



Ontario Edible Education Network
Sustain Ontario – the Alliance for Healthy Food and Farming
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November 30, 2013

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

Dear Minister Sandals,

Re: Next Phase in Ontario's Education Strategy

In response to the call for feedback regarding the Next Phase in Ontario's Education Strategy, members of Sustain Ontario (a project of Tides Canada Initiatives Society) and the Ontario Edible Education Network would first like to extend our appreciation for the opportunity to comment. In short, we would like to encourage the Ontario Ministry of Education to take a whole-school approach to healthy eating and to ensure that food literacy opportunities are firmly established within all schools.

Food literacy education engages children and youth to learn skills and develop habits that will enable them to make healthy food choices throughout their lives. Food literacy involves understanding where food comes from; the impacts of food on health, the environment and the economy; and how to grow, prepare, and prefer healthy, safe and nutritious food.

The health of our children is a growing concern. The report *No Time to Wait: A Healthy Kids Strategy*, which was submitted in 2013 by the Healthy Kids Panel to the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, raises the alarm that childhood obesity is at a crisis in Ontario. Childhood obesity negatively affects children, their families, and ultimately the province; costing about \$4.5 billion per year – \$1.6 billion directly and \$2.6 billion indirectly according to the recently released Healthy Kids Strategy.

Schools are in a unique position to impede this trend, particularly by supporting prevention-oriented strategies that foster good dietary habits. Integrating education about agriculture and food into the Ontario curriculum and teaching children and youth the valuable skills of growing, securing, and

preparing healthy foods has the potential to help them establish healthy food habits early, reducing future rates of obesity, diabetes, and other diet related diseases, while also helping them establish life-long skills. This will support healthier generations to come and, in the long-term, provide healthcare savings.

Engaging children and youth in food-focused activities such as growing, securing, or preparing food has the potential to contribute to core curriculum requirements, helping to bring education to life for children and youth and get them excited about other subjects. For instance, food can act as a catalyst for learning about subjects such as math (e.g. measuring ingredients in a recipe), science (e.g turning a liquid into a solid by making butter), social science (e.g. talking about our different food cultures), economics (e.g. by preparing food budgets) and physical education (e.g. through discussion about nutrition and what leads to physical health).

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 in a dynamic and memorable way while gaining useful and marketable skills.

Food literacy education also allows students to gain the necessary skills to make healthy food choices and increase their self-efficacy to prepare nutritious meals for themselves. Teaching food skills within the education system is important, as children are not always provided with food skills or knowledge at home.

The school system also offers the opportunity for children and youth to learn how to enjoy a diversity of healthy foods together. Taught in a fun and engaging way, food education can allow for the negative social stigma about healthy eating to be reversed, which can also support parents to introduce a wider variety of healthy foods into their children's diets both at home and in packed lunches.

In light of the benefits of taking a broad approach to this issue, we strongly encourage the Government of Ontario to put in place measures to:

1. Support the development of a provincial food literacy and student nutrition policy framework

- Within the Ministry of Education's capacity, require school boards to develop food literacy and student nutrition policies. Taking a step even further, require the development of a healthy schools policy that integrates healthy eating and food literacy with physical activity, environmental stewardship, and healthy communities (a potential model is the DC Healthy Schools Act). Such a policy will inform programs and curriculum initiatives that deepen student food literacy and nutrition knowledge, enabling children and youth to live healthier lives.
- Support the implementation of an Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy to ensure an integrated and complimentary approach to reducing hunger, supporting healthy eating, reducing chronic disease and health-related illnesses, and addressing other aspects of our food system.

2. Provide teacher and administrator training, and support infrastructure to enable food literacy to be integrated into the Ontario curriculum as well as into other aspects of the school environment

- Include evidence-based food literacy (education about nutrition, food, growing and producing food, and food skills development) as a mandatory part of the curriculum at all grade levels.
- Ensure that new teachers are taught to make curriculum links to food literacy in many different subject areas at all grade levels.
- Provide and support teacher and administrator training and professional development in the area of food literacy, including through partnerships with the many organizations that currently provide such teacher training opportunities.
- Develop a set of age-appropriate food skills / food literacy benchmarks and a common evaluation for cooking skills and culinary programs.

3. Support the establishment of gardens, composters and food skills programs in schools as complimentary experiential programs that support and reinforce in-class food literacy education

- Build all new elementary and secondary schools with food skills infrastructure, a full-service cafeteria, and a food garden.
- Provide resources and enact supportive policies to enable existing schools to build and maintain gardens, greenhouses, food skills programs, and cafeterias.
- Ensure hands-on food skills education in schools.
- Identify opportunities for resource sharing and partnerships between schools and community agencies, to support teacher education as well as student access to garden educators and rotating food skills educators.

4. Work with other government Ministries to ensure that linkages are built between food literacy, student nutrition, local sustainable food procurement, and other policy opportunities

- Support the development of local sustainable food procurement policies, programs and targets for schools.
- Work with the Ontario Student Nutrition Program to integrate food literacy education and benefit curriculum objectives.
- Help ensure that all children and youth have access to healthy and nutritious food in schools through support for the development of a universal Student Nutrition Program accessible to every child and youth every school day.

It is also critical that new policy initiatives and institutional requirements be accompanied by financial and other supports to ensure that they are, in fact, enabling of effective implementation.

In closing, members of Sustain Ontario and the Ontario Edible Education Network would be very pleased to speak further with you about this issue and to help showcase successful models where schools, organizations and other stakeholders are helping to establish healthy food environments within the school system, and are seeing incredible results.

We look forward to being involved in this and other government initiatives to bring positive changes to Ontario's education system and ensure the health of Ontario's individuals and families.

Sincerely,



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Sustain Ontario is a cross-sectoral alliance that is working to create a food system that is healthy, ecological, equitable and financially viable. Sustain Ontario works collaboratively to connect members, showcase food system innovations and champions, explore and research pressing issues in the food system, and advocate for a healthy and sustainable food system. With 430 members in the Ontario food and farming sector, Sustain Ontario's reach is province-wide.

Sustain Ontario is a project of Tides Canada Initiatives Society (TCI). TCI is a shared administrative platform that provides professional organizational support (e.g. governance, financial management, HR, and regulatory compliance) to 40 social justice and environmental projects.

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.

CC: Teresa Piruzza — Minister of Children and Youth Services

Kathleen Wynn — Premier and Minister of Agriculture and Food

Deb Matthews — Minister of Health and Long-Term Care

Jim Bradley — Minister of the Environment

Laurel Broten — Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs

David Zimmer — Minister of Aboriginal Affairs

Ted McMeekin — Minister of Community and Social Services

Brad Duguid — Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities

John Gerretsen — Attorney General

Dr. Eric Hoskins — Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Employment

Jeff Leal — Minister of Rural Affairs

Charles Sousa — Minister of Finance

Harinder Takhar — Minister of Government Services

Michael Chan — Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport