



**March 15, 2017**

Hon. Mitzie Hunter  
Minister of Education  
Mowat Block, 22nd Flr  
900 Bay St, Toronto ON M7A1L2

Dear Minister Hunter,

**Re: Ontario's Well-Being Strategy for Education**

I am writing on behalf of Sustain Ontario and the Ontario Edible Education Network to express our strong support for the Ontario Ministry of Education's focus on student well-being. Our submission encourages the Ministry of Education to integrate access to and education about good food and nutrition into its well-being framework given that good food in schools benefits all dimensions (cognitive, social, emotional and physical) of student well-being.

Sustain Ontario's Edible Education Network brings together groups from across the province that are getting children and youth eating, growing, cooking, celebrating, and learning about healthy, local and sustainably produced food. These groups have a wealth of experience providing food literacy education and access to good, healthy food in schools and have seen time and time again the benefits of their work on student well-being. We refer to food literacy as knowledge about local agriculture and where food comes from; how food systems impact individual health, broader societal and economic wellbeing, and the environment; and how to grow, access, prepare, and prefer healthy, safe and nutritious food.

We would first like to point to the 2-page brief entitled "*The Role of School Food Programs in Promoting Student Well-Being*" that was prepared by the Ontario Student Nutrition Program – Southwest Region (OSNP-SWR). This brief speaks to how school food programs can support the Ministry of Education's four foundations for student well-being: *Healthy Schools, Positive Mental Health, Equity and Inclusive Education, and Safe and Accepting Schools*.

The following comments respond to the questions that the Ministry has put forward as a part of its engagement process:

- 1) **What does "student well-being" mean to you / your organization – what does it look like, feel like, sound like?** Those who support school food programs have stated that well-being can be seen as:
  - **Students enjoying learning:** By applying academic subjects to real-world situations, especially those as exciting as food, children and youth can become more engaged in learning about all

subjects. Food programs such as gardens and cooking get students engaged in hands-on learning and provide real-world examples that help students ask their own questions (critical thinking and self-directed learning) and make connections between subject material, all while gaining useful and marketable skills. Teachers share that the kids who are most restless in class seem to do the best and thrive with the outdoor activity in school gardens.

- **Students having their needs met so that they can be ready to learn:** It is hard to learn when hungry. Meal programs set students up to concentrate and be ready to learn. Principals and teachers often ask for more food for their breakfast program on EQAO days – kids perform better.
- **Students feeling that they can take care of themselves and make healthy choices:** Food literacy education lets students develop the skills, mindset and habits to make healthy food choices and prepare nutritious meals for a lifetime of healthy eating. If taught in a fun and engaging way, food education can expand students’ palate and reverse the negative social stigma about healthy eating. This can support parents to introduce a wider variety of healthy foods into their children’s diets at home and in packed lunches.
- **Students feeling included, valued, and that they belong:** Kitchens and gardens often allow students who struggle academically and/or socially to feel successful and valued. When students are involved in growing, preparing and sharing food together in a non-stigmatized and equal setting where they have time to eat and enjoy each others’ company, they build relationships with volunteers, school staff, and each other. Eating and drinking together is a commonly used strategy in conflict resolution and could support anti-bullying and community building efforts. Sharing food from different cultures can also allow students to embrace cultural differences.
- **Students feeling healthy and positive about their school experience:** Providing good food and nutrition to students is a part of a strong health promotion strategy and can complement other interventions. FoodShare Toronto shares that “Our experience running school cafeterias has demonstrated that providing good food can be a vital tool in showing students they are cared for and deserve access to and input on healthy, affordable and delicious food in schools.”

2) **In your current role, how do you promote and support student well-being?** Individuals and organizations that provide school food programs have shared the following stories:

- OSNP-SWR shares that “Student nutrition programs are led by volunteers who care, nurture, and provide healthy food for students. Many times these meals and snacks are served in school environments where students feel comfortable and enjoy socializing with peers and caring adults while they enjoy a snack or breakfast. For some students this is the best way to start their day at school! Our Community Development Coordinators have many examples to share about how Student Nutrition Programs support: Inclusion, Diversity, Parent/community engagement, Increased graduation rates, Student engagement, Positive behaviours, Positive health outcomes, and Shifting the norms, beliefs and attitudes towards nutrition.”
- Roots to Harvest shares that “When we bring hands-on and immersive gardening and kitchen programs to schools, students are exposed to new experiences that aren’t traditionally taught in the classroom. These experiences give students a voice and an added sense of place in an establishment that they often feel marginalized from. We’ve seen that this lets students develop relevant skills that they can use, and demonstrate strengths that can be authentically assessed in the classroom. Students experience success in a way that they haven’t had a chance to experience

before. We've also seen students move from trying not to be noticed, to sharing stories and knowledge about their own personal food experiences. These types of programs clearly demonstrate differentiated learning involving the students who need it the most."

