

Alberta Food Matters

Food Matters to Everyone!



Growing Food Security Alberta (GFSA) Network operating through Alberta Food Matters

Call for a Universal School Food Strategy for Alberta

Food Security in Alberta

Ensuring sufficient access to healthy, culturally appropriate food for all Albertans is a significant challenge in our province. In 2011, 172,300 households across Alberta struggled to access adequate amounts of food, in large part due to financial reasons (1). At the same time, an overabundance of unhealthy foods has contributed to public health issues such as overweight and obesity (2). For example, in 2013, approximately 55 percent of adults and almost 55,000 young people in Alberta self-reported as overweight or obese (3, 4). These issues are embedded in wider food system concerns, such as the environmental impact of large-scale industrial agriculture (5) and a decreasing number of farms and farm operators (6).

A Focus on Children and Youth

Children and youth represent an important population to focus our efforts to build food security. In March 2013, 44.1% of food bank users in Alberta were children (7). Young people are also consuming large amounts of nutrient poor foods, which are easily accessible in settings like schools and childcare facilities (8). In turn, easy access to unhealthy foods contributes to high rates of childhood overweight and obesity, which has negative implications across an individual's life span (2). Further, researchers suggest that the transition towards convenience foods has left many young people less equipped to prepare food and make informed choices about the food environment (9).

A Universal School Food Strategy for Alberta

Promoting food security in Alberta requires systemic and comprehensive approaches that consider ecological, social, education and economic components (10). Public institutions, such as schools, can play an important role in such a comprehensive approach considering the large number of young people who access these settings (10, 11).

To-date, many schools across Alberta have implemented programs and initiatives to improve school food environments. Nevertheless, these initiatives are often ad-hoc or voluntary in nature (12). As a result, the effectiveness of such programming varies and many students are not benefitting. **To address this gap, we believe it is time for the provincial government to take the lead in the development of a Universal School Food Strategy for Alberta.**

This strategy should aim to (i) make healthy, sustainable and culturally appropriate food available to all school-aged children in Alberta, (ii) provide all children with the education and skills required to grow and prepare food, as well as make healthy choices outside of school, and (iii) support the development of local food procurement policies in schools across the province.

For such a strategy to be effective, it must extend beyond the provision of food through school feeding programs to create environments that support student health and the wellbeing of our food system. Further, the strategy must emphasize universal access to ensure all children benefit and that families experiencing low-income are not stigmatized (13).

Key Components of a Universal School Food Strategy for Alberta

The GFSA Buzz recommends that a Universal School Food Strategy for Alberta include government support for:

- Education and hands-on participation in food production and preparation. More specifically, the education component should highlight the ecological, nutritional and cultural value of food, as well as the relationship between food, health and well-being. It should also explore the history of land and food systems in Canada, including knowledge from an indigenous perspective.
- School food that is healthy, prepared and produced in a sustainable manner, and available to students regardless of their means. Schools should aim to develop healthy school food environments and incorporate food produced and prepared at the school or as close as possible to the school. Schools should also meet the requirements of the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth.
- Support relationships with local producers and the development of local food procurement policies in schools across the province.

The proposed strategy is in line with a number of current government priorities. For instance, it supports the Ministry of Human Service's Together We Raise Tomorrow Campaign, which aims to improve the safety, wellbeing and development of children in Alberta. Further, it supports the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development's Explore Local initiative, which aims to increase growth opportunities within Alberta's local markets.

Benefits of a Universal School Food Strategy for Alberta

- The World Health Organization supports the implementation of school food strategies and programs as a method to create healthier food environments in schools (14). The school food environment has a significant influence on children's eating behaviors (15-17). For example, research on farm to school programs suggests that positive dietary behavior results when students are served more fruits and vegetables, particularly when the food is locally grown, fresh and supplemented by educational activities (18).
- Investing in prevention and wellness makes good economic sense. Research suggests that an investment of one dollar in health promotion can result in \$4-5 in cost saving to the healthcare system (19, 20).
- Evidence suggests that children perform better at school when they have sufficient nutritional intake. Providing children with nutritious food at school has been shown to improve cognition and scholastic achievement, increase attendance and improve student behavior (21-26). For example, a 2008 Canadian study found that, above and beyond socio-economic factors, diet quality was important to academic performance (21).

- By sourcing food from farmers that are close to home, money is more likely to stay within the community (27). It can also help to reduce the distance food travels from where it is produced to where it is consumed (28). Further, local procurement initiatives may help to provide farmers with opportunities to build community connections (18).

