


Growing Local:

Strengthening School Food Programs with Ontario Food



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Executive summary

School food programs across Ontario present a major opportunity to bring more local food into the province's education system as it could unlock an estimated \$200 million annual market for Ontario-grown and produced foods. School food programs play an essential role in supporting student health and learning, while also representing a major opportunity to strengthen Ontario's agri-food sector.

This project sought to understand opportunities to improve local food procurement in Ontario's school food programs. It focused on Ontario's Student Nutrition Programs (SNPs) which provide over 130 million meals and snacks each year to over a million students.

For this study, "local" refers to products grown or produced in Ontario, with a particular focus on sourcing from within the surrounding regions wherever possible. The project explored opportunities to enhance local food procurement in Ontario's SNPs through:

- An environmental scan of academic and industry research on student nutrition and local food systems,
- Interviews with SNP Lead Agencies, Community Partners, distributors, and agricultural organizations in the Southwest and Central West regions, and
- A short online survey of manufacturers, distributors, and producers supplying SNPs.

Ontario's agri-food sector comprises of more than 48,000 farms producing over 200 commodities and supplies approximately 54% of the food consumed within the province. Leveraging this capacity through stronger connections between producers and school food programs presents a clear opportunity to advance both economic and community well-being across Ontario.

This project focuses on two SNP regions. These regions are the Southwest Region whose Lead Agency is the VON and the Central West Region whose Lead Agency is the YMCA of Three Rivers. These organizations coordinate program delivery and support schools in providing nutritious meals to students. These regions were selected to help focus the research and allow for a more detailed understanding of local food supply chains and the practical opportunities and challenges associated with integrating more Ontario-grown food into SNPs.








Findings and recommendations

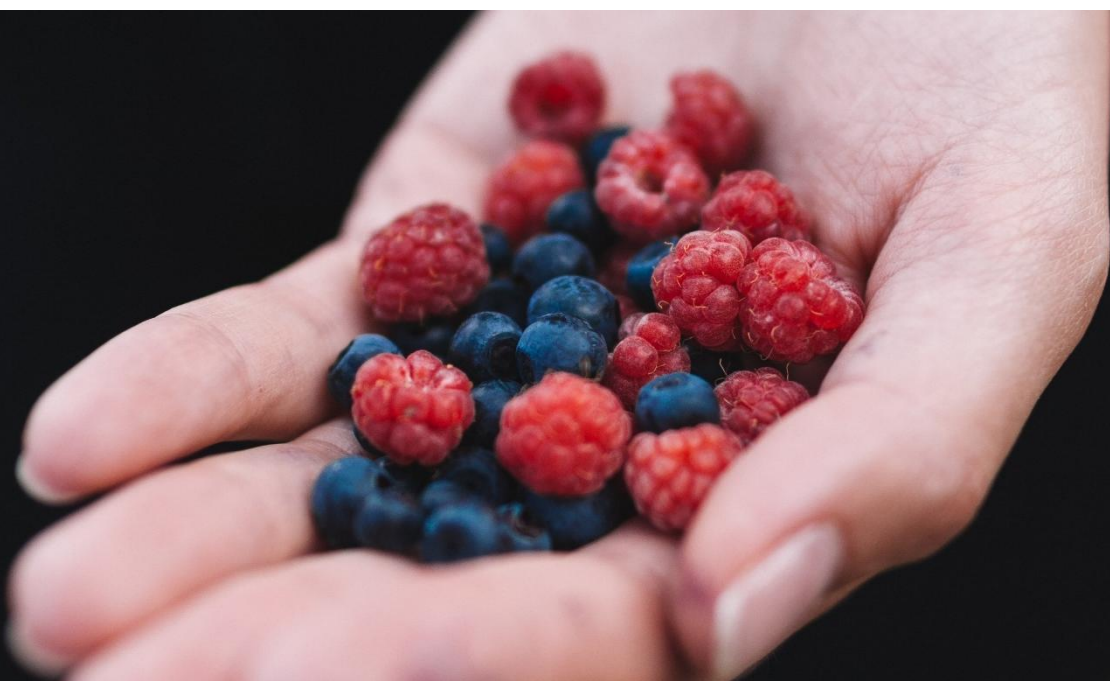
Several consistent themes emerged across both regions, highlighting areas where targeted collaboration and investment could strengthen local food procurement in SNPs.

Key Barriers	Opportunities for Improvement
Highly localized program purchasing and planning	Strengthen collaboration between Lead Agencies, Community Partners, and distributors to coordinate purchasing and streamline food transportation and storage.
Reliance on volunteers and limited staff capacity	Explore a provincial food and logistics coordinator role to connect agriculture and school food programs and develop tools to simplify purchasing and reporting.
Preference for pre-packaged foods and limited infrastructure	Support investment in kitchen infrastructure, innovative, school-friendly local food products and processing solutions, and encourage innovation in packaging and processing.
Seasonality of local produce	Leverage greenhouse production, freezing, and preservation to extend seasonal availability and provide menu-planning tools tailored to Ontario’s harvest calendar.
Gaps in data collection and knowledge sharing	Explore new data collection tools, standardize data collection tools, and leverage distributor reporting systems to reduce burden on staff/volunteers.
Limited channels connecting farmers and schools	Develop a provincial farmer-school resource hub, support centralized procurement models using distributors’ relationships, and improve communication channels.



Based on these finding and opportunities identified, the following recommendation are proposed:

Recommendation	Details and timeframe
A. Provincial school food and logistics coordinator 	Short term: Could benefit from cross-ministerial funding and coordination. Feasible within 1 year once roles and responsibilities are defined.
B. Partnerships with commodity organizations 	Short-medium term: Builds on existing relationships (e.g., Ontario Apple Growers). Can begin through formal agreements or pilot supply arrangements. Could scale up to include multiple commodities within 1–2 years.
C. Local food innovation and processing funding stream 	Medium-long term: Requires a new funding stream or program, likely involving government approval. Industry innovation and product development take time (3–5 years).
D. Seasonal menu toolkit 	Short term: Builds on existing resources and toolkits (e.g., Foodland Ontario materials). Can be developed within 6–12 months with input from SNP food and logistics coordinators.
E. Streamline data collection and reporting 	Medium-long term: Pilot projects could begin in 1–2 years with a full rollout in 3–5 years. Would requires technical development, training, and policy alignment.
F. Farmer-SNP tools and networks 	Short-medium term: Pilot farmer engagement and distributor partnerships within the first year. Expand regional participation and refine tools by year 3.
G. Map the school food supply system 	Short-medium term: Begin mapping using existing data and ConnectON within 12 months. Refine and integrate more regional data by year 2.