- FoodShare Toronto provides a wide range of good food programming in schools including: running schoolyard farms at high schools where students experience growing, harvesting, cooking, and selling good foods grown at school (the School Grown project); supporting in-class growing projects such as hydroponic tower gardens; and helping teachers to connect their curriculum with fun food literacy activities that engage students' whole self and include a focus on food justice and equity based pedagogies. The following testimonials communicate how this work benefits students:
  - *"[School Grown] made me a bit more confident in myself, like sometimes I think that I haven't done anything but then I realize, wait, I have done something, there's people that tell me I've done something and they were really proud of me and they look up to me and I look up to them and they respect me. It's made me see that I shouldn't keep putting myself down. And if they're going to have faith in me, then I should have faith in myself."* ~ Jordan, School Grown graduate
  - *"Some of the students that I referred to the program are students who had multiple struggles and had not had an easy time and just the way that [Foodshare] embraced the students and the possibilities that were open for them- amazing. There is no therapy that could do as much as that garden did for several of those kids."* ~ Natasha, Social Worker, Bendale BTI
- Green Thumbs Growing Kids has been offering food gardening, environmental and food literacy programs since 1999 in the downtown core of Toronto. They partner with schools and civic greenhouse facilities to enable and empower children, youth and families to learn about and grow healthy food in an environmentally sustainable manner. Teachers who engage their students in GTGK's programs have shared the following stories: "Several times I have noticed non vegetable eaters starting to love vegetables and get excited at eating them out of the garden by the end of the programme." "Students have more energy and develop a love for healthy food." "Students become more familiar with healthy foods and appreciate them more." "Good food helps students have a successful day and allows them more control over their moods."
- Real Food for Real Kids (RFRK) transforms fresh local ingredients from over 40 Ontario farms into delicious & nutritious meals and snacks for over 15,000 kids/students in childcare centres, elementary schools and camps daily. RFRK shares the following testimonials:
  - *"As educators we know the importance of well-fed students, and that a healthy lunch is the right fuel for students to better perform. It raises their level of overall well-being and their ability to concentrate better. Real food makes happier, healthier students."* Janet, Principal at Harrison
  - *"The hot nutritious lunches RFRK provides to our students has had a great impact on our student wellbeing. A nutrients rich Lunch enables students to be better learners, and concentrate for longer periods of times. "* Derek, Principal at Kingsway College School
  - *"Not only is the food amazing, but the way that these meals brought all of us together every day, sharing stories and getting to know each other was the absolute best part! "* Shauna Kochen, Director Black Creek Farm, Everdale
- Ontario EcoSchools provides a certification framework that helps students and staff enhance environmental education throughout the school year. The program works with over 880,000

students in over 1,800 schools from 55 school boards and supports over 49,000 student leaders that engage on an annual basis on EcoTeams. Well-being is promoted throughout the framework. Some examples of how well-being is supported include:

- Encouraging the use of natural lighting in classrooms
- Supporting the improvement of biodiversity and rich outdoor learning environments and the use of outdoor classrooms on a regular basis
- Building capacity in educators to feel comfortable taking their students outside for learning
- Building an EcoTeam that supports equity and inclusion for all students
- Illuminating the connection between well-being and nature connection in relation to nature-deficit disorder
- Connecting culinary programs to school ground gardens in supporting connections to healthy food choices

3) **Where might resources be better directed to promote and support student well-being in our education system more effectively?** The following are ways that the Ontario Ministry of Education might re-direct its resources:

- a) Work with other government Ministries and community partners to support linkages between food literacy and Student Nutrition Programs. Strengthen partnerships with external organizations that have the resources and mandate to support student well-being (e.g. gardening initiatives, nutrition education, and programs that provide nutritious meals and snacks).
- b) Encourage well-being interventions to connect and build on each other. This may include using food programs, such as healthy meals or cooking together, to support and better enable anti-bullying or mental health initiatives.
- c) Promote other Ministry of Education programs to schools, e.g. the Focus On Youth funding through which organizations can hire youth in the summer to gain employment skills, make a living, and earn co-op credits. This can be transformational for students who are marginalized or at risk.
- d) Provide food and nutrition training to teacher and administrators, and support partners to provide guidance for how food literacy can be taught using the Ontario curriculum as well as integrated into other aspects of the school environment.
- e) Emphasize opportunities for food education as a part of the Ministry's framework for experiential learning (e.g. hands-on gardening or cooking or marketing of food products; visits from farmers or chefs or gardeners).
- f) Build the ceremony of sharing food into the school day as is done in countries around the world. This would involve time at lunch for students to gather to eat, connect, build relationships, and develop a love of good food.
- g) Re-distribute resources so that schools can establish and teach using gardens and composters and provide food skills programs so that students graduate from high school with the skills to grow their own food and prepare healthy meals for themselves.

In closing, we would like to see the framework for student well-being recognize the interconnectedness between the cognitive, social, emotional and physical dimensions and apply a whole-school approach to

ensure that food literacy and healthy eating are firmly established within all schools and that they complement and are complemented by other well-being interventions.

Thank you again for the opportunity to engage in this discussion about student well-being in Ontario. We would be pleased to speak with you further about this issue and to share concrete examples of where schools, organizations and other stakeholders are establishing healthy food environments in schools and are seeing incredible results for student well-being.

Sincerely,



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**Sustain Ontario** is a province-wide, cross-sectoral alliance that promotes healthy food and farming. Our mission is to provide coordinated support for productive, equitable and sustainable food and farming systems that support the health and wellbeing of all people in Ontario, through collaborative action.

<http://sustainontario.com/>

The **Ontario Edible Education Network** has been established to bring together groups in Ontario that are doing great work to connect children and youth with good food. The network better enables these groups to share resources, ideas, and experience, work together on advocacy, and facilitate efforts across the province to get children and youth eating, growing, cooking, celebrating, and learning about healthy, local and sustainably produced food. <http://sustainontario.com/work/edible-education/>