



**SUSTAIN**

Alliance for healthy, just and sustainable food & farming  
Working across Indigenous Territories / Ontario

## School Food and Food Literacy

### Definition and Scope

This policy brief covers issues at the intersection of children and youth and food system issues. Most of the discussion relates to food programs, including meal and snack programs as well as food literacy programming, that are offered in the school setting. “School Food Policies” refer to policies that relate to any and all aspects of food in a school setting. This includes food access and methods of program delivery, development of curriculum and experiential learning opportunities, purchasing and procurement, infrastructure and equipment, facilities such as gardens, as well as marketing policies in relation to children, youth, and food.

### Recommendations include:

- Universal School Food Program
- Food Literacy Education
- Local Procurement
- School Food Infrastructure
- Restrict marketing of food and beverages to children
- School Gardens

## **About this Document:**

Sustain is a province-wide, cross-sectoral alliance of organizations that work through collaborative action towards productive, equitable and sustainable food and farming systems that support the health and wellbeing of all people in Ontario/Indigenous Territories. These policy recommendations have been developed through a participatory process between September 9, 2024 and February 7, 2025 engaging 90+ organizations, as well as academics who contributed expertise, across Ontario/Indigenous Territories.

This is not a finished product. It is being shared based on the election being called.

The process to date has included:

- A survey of food and farming organizations about policy priorities
- A policy grey literature review
- Multiple meetings among organizations in Sustain-facilitated networks
- 2 rounds of review by Sustain network organizations
- Review by academics working in respective policy areas

Sustain is sharing out this work widely, educating voters for the Provincial Election 2025, knowing there is more work to do.

## **Next steps:**

Sustain will continue to gather expertise and solutions in the months to come, building increasing participation and consensus on priority recommendations.

Importantly, Sustain will facilitate network engagement across organizations to work with all MPPs who form the next provincial government, and staff, to implement these recommendations over the next four years. Sustain recognizes and looks forward to elevating the leadership and expertise of organizations to do this policy work from within the networks.

To join this network, please email Rosie at [networks@sustainontario.com](mailto:networks@sustainontario.com)

# Universal School Food Program

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## Key Issues:

- Ontario families are struggling. More and more Canadian families struggle to access nutritious and affordable food (largely due to inflationary pressures)
- Ontario Student Nutrition Programs (SNPs) support students with nourishing food in 80% of schools across the province. SNPs must contend with record-high food costs coupled with increased participation rates, and are thus struggling to feed the children and youth who access their programs.
- Ontario currently invests \$37.6M in school food programs, providing 10¢ per student per day, while the median national/provincial/territorial contribution is nearly four times higher at 39¢/student/day.<sup>1</sup>
- Research shows that most children and youth do not receive adequate nutrition, which impacts their academic success, mental well-being, and overall growth and development, causing increased rates of costly diet-related illnesses over time.
- Improving the quality of Ontario's school food programs and expanding them to reach more children and youth will immediately take pressure off household budgets and lead to improved learning, behaviour, health and wellbeing – representing a sound economic and social policy.

## Recommendations:

We thank the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) and the government of Ontario for their leadership in negotiating an agreement to receive federal funding as part of the national school food program. Ontario will receive \$108.5M over the next three years for the Ontario Student Nutrition Program and the First Nation Student Nutrition Program. To build on this deal, we recommend that Ontario:

- **Increase Ontario's investment in Ontario Student Nutrition Program and the First Nation Student Nutrition Program** to leverage the recent \$108.5M in federal funding in order to stabilize and grow programs, reach more children and youth, take pressure off household budgets, and improve the learning, behaviour, health and wellbeing of children.
- Add more provincial funding to build on the national program, match investments from external funders, and **raise Ontario's Ontario's per capita contribution** to align with the national [provincial/territorial median investment](#) of 39¢/student/day.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario invests \$32.2 from MCCSS, including \$28.1M for the SNP and \$4.1M for the First Nations SNP, and \$5.4M from the Ministry of Health for the Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program, which feeds into Northern SNPs for 20 weeks/year. Total ON funding = \$37.6M

- **Ensure that by 2030, all children and youth in Ontario** will be able to access a nutritious and culturally relevant meal, in a non-stigmatizing manner, at school each day by committing to a universal school food program.
- **Work with the Ministry of Education to implement a review of facilities and equipment** required to support food preparation in schools, including low-cost and innovative options (e.g., portable kitchen units) for schools without full kitchens.
- **Collaborate with the Ministry of Education to support food literacy** to be present alongside the current School Nutrition Program models in schools.

Learn more on the website of the [Coalition for Healthy School Food](#).