To demonstrate the potential for scaling up local food procurement, three pilot initiatives are proposed to build partnerships and resources. These include:

Pilot Project	Details
Pilot 1: Local food distributor	Test a centralized bulk-purchasing model to increase access to local foods in student nutrition programs. The pilot will identify the top 5–10 locally sourced products, enable coordinated regional ordering and delivery, and evaluate the effectiveness of a centralized approach. Key participants include a provincial food and logistics coordinator, regional distributors, and Community Partners.
Pilot 2: Farmer resource hub and networking events	Develop a farmer-focused resource hub on Student Nutrition Ontario’s website to provide guidance on student nutrition program participation such as food safety and procurement processes. The pilot will also host networking events connecting farmers, distributors, and schools to strengthen local food supply pathways.
Pilot 3: Expanding Ontario apple procurement for student nutrition programs	Partner with Ontario Apple Growers, packers, distributors, and schools to increase the supply of locally grown apples in student nutrition programs. The pilot will establish procurement specifications, coordinate delivery pathways, and test the feasibility of expanding this model to other fruit commodities.



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Part 1: Context

1.1 Introduction

Ontario's Student Nutrition Programs (SNPs) provide over 140 million meals and snacks annually to over a million students across the province; a number that continues to grow. This rising demand, as well as demand from other school food programs, presents a sizable

For this report, "local" refers to any product grown or produced in Ontario, with particular emphasis on sourcing from within the surrounding regions of the study area whenever possible.

but underused opportunity to strengthen Ontario's local food system. Despite Ontario's thriving local agri-food sector, many programs face challenges accessing local products due to very decentralized procurement and distribution systems.

By increasing local food procurement, school food programs could unlock an estimated \$200 million annual market for Ontario-grown food.¹ Doing so would not only provide stable markets for farmers and food processors but also lead to efficiencies in food sourcing and distribution, while feeding Ontario's school-aged children. Strengthening these connections will support resilient regional food systems, boost rural economies, and enhance food literacy and awareness of agriculture among students and staff.

This report focuses on two SNP regions, Southwest Ontario (led by [VON](#)) and Central West Ontario (led by the [YMCA of Three Rivers](#)). As each region operates independently, focusing on these two specifically has allowed this report to provide a detailed view of how programs function and the opportunities and challenges they face.

The purpose of this project is to understand opportunities to improve local food procurement in Ontario's school food programs.

Methods

This project was conducted between April and November 2025 and was written by Wilton Consulting Group. Multiple approaches were used to gain insight into Ontario's Student Nutrition Programs and local food procurement in Ontario's Southwest and Central West Regions. The findings from the environmental scan and engagement activities are synthesized and integrated throughout the report:

- An **environmental scan** of academic research, government publications, industry reports, and relevant grey literature was conducted at the beginning of the project and updated throughout the study period as new topics emerged. In addition to publicly available sources, background materials and contextual information were provided by Student

Nutrition Program Lead Agencies and Community Partner organizations in the Southwest and Central West Regions. Sustain Ontario also contributed valuable research, sector knowledge, and resources that informed the scan. The scan focused on student nutrition programming, local food procurement models, supply chain considerations, and best practices and barriers related to sourcing local food for school-based programs. Findings from the environmental scan were synthesized thematically and used to inform interview guides, survey design, and overall analysis.

- Semi-structured **interviews** were conducted between June and July 2025. Interviewees were selected based on their involvement with the Southwest and Central West SNP programs and included individuals working both within and alongside the programs (e.g., Lead Agencies, Community Partners, and food distributors). Commodity groups were also included and were selected based on foods relevant to school food programs. Interviews explored program operations, procurement practices, and challenges and opportunities related to local food sourcing, as well as regional context. Interview findings were reviewed and analyzed thematically to identify common trends, regional differences, and cross-cutting issues.
- A short **online survey** was distributed to manufacturers, distributors, and farmers who have contributed to SNPs in the two study regions. Thirteen responses were received. The survey was designed to supplement interview findings by capturing supply-side perspectives related to feasibility, scale, logistics, and participation in SNPs. Survey results were analyzed descriptively and used to validate and contextualize insights from the interviews and environmental scan.
- Ongoing **collaboration** and **discussion** occurred throughout the project between Wilton Consulting Group, Sustain Ontario, and Student Nutrition Program Lead Agencies and Community Partners in the Southwest and Central West Regions. This collaboration allowed for feedback on findings and informed the development of the report.

Findings from the environmental scan and engagement activities were analyzed together to identify converging themes, areas of alignment, and gaps across the literature, program delivery experiences, and supply chain perspectives. This integrated approach supported a balanced understanding of current conditions, challenges, and opportunities related to strengthening local food procurement within SNPs.

Limitations

The primary focus of this study is on two of Ontario's 14 SNP regions. As such, the findings from this research are immediately relevant to Ontario's Southwest and Central West Regions; however, many of the insights are translatable to other regions across the province. Within these two regions, there is considerable potential for further development as interest and investment in local food in schools increases.

While this study focused on SNPs, it is important to recognize that Ontario's broader school food landscape also includes a variety of other programs. This includes hospitality and culinary classes, parent-led lunch initiatives, the First Nations Student Nutrition Program (FNSNP), independently run cafeterias, and other food education programs. These programs represent additional opportunities to strengthen local food connections in schools which is not touched on in this report.



1.2 Ontario’s Student Nutrition Program

Ontario’s SNP provides funding for healthy meals and snacks across Ontario’s public primary and secondary schools. SNPs are asked to follow [10 key guiding principles](#) set out by the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS), including “Ontario food and beverages are served when possible”.

There are two distinct types of programs: meal programs and snack programs.

Program	Description	Foods
Meal	Typically, a breakfast which allows students to attend class nourished and ready to learn. Can be sit-down, or grab-and-go style. Breakfast can be hot or cold, and served out of cafeterias, libraries, classrooms, gymnasiums, etc.	A minimum of three food groups must be available: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vegetables and fruit• Whole grains• Protein/dairy
Snack	Smaller snacks for students to either pick-up from a drop-in style classroom format, or classroom bin program where snacks are delivered to each classroom.	Snack programs must serve two food groups, one serving of fruits or vegetables, plus a serving of either: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Protein/dairy• Whole grains

Student Nutrition Ontario (SNO) is the provincial network for SNPs. SNO is made up of 14 regions, each run by distinct Lead Agencies across the province that administer allocated funding to their local schools, either directly or through Community Partners. In 2023/2024 the 14 regions:

- Facilitated more than 5,249 SNPs¹,
- Served 895,116 students,
- Served 142,131,145 meals and snacks to students, and
- Coordinated community committees in most regions to help bring together school boards, public health units, and parents to support program delivery in Ontario.

¹ Please note, some schools can operate more than one program (e.g., if a school has a breakfast and snack program, that is identified as two separate SNPs).

Ontario’s SNPs currently receive funding from the Government of Canada, through the [National School Food Program](#), in addition to ongoing contributions from the Ontario government (through MCCSS), Breakfast Club of Canada, the Grocery Foundation, some municipalities, and generous local funding partners across the province.

In 2023, the Ontario government provided \$33 million to the SNP, which provided nearly 130 million meals and snacks to over 800,000 students daily across the province.ⁱⁱ The Government of Canada has also committed to provide up to \$108.5 million to Ontario² over the next three years.ⁱⁱⁱ

This report supports the [Grow Ontario Strategy](#), which prioritizes supply chain stability, innovation, and workforce development. Its call to “support organizations and communities undertaking food supply chain initiatives to increase Ontario-grown food for Ontarians” directly connects to strengthening school food programs through local procurement. With ongoing uncertainty in global trade and tariffs, strengthening Ontario-grown agriculture ensures a more reliable, resilient, and self-sufficient food system. By linking farmers, distributors, and schools, this report helps put the Grow Ontario vision into action.

There is an opportunity for stronger collaboration among provincial ministries and local public health departments to advance school food initiatives. The [MCCSS](#) supports child well-being and food security programs that make healthy food more accessible for all students. The [Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness](#) (OMAFRA) supports the production and promotion of Ontario-grown food, creating pathways for farmers to supply local markets. [The Ministry of Education](#) (EDU) oversees schools and curriculum, providing a foundation for integrating healthy eating and food literacy into the learning environment.

Local public health departments can also play a role by aligning nutrition standards, supporting food safety, and helping schools connect with regional food networks. Together, these ministries can strengthen the connection between local producers and schools, improving student health, supporting Ontario’s agri-food economy, and advancing a more resilient food system.

² Please note, these funds will be distributed to both SNP and FNSNP.

Understanding the Roles within SNO

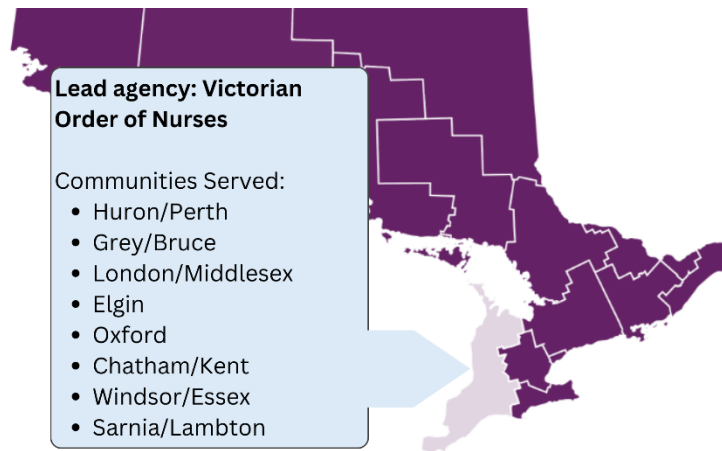
SNO's organizational structure is designed to support school food purchasing across Ontario. Funding from the Ontario government enables part-time or full-time staff positions that provide expertise and coordination for Student Nutrition Programs (SNPs).

Key Roles:

- **SNP Lead/Manager** – Serves as the administrative lead for a region, participating in provincial level planning and initiatives related to SNPs. *One per region*
- **Food and Logistics Coordinator** – Builds regional connections between schools, distributors, farmers, and food organizations, while also maintaining provincial links. *One per region*
- **Community Development Coordinator** – Offers hands-on, local support to schools, providing guidance on infrastructure, equipment, funding, and access to community food sources. *One or more per region (based on number of schools served)*

Southwest Region SNP

The Lead Agency for the Southwest Region SNP is VON. The program serves eight communities and is supported by a network of 10 coordinators that work directly with schools. These communities include:



Key facts about the Southwest Region SNP:

- Southwest Region has more than 470 active programs
- Approximately 125,000 children are fed every year
- More than 21 million meals and snacks are served

The Southwest Region’s SNP is delivered through two streams (Figure 1): a direct deposit model and a school food delivery program. In the direct deposit stream, 220 school food programs receive Ontario Student Nutrition Program (OSNP) funding directly and are responsible for independently coordinating and sourcing their food. Alternatively, 250 school food programs participate in the School Food Delivery Program, which typically provides weekly deliveries of two fresh produce items along with other essentials. Schools select from a pre-determined list of available options curated by VON.

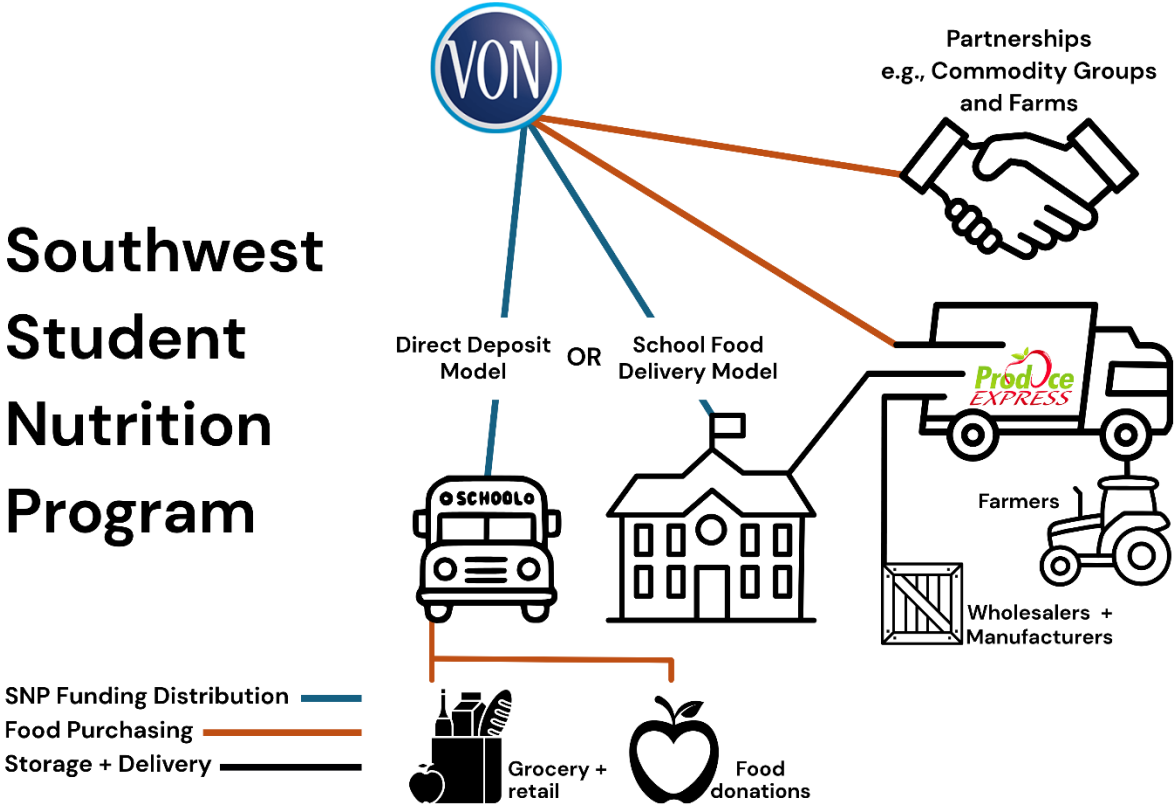


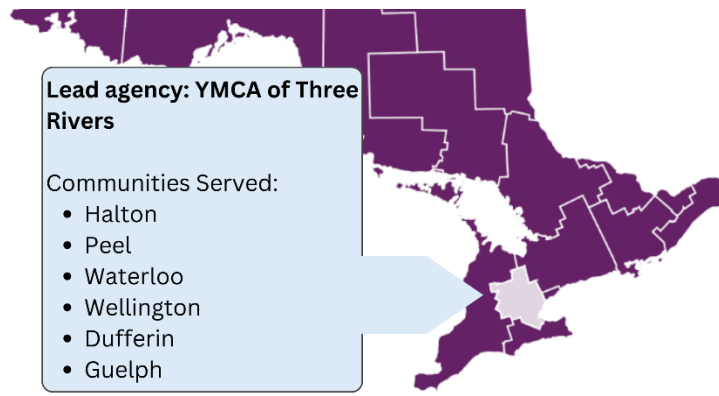
Figure 1. Southwest SNP food distribution streams.

A third-party distributor, selected through a formal RFP process, manages the distribution of food to participating schools. The current distributor, [Produce Express](#), serves all eight communities across the region. Regardless of the stream, all schools are expected to secure additional funds to cover program costs beyond the provincial funds, often through local fundraising or community partnerships. This structure creates a blend of centralized coordination and school-level autonomy, balancing consistency in program delivery with the flexibility to meet local needs.

In the 2023/24 school year, the Southwest Region’s school food delivery program spent more than \$1.2 million on local food, more than doubling the goal of \$500,000.

Central West Region SNP

The Lead Agency for the Central West Region SNP is the YMCA of Three Rivers. The program is supported by four Community Partners, each supporting local programs for schools in their respective communities. These communities include:



Key facts about the Central West Region SNP:^{iv}

- Central West Region has more than 700 active programs across 680 schools
- Over 400,000 students access the program every year
- Serve an average of 100,000 students daily

Table 1. Breakdown of Community Partners under Central West Region and key facts.

Organization	Communities served	Key facts
Halton Food for Thought	Halton Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 157 schools have a program (representing 90% of all schools in Halton) • 200 programs delivered • 4 full time staff
Nutrition for Learning	Waterloo Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 180 school food programs • 23,000 children fed daily
YMCA GTA	Peel Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 293 programs delivered across 286 schools in Peel Region • 223 elementary school programs • 70 secondary school programs • 35,000 children fed daily • 6,000,000 meals or snacks served in 2024/25
Children’s Foundation of Guelph Wellington	Guelph, Wellington and Dufferin County	<p>In 2024/25,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than 16,000 students accessed programs • Nearly 2.5 million meals or snacks provided • More than 16,500 volunteer hours provided

When it comes to food purchasing, decisions are made slightly differently by each Community Partner (Figure 2). The YMCA of Three Rivers takes on a leadership role in dispersing funds to

the Community Partners, fostering relationships with manufacturers, distributors, and donors, and developing resources for their Community Partners to support local schools. The YMCA of Three Rivers has supported bulk purchasing initiatives in the past (e.g., the [Great Big Crunch](#)); however, they typically enable their Community Partners to deliver programs independently in a way that works for their local communities.

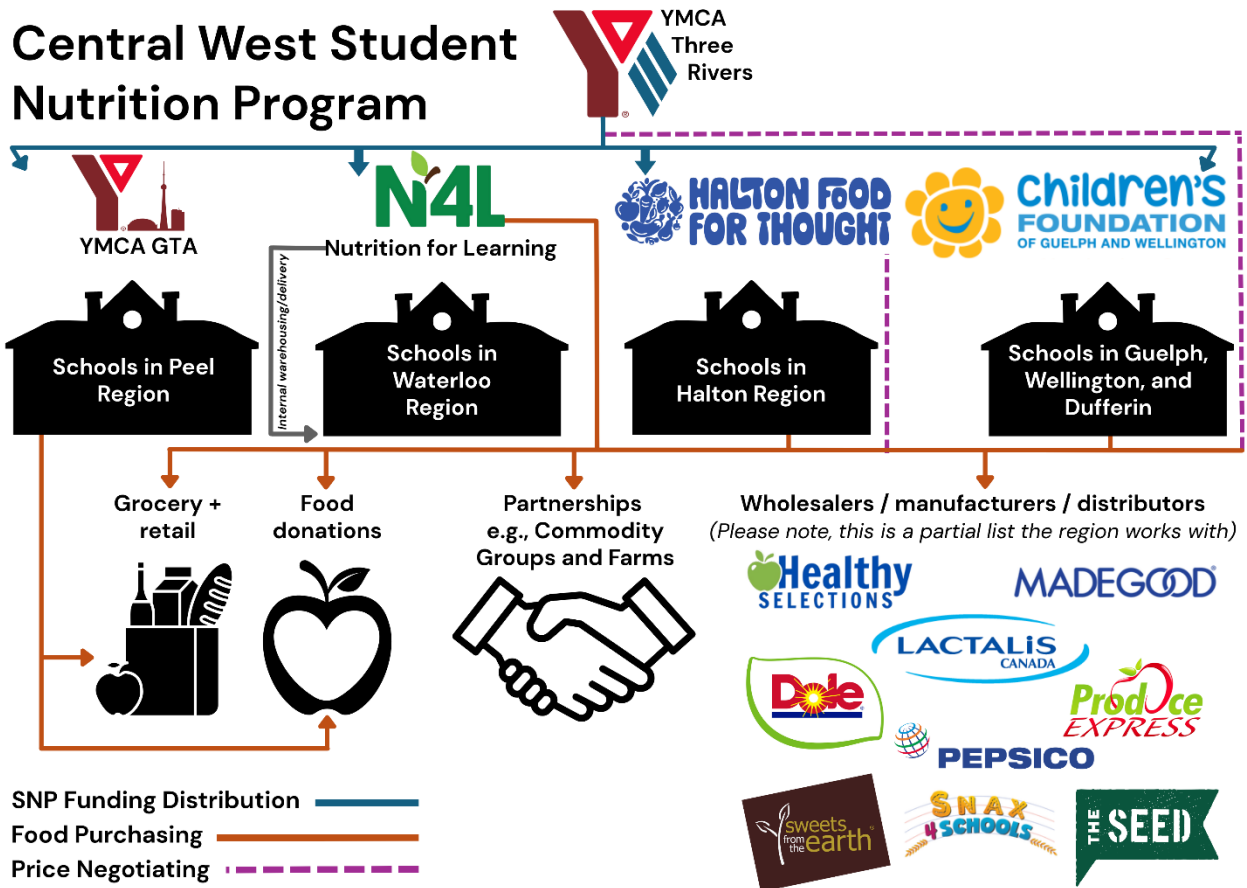


Figure 2. Central West SNP food distribution streams.