Incremental Approach for Achievement

The GFSA Buzz encourages the government of Alberta to adopt a stepwise approach to the development and implementation of a universal school food strategy. Potential steps include:

1. Facilitate open conversations surrounding a universal school food strategy with key stakeholders, including government officials, school representatives, healthcare workers, local farmers, families and community members.
2. Work with schools and other actors to encourage school cultures that foster healthy environments and skill-building involving students and families, such as cooking and gardening.
3. Work with schools and other actors to establish relationships between schools and local farmers, gardeners and cooks to provide learning and educational opportunities.
4. Incorporate food growing, preparation, nutrition and history as a mandatory part of the Alberta's curriculum.
5. Develop local procurement guidelines and policies for all Alberta schools.
6. Designate provincial funding to support standardized, nutritional school meals and snacks.
7. Establish the program in pilot schools. Use evidence from pilot schools to facilitate the expansion of the program across the province.

Best Practice Models

Many successful programs exist across Canada to promote food security and encourage childhood health and wellbeing. Key components of these initiatives include nutrition, food education, community building and sustainability. Examples of these initiatives include:

- ***The Farm to School Model*** (<http://www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca/>):

The Farm to School Model (F2S model) aims to increase access to local, healthy and sustainably grown foods in schools. Specific objectives of the farm to school model include minimizing the distance between farm and fork, increasing the amount of local, healthy and sustainable food consumed by students, improving student knowledge of the food system and promoting healthy food environments (29).

The F2S model has a long history in North America, with early initiatives established during the 1990s in California and Florida. Since then, the model has been implemented in schools across the United

States (30). In Canada, the F2S model operates in nine provinces. British Columbia, for example, currently operates F2S programs in over 50 schools (29).

A recent review of Farm to School Programs in the United States points to a number of benefits for students, schools, parents and farmers. Examples include increased consumption of fruits and vegetables among students and increased student knowledge about the food system (18).

Funding for F2S programs is usually derived from a combination of sources, such as school districts, health authorities, municipalities and private sponsorship (31).

- ***Little Green Thumbs*** (<http://littlegreenthumbs.org/>):

Little Green Thumbs is a Canadian program that helps to educate children about the value of their own health, the environment and their community. It seeks to accomplish this by engaging students in gardening and empowering them to grow their own food.

In Canada, the Little Green Thumbs program operates in the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Newfoundland through a number of host organizations. It can be adapted to various settings and aligns well with current curriculums (32).

Proposed Funding

In contrast to many other provinces across Canada, the Alberta government does not provide direct, province-wide funding to support school food programming. A 2007 report from the Center for Science in the Public Interest illustrates that public investment in school food programs ranged from \$23.48 per child during 2005-06 in British Columbia to a low of \$0 in Alberta, Nunavut and the North West Territories (33).

To support implementation of programs related to the Universal School Food Strategy, the GFSA Buzz proposes a cost-share model. This should include collaboration between the provincial government, individual communities, local businesses and organizations, local government and the private sector (34).

While the province is encouraged to fund a universal school food strategy through general revenues, there are a number of other creative options to consider. For example, one options is to adopt a sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) tax, which would incorporate a small fee with every purchase of an SSB (35). In a 2011 survey of decision-makers from government, schools and workplaces in Alberta, 60% of Albertan decision-makers indicated support for a tax on soft drinks and energy drinks (35, 36). The government could also explore alternative options such as a progressive nutrition tax or luxury tax on professional sporting event tickets.

Summary

Improving the school food environment represents an important step in a comprehensive approach to promote food security in our province. It is time for the government of Alberta to invest in our most important asset: children of today and tomorrow's future. GFSA encourages the Government of Alberta to take action through the development of a Universal School Food Strategy that includes support for (i) healthy meals and snacks, sourced by local producers, (ii) student involvement in the cultivation and preparation of food, (iii) education on the food system, and (iv) local procurement policies and relationships with local producers. An incremental approach that builds on existing capacity and programming across the province makes this strategy highly achievable.

If such a strategy is implemented in Alberta, our children will benefit from healthier eating habits, reduced risk of chronic disease, improved academic performance and greater awareness of the food system. Alberta, in turn, will have the advantage of healthier children and a stronger local economy.

Next Steps

The GFSA is working with the Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention on a scan of school food environments to identify school food policies and programs that already exist, as well as gaps that could be filled through a Universal School Food Strategy.

Help GFSA Buzz Take Action!

- Share your story: What's in your child's lunch box? What school food programs are in your community and how do they make a difference? Why do you want to improve school food in Alberta? We want to hear from you! Submit your stories here: <http://gfsastories.tumblr.com>.
- Join us on social media. Like our [Facebook Page](#) and follow us on [Twitter](#) for updates on our advocacy efforts.
- Show support for a Universal School Food Strategy by tweeting decision-makers in your community. Head to our website for sample tweets: <http://www.foodsecurityalberta.org/node/61>
- Become a member of the GFSA network. Find out more about what it means to be part of the Network here: <http://www.foodsecurityalberta.org/node/21>

We are aware of and support a number of research and policy initiatives that aim to build household and community food security across Canada. Examples include the First Nations Food, Nutrition and Environment Study funded by Health Canada, Action to End Poverty in Alberta's efforts to reduce poverty in the province and Food Secure Canada's call for a National Universal School Food Strategy.

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