## Existing Examples

- **Manitoba and Newfoundland and Labrador** were the first provinces to sign agreements with the federal government for the development of a national school food program. Ontario followed on November 22, 2024, and PEI signed on November 29, 2024.
- **BC, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, PEI and Manitoba** have recently made significant provincial investments in their school food programs that we encourage Ontario to follow. Learn more about these [recent investments](#)

## Food Literacy Education

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### Key Issues:

- Canadians – including children and youth attending Ontario schools – often do not have the knowledge, skills and/or opportunity to actualize their personal health and well-being in relation to food.
- Diet-related diseases, which currently add \$5.6 billion in annual healthcare costs in Ontario and disproportionately affect those who already experience health inequities.
- The severe lack of general knowledge about food and its connection to health means that citizens don't have the information they need to make healthy choices
- Student mental health challenges are extreme within schools, across all grade levels, throughout Ontario. Good nutrition can help to mitigate mental health challenges.
- Educator training and curriculum could help teachers, children, and youth understand how food can contribute to robust solutions for personal and community resilience. However, there is currently minimal food literacy education in the Ontario curriculum.

- Current food literacy curriculum is taught primarily through Health and Physical Education (i.e. food and nutrition), Science and Technology (i.e. food and food systems), and optional Family Studies credits (at Secondary Level).
- Physically engaging in hands-on food literacy opportunities can increase mental health and wellbeing for students and teachers. However, these opportunities are rare and not included in pre-service or in-service teacher training.

## Recommendations

We recommended that the Ministry of Education:

- 1) **Develop a *Strategy for Food Literacy Education in Ontario Schools*** to support Ontario curriculum changes and updates related to all aspects of food literacy.
- 2) **Support food literacy coordination staff time.** This could involve: (a) creating in-school positions to promote in-school as well as garden-based learning, (b) supporting experienced community partners who offer child and youth programming, and (c) expanding existing programs such as the Core Ed Learning Resources Fund to include food literacy coordination.
- 3) **Take a ‘whole school approach’ to weave food literacy** into the broader school environment, learning from existing approaches such as [Healthy Schools certification](#), or Alberta’s [Apple Schools](#) approach.
- 4) **Collaborate with the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS)** to integrate food literacy into the curriculum to build stronger school food programs, supported by sufficient capacity and training for success.
- 5) **Review and assess the facilities and equipment** currently existing (and required to support experiential food literacy education), including low-cost and innovative options (e.g., portable units) for schools without teaching kitchens.
- 6) **Collaborate with school boards** to support food, nutrition, and food literacy to be included in on-going teacher professional development day opportunities, including how to teach about Indigenous foodways in an appropriate way.
- 7) **Collaborate with colleges and universities** to embed food literacy in teacher education certification programs, including how to teach using culturally responsive and equity-informed pedagogies so that teaching and learning is appropriate and inclusive of diverse foodways, as well as understanding the interconnections between food systems, the environment, and climate.

- 8) **Provide funding and support for experiential learning coordinators** in school districts, as well as other coordination support, to develop further opportunities for gardens, cooking skills, and other hands-on food-related education, which will support student mental health and well-being alongside meeting other curriculum goals.
- 9) **Provide funding and support to equity-deserving groups and organizations** to support food literacy education in schools.

For further recommendations, [access Sustain Ontario's 2023 recommendations to the Ontario Ministry of Education](#) and our [Bill 216 Policy Briefing Note](#) (p. 2).

## Existing Examples of Curriculum Connections and Resources

- [Food is Science](#) website.
- [Ag in the Classroom](#): Canadian resource for agricultural curriculum and career development.
- [Teach Food First](#): Developed by the British Columbia Ministry of Health, BC teachers, and other partners to provide curriculum suggestions for teaching about food and nutrition.
- [Learning from the Land](#): *Resources and stories from K-12 schools to support engagement with Indigenous plants and pedagogy.* Created by Public Health Association of BC with support from BC Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Fisheries, Indigenous partners, and other organizations.

## Local Food Procurement

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### Key Issues:

- Consumption of fruits and vegetables is declining in youth across all socio-economic categories<sup>2</sup>.
- Fruit and vegetables are a key element of student nutrition programs across Ontario, and Ontario producers are interested in offering their fresh produce to schools, but do not know the appropriate sales pathways<sup>3</sup> to access these markets.

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<sup>2</sup> [StatsCan, 2023](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Farm to Cafeteria Canada, 2023](#)

- There is a significant potential market for increased local food sales in schools, but no regional or provincial baseline tracking of Ontario-grown purchasing to measure those increases.