Typology

Ontario’s SNPs operate in a wide range of contexts, from small rural schools to large urban ones, each with different opportunities and barriers to serving local food. In both regions studied, we observed a mix of urban and rural settings, varying school sizes, and communities with different levels of resources. While these factors shape program delivery (e.g., staff run vs. volunteer run) at the school level, a significant difference between regions was in how food was sourced and supplied.

The typology below highlights the key parameters that shape how local food (from farms, forests, and waterways) makes its way into school food programs. By mapping these differences, we can better understand the enablers that support greater use of local food, as well as the challenges that influence access, and affordability. The following typology (Table 2) illustrates how these structures differ across the two study regions.

Table 2. Regional differences Southwest and Central West SNP food sourcing and delivery.

Region and program	What type of purchasing system does it have <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centralized Decentralized Combination 	Purchasing methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bulk Retail Combination 	Work with a single distributor or multiple?	Work directly with local farmers or farm organizations?
Southwest ³	Combination	Combination	Single distributor	Yes
A. Direct Deposit model	Decentralized purchasing system	Schools purchase at retail prices	N/A	Dependent by school
B. School Food Delivery model	Centralized purchasing system	Combination	Single distributor	Sometimes
Central West ⁴	Combination	Helps with negotiating and purchasing in bulk	N/A	Sometimes
Halton Food for Thought	Combination	Combination	Multiple distributors	Sometimes
Nutrition for Learning	Centralized purchasing system	Food is purchased in bulk	Multiple distributors	Yes
YMCA GTA	Decentralized purchasing system	Schools purchase at retail prices	Dependent by school	Dependent by school

³ The following are the two program models in the region

⁴ The following are the Community Partners and how they deliver their programs in their areas

Children's Foundation of Guelph Wellington	Decentralized purchasing system	Schools purchase at retail prices	Multiple distributors	Yes
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Best practices for local food procurement in Student Nutrition Programs in Ontario

Through the interviews, it became apparent that several practices appeared to help Ontario school food programs provide local products. These include:

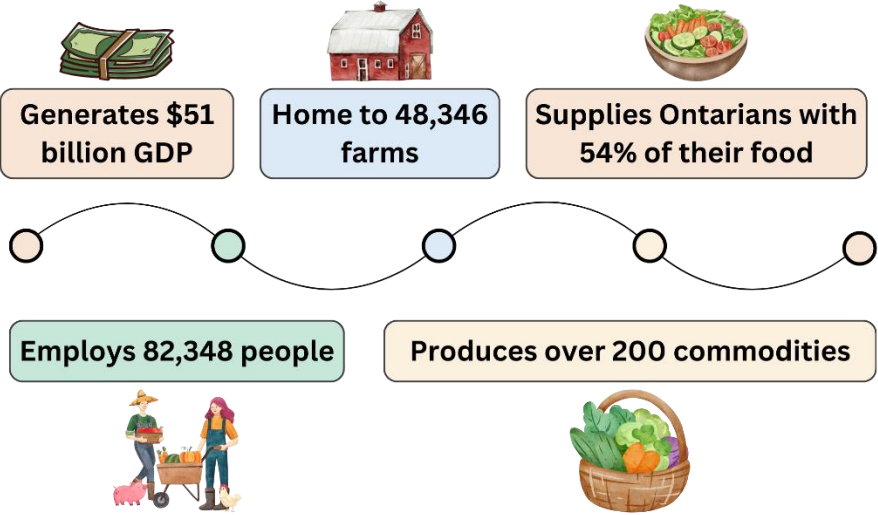
- **Centralized systems** (such as shared ordering or menu planning) to reduce administrative burden.
- **Bulk purchasing** to stretch budgets and make local food more affordable.
- **Working with distributors** to increase the efficiency of transportation, food safety, and access of a wider variety of local products.
- **Strong relationships** with farmers, suppliers, and farm organization to build trust and open new possibilities.
- **Tracking data** on purchases, deliveries, and costs to improve efficiency and transparency.
- **Menu flexibility** so schools can adapt to seasonal availability and minimize waste.
- **Collaborating across programs and networks** to share resources, knowledge, and best practices, strengthen connections, and improve understanding of the local food system.

Together, these practices make it easier for schools to access Ontario-grown food while keeping programs sustainable and impactful.



1.3 Ontario’s agriculture and agri-food sector

Ontario’s agri-food sector is a cornerstone of the provincial economy, generating over \$51 billion in GDP in 2024 and employing more than 871,000 people (representing one in every nine jobs in Ontario).^v The province is home to more than 48,000 farms producing over 200 different commodities, reflecting both the scale and diversity of Ontario’s agricultural base.^{vi} Together, these farms and processors supply approximately 54% of the food consumed within the province, underscoring Ontario’s role as a leading producer of food in Canada.^{vii}



Ontario is also one of the largest food and beverage manufacturing hubs in North America, with over 5,000 businesses generating more than \$60 billion in annual sales and employing around 120,000 people.^{viii} This integrated production and processing system creates strong opportunities to connect local producers with buyers across the province, including schools. However, gaps remain in preserving and processing local foods for SNPs, as limited access to capital (specifically for processed foods commonly used in schools), skilled labour, and locally manufactured equipment in Ontario’s agri-food sector constrain the sector’s ability to scale and provide more ready-to-serve, Ontario-made options that can easily be accessed by schools.^{ix}

In 2024, Ontario exported more than \$28 billion in agri-food products while importing just over \$41 billion, underscoring the untapped potential to increase the share of Ontario-grown food on local tables.^x Every dollar spent on Ontario food generates a powerful ripple effect, recirculating through the local economy two to four times more than dollars spent on non-local products.^{xi} Supporting Ontario’s farmers and processors is therefore not only an investment in feeding students, but also one of the most effective ways to drive local economic growth and support rural communities.

