treated.

Procedures:

- Researcher will conduct interviews and survey will be distributed by South Island Farm Hub (to schools who participated in the Farm Bucks program). Interviews may be audio recorded, and researcher will take notes throughout. There may be a request for permission to take photos.
- Duration: Research will be conducted between April 1, 2021 to May 31, 2021.
- Location: Location will occur at a predetermined location.
- Inconvenience: This research will take up some of the participants' time. This time should not exceed over 2 hrs per participant for interviews.

Benefits:

- Participants: will be able to share their valuable input regarding the development of a universal school meal program in this region.
- Society: this research will further the potential for developing a universal school meal program that is responsive to our regional contexts and values.

Risks:

- There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research

Researcher's Relationship with Participants:

- The researcher may have a relationship to you as a friend/friend, or employee/supervisor.
- To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, it must be explicitly understood participation is absolutely voluntary and will have no bearing whatsoever on your relationship with the researcher.

Withdrawal of Participation:

- You may withdraw at any time without explanation or consequence.
- Should you withdraw, your data will be destroyed and withdrawn from the study.

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

- If you, the participant, are not willing to have your name and job title included in the study, you will have that option.
- You will be explicitly asked (see below) if your name and job title can be used, and if you are willing to have your input presented publicly.

Research Results May be Used/Disseminated in the Following Ways:

- A final study report will be written and made publicly available via the websites of some of the above listed collaborators.
- Study findings will be translated into more public facing documents, which will be targeted for dissemination to school districts and organizations advocating for and/or supporting school meal programs in the Capital Region. These documents may also find an audience with those supporting the Coalition for Healthy School Food across Canada.

Questions or Concerns:

- Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1.

Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Opportunities for Building Healthier School Food Environments in the Capital Region

Visually Recorded Images/Data: Participant to provide initials, *only if you consent*:

Photos may be taken of me for: Analysis _____ *Dissemination _____

Videos may be taken of me for: Analysis _____ *Dissemination _____

*Even if no names are used, you may be recognizable if visual images are shown as part of the results.

Waiving Confidentiality

I consent to be identified by name and job title in the results of the study. I consent to have my responses attributed to me by name and job title in the results. _____ (Participant to provide initials)

Future Use of Data

I consent to the use of my data in future research: _____ (Participant to provide initials)

I **do not** consent to the use of my data in future research: _____ (Participant to provide initials)

I consent to be contacted in the event my data is requested for future research: _____ (Participant to provide initials)