## Recommendations

- 1) MCCSS should fund a consistent procurement tracking database for Student Nutrition Programs and the schools they serve, to measure baseline food purchasing data across the province, and then facilitate tracking of increases in local procurement.
- 2) Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness (OMAFRA) should collaborate with MCCSS and the Ministry of Education to develop an initial provincial local procurement target for schools with the intention to incrementally increase it.
- 3) OMAFRA should provide a designated funding amount to flow through existing SNP lead agencies specifically for purchase of Ontario fruits and vegetables.

## Existing Examples

- A [Guide](#) to Sourcing BC Food in K-12 school food programs.
- [Feed BC](#) provincial purchasing program recommends 30% local procurement within public institutions including schools.
- US Farm to School Network's offers [Local Food Purchasing Incentives](#).
- [Brazilian Legislation](#): Article 14 of Law 11,947 (2009) states that 30% of the food budget for the national school feeding program should be used to purchase food directly from family farms and local rural enterprises, with priority to resettled farmers, traditional Indigenous communities and "quilombolas".

## School Food Infrastructure

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### Key Issues:

- Budgets for school food programs are extremely limited, and have not been increased in 10 years (see policy area 1 above).
- Prepackaged foods purchased by school food coordinators are not only more expensive than whole foods, but also have less nutritional value. However, schools often do not have the kitchen or food preparation facilities needed to safely prepare whole foods from scratch.
- New schools across Ontario are being designed and built with little to no consideration for facilities for food preparation or gardens.

- Investing in school-level infrastructure would enable school food programs to provide more nutritious, fresh, and local (where possible) foods in each school (e.g., kitchens, gardens).

## Recommendations:

We recommend that the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Infrastructure collaborate to:

- **Develop a provincial school food infrastructure fund** to support kitchens, food preparation facilities, gardens and other growing capacity (such as vertical tower gardens) in existing facilities and new builds.
- **Require food infrastructure** to be included in new builds and retrofits.
- **Support community and school gardens** by incorporating garden space into schoolyard landscape design and planning, including water sources, tool storage sheds and accessible gardens (with raised beds).

## Existing Examples

- [Federal School Food Infrastructure Fund](#)

# Restrict Marketing of Food & Beverages to Children

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## Key Issues:

- Food marketing to children is most likely to feature fast foods and sugar-sweetened beverages ([Potvin Kent et al., 2023](#)).
- In 1980, the province of Quebec introduced legislation prohibiting commercial advertising to children under the age of 13, but Quebec remains the sole jurisdiction in Canada to have this type of law.

## Recommendations

- 1) We recommend the Ministry of Health and other relevant Ministries develop and introduce provincial legislation prohibiting advertising of food and beverages to children under 13 that would align with federal [Private members bill C-252](#) Child Health Protection Act currently in debate in the Senate.

## Existing Examples

- Quebec [restricts marketing to children under 13](#).



- Mexico [requiring foods of minimal processing, no caffeine, low sugar in schools](#) in March 2025. ([Full legislation text.](#))

## School Gardens

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### Key Issues:

- Children and youth mental health is an acute issue in Ontario and across Canada:
  - 62% of Ontario youth report have expressed concerns about their level of anxiety<sup>4</sup>.
  - 1 in 5 youth who felt that their mental health was “good” in 2019 no longer felt that way in 2023<sup>5</sup>.
- School gardens are known to enhance the physical and mental wellbeing of students, support healthy food choices, and provide extensions to classroom learning.
- There is high interest from schools and organizations to increase the presence and use of school gardens. However, they are difficult to maintain given the lack of systemic support and labor requirements during the summer months.

### Recommendations:

We recommend that the Ministry of Education:

- 1) **Hire Food Literacy Coordinators** to work in collaboration with OMAFA, Public Health Units, and regional Food Policy Councils to connect existing community non-profits, Master Gardener networks, and municipal program staff with schools to support school garden activity, especially in summer.
- 2) **Increase support for experiential learning coordinators** in school boards across the province, who would include gardening as a primary focus of experiential learning in schools.
- 3) **Develop garden-based learning** as a specific stream of professional development for existing in-service teachers, and add a summer intensive to respond to interest by current teachers for doing this work.
- 4) **Review and map existing school garden and school greenhouse locations** and assess resources required to support increased use of these school facilities.

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<sup>4</sup> [Ipsos Public Affairs. \(2017\) Children and Youth Mental Health](#)

<sup>5</sup> [2023 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth](#)

- 5) **Collaborate with public health inspectors** to create guidelines to support safe consumption of school-grown food within SNPs and other school food contexts

## Existing Examples

- [SEED Project – Midland Ontario](#): Year-round youth food skills development linking schools and community organizations.
- [Greater Victoria School District](#): School gardens policy.
- [School garden mentorship program in BC](#)

## References:

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