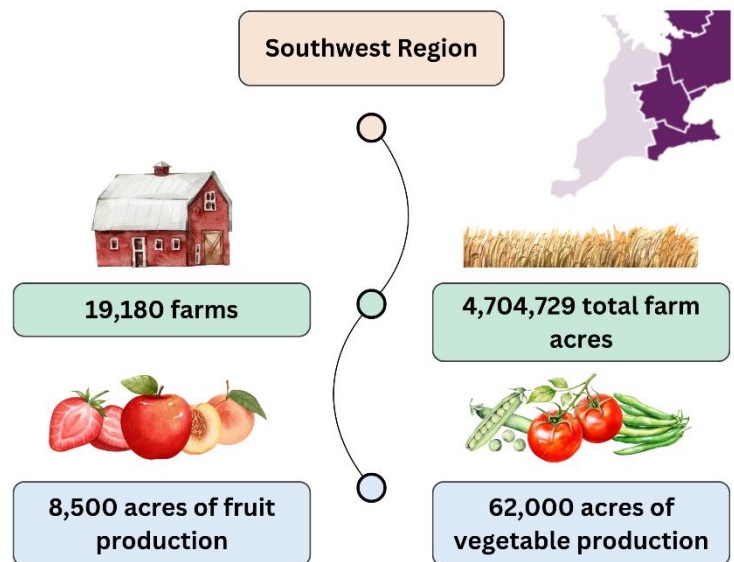
Beyond the Farm

While this section focuses on farming data, it is important to recognize that local food comes from more than just farms. Ontario's local food providers include farmers, fishers, hunters, foragers, and other traditional Indigenous food providers, as well as processors and retailers who contribute to local food systems and economies.

Agriculture in the Southwest Region⁵

Ontario's Southwest Region is one of the province's most productive agricultural regions, with a strong mix of fruit, vegetable, dairy, and egg production. The area supports over 8,500 acres of fruit (Figure 3), the majority of which is dedicated to apples (7,629 acres). Southwest Region is somewhat unique as it is home to Grey County which is a prominent producer of apples in Ontario. Vegetable production is even more prominent (Figure 4), with 62,000 acres in total, led by:

- Tomatoes (12,816 acres)
- Green peas (10,681 acres)
- Beans (5,586 acres)
- Carrots (3,869 acres)
- Cucumber (2,974 acres)
- Peppers (2,908 acres)



Beyond produce, the region also plays a central role in supplying Ontario's protein and dairy needs, with over **4.2 million eggs** produced and more than **106,000 milk solids** coming from local dairy farms.

⁵ Agriculture data for the Southwest Region was compiled by aggregating 2021 agriculture and agri-food data from all municipalities in the region. Source: Ontario Farm Data by County, Government of Ontario (2021), available at: <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/ontario-farm-data-by-county>.

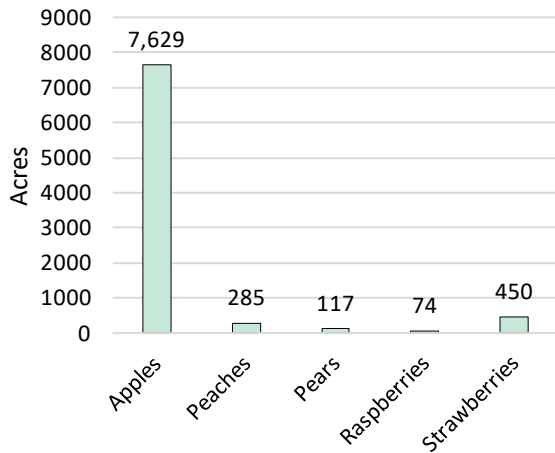


Figure 3. Fruit production by acreage in the Southwest Region.

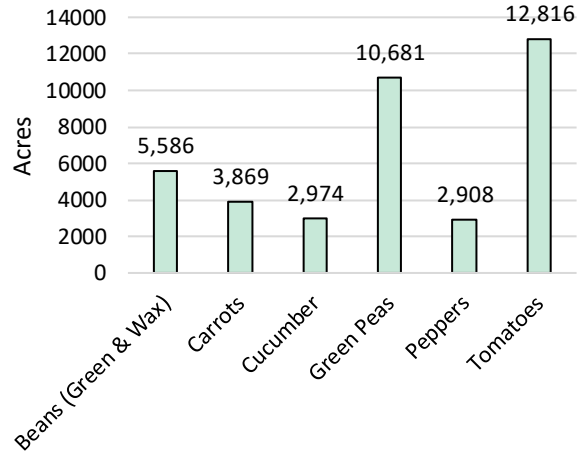


Figure 4. Vegetable production by acreage in the Southwest Region.

Greenhouse production is a major strength of the Southwest Region’s agricultural sector, covering 146,337,588 square feet (3,359.45 acres) (Figure 5). Greenhouse production in the area is focused on three main crops:

- Tomatoes (51,227,637 square feet)
- Cucumbers (33,614,371 square feet)
- Peppers (48,961,891 square feet)

This scale of production positions the Southwest Region as a large contributor to Ontario’s year-round supply of fresh produce.

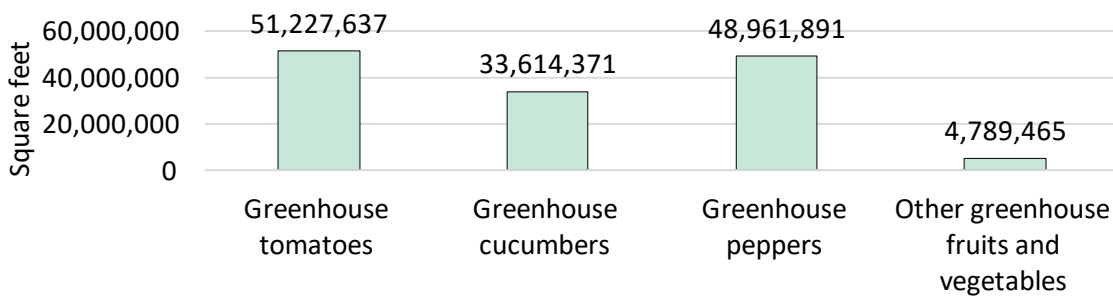


Figure 5. Greenhouse production by square feet in the Southwest Region.



Food Self-Sufficiency & Direct Sales

Southwest Ontario is a major food producer, with production levels that far exceed local consumption for many crops (Table 3).

Self-sufficiency shows how local food production compares to local consumption. **Values over 100% mean the region grows more than it eats.**

Table 3. Percent self-sufficiency of different agricultural products in the Southwest Region and their relevance to school food programs.

Produce	Self-sufficiency	Relevance to school food programs
Tomatoes	1,801%	Commonly eaten fresh (cherry or grape varieties are easiest to serve) but also made into sauces.
Rutabagas and Turnips	1,103%	Less common as a snack but could be introduced raw in sticks or cooked/mashed.
Green Peas	949%	Kid-friendly and commonly used fresh in school meals. Also, can be found frozen or canned.
Sweet Corn	557%	Sometimes used for salads but less common as a snack. Only available for the first month of school.
Cucumber	535%	Commonly eaten fresh; easy to slice into sticks or rounds for snacking.
Peppers	525%	Commonly eaten fresh; sweet varieties are colourful and appealing in slices.
Beans (Green and Wax)	517%	Usually cooked but can be served raw in pods as a crunchy snack.
Carrots	474%	Common eaten fresh; served as sticks or baby-cut. Also, can be used in soups.
Pumpkins	348%	Usually processed into purée; can be used for muffins; seeds could be roasted as a snack option.
Apples	341%	Classic fresh snack; portable and widely accepted by students.
Beets	199%	Less common as a snack but could be cooked and introduced.
Cabbage	178%	Usually shredded into salads or slaws; less common as a standalone snack.
Dry Onion	158%	Typically used in meals that involve cooking.
Asparagus	138%	Less common as a snack but could be cooked and introduced.

In total, 1,887 farms across the Southwest Region reported selling agricultural products directly to consumers. Of these, 1,812 sold unprocessed products such as fresh fruits and vegetables, while 200 offered value-added items like preserved goods. This direct sale activity indicates a local market readiness that demonstrates the potential of farm-to-school sales.

Agriculture in the Central West Region ⁶

The Central West Region supports a diverse mix of fruit and vegetable production. The region has 1,296 acres of fruit (Figure 6) and 10,273 acres of vegetables in production (Figure 7).

- **Fruits:** Apples dominate at 767 acres, followed by strawberries (270 acres), pears (159 acres), peaches (62 acres), and raspberries (38 acres).
- **Vegetables:** The largest acreages are green peas (242 acres), carrots (154 acres), and tomatoes (105 acres).

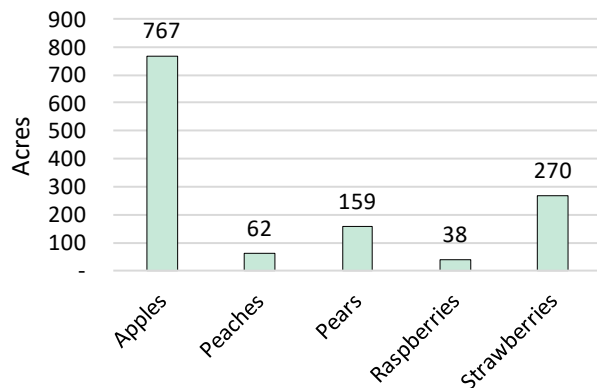
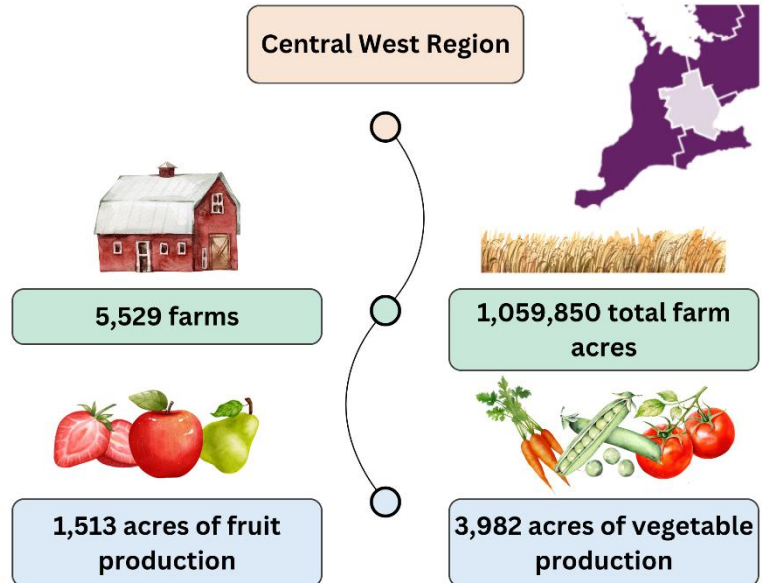


Figure 7. Fruit production by acreage in the Central West Region.

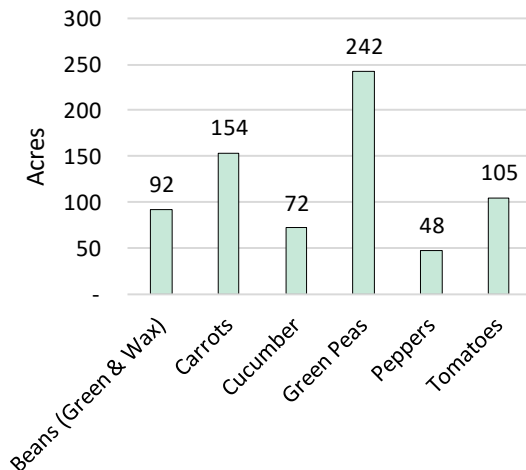


Figure 6. Vegetable production by acreage in the Central West Region.

This range of crops indicates both seasonal variety and opportunities for school nutrition programs to highlight local produce in their menus.

⁶ Agriculture data for the Central West Region was compiled by aggregating 2021 agriculture and agri-food data from all municipalities in the region. Source: Ontario Farm Data by County, Government of Ontario (2021), available at: <https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/ontario-farm-data-by-county>.

The Central West Region also has greenhouse farming, with 160 farms reporting a total of 5.5 million square feet (126 acres) of greenhouse space in use. Production is concentrated in a few key crops (Figure 8):

- Tomatoes (47,872 square feet)
- Other fruits and vegetables (34,418 square feet)
- Cucumbers (9,387 square feet)
- Peppers (7,251 square feet)

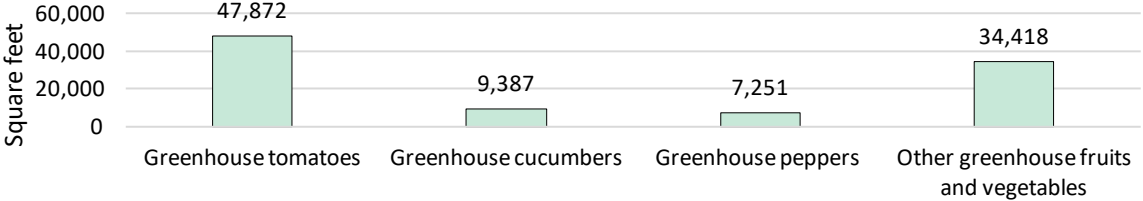


Figure 8. Greenhouse production by square feet in the Central West Region.

This greenhouse capacity can provide schools and communities with consistent, year-round supply of Ontario-grown produce, complementing seasonal field crops.

Food Self-Sufficiency & Direct Sales

In the Central West Region, self-sufficiency levels show strong production of wheat flour (213%), beef (111%), and dairy products (100%) (Figure 9).

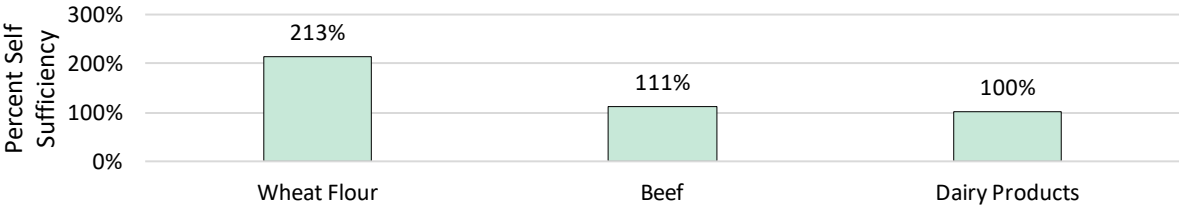


Figure 9. Percent self sufficiency of different agricultural products in the Central West Region.

In total, 1,078 farms across the Central West Region reported selling agricultural products directly to consumers. Of these, 1,044 sold unprocessed products such as fresh fruits and vegetables, while 101 offered value-added items like preserved goods. This direct sale activity indicates a local market readiness that, like Southwest Region, demonstrates the potential of more farm-to-school sales.



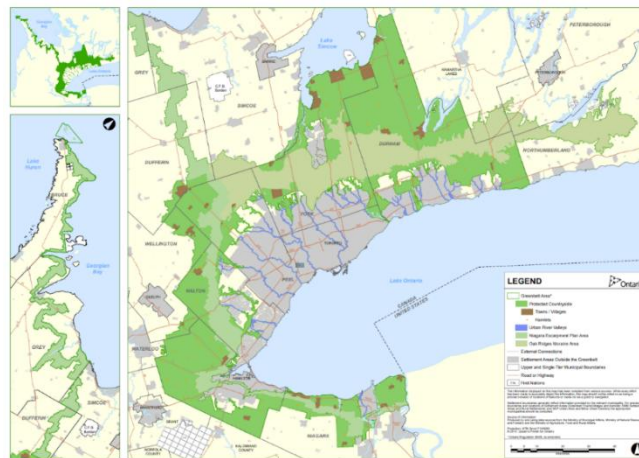
The Greenbelt

Ontario's Greenbelt is a provincial asset protecting over two million acres of farmland, forests, wetlands, and natural systems.^{xii} Established in 2005, it was designed to permanently safeguard agricultural lands from urban development pressures. As it surrounds Southern Ontario's largest cities, the Greenbelt preserves 750,000 acres of highly productive farmland and 4,782

farms.^{xiii} Also, home to specialty crop areas like the Holland Marsh and Niagara's fruit and grape region, the Greenbelt is essential for local food production.

The agricultural sector within the Greenbelt generates \$9.6 billion dollars a year and sustains 177,700 full-time.^{xiv} By protecting food production near cities like Niagara Falls, Hamilton, Brantford, Waterloo, Guelph, Toronto, and the GTA, the Greenbelt creates the conditions for school food programs to be able to access fresh, local food by keeping farmland close to population centres, shortening supply chains, and improving reliability.

Food production within the Greenbelt is especially important for the fruits and vegetables most relevant to school food programs. High-acreage crops include apples (4,321 acres), peaches



greenbelt
PLAN 2017
Schedule 1:
Greenbelt Area

(3,689 acres), carrots (2,640 acres), and sweet corn (2,336 acres) (Figure 10 and 11), all staple items in school menus. By anchoring production of these core foods, the Greenbelt directly supports efforts to expand local procurement for school food programs.

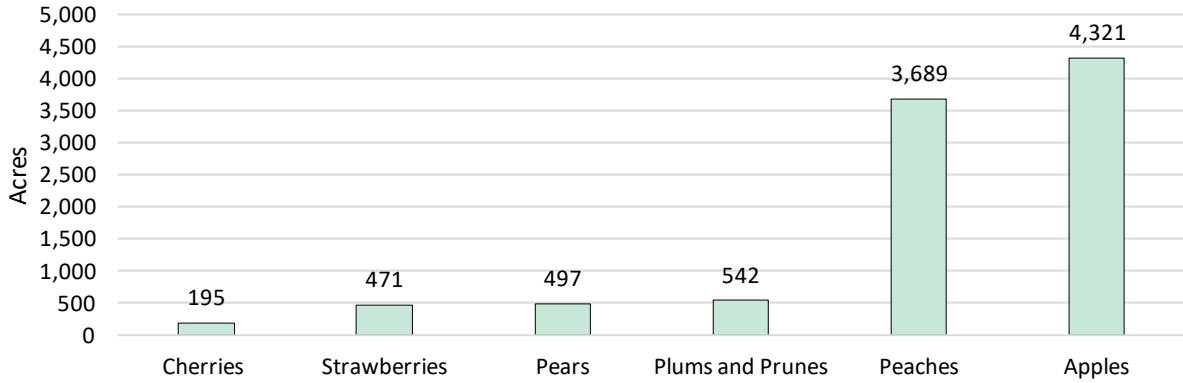


Figure 10. Fruit production in acreage in the Greenbelt.

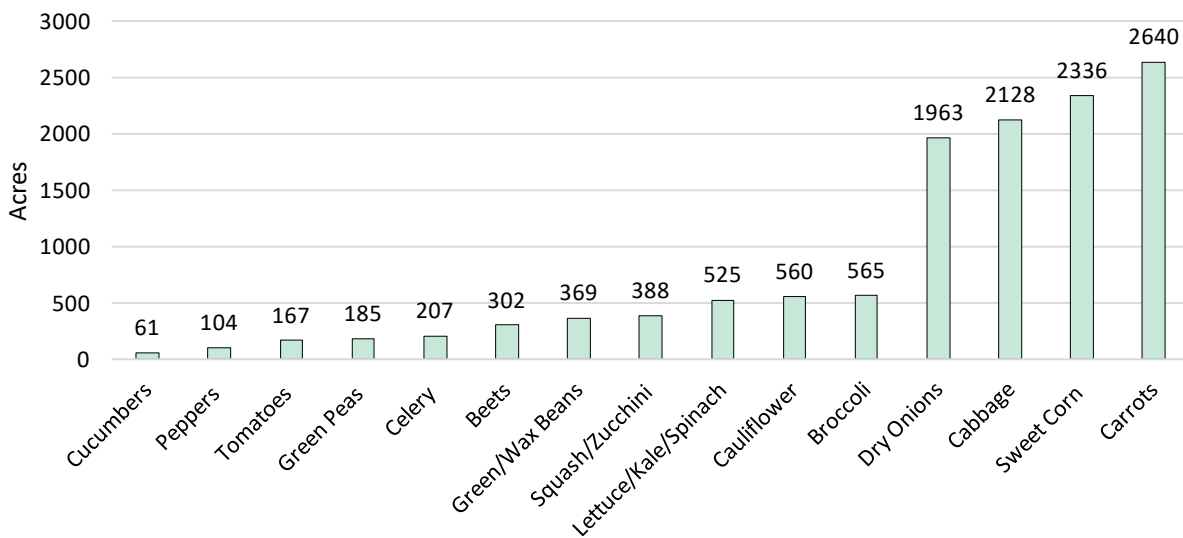


Figure 11. Vegetable production in acreage in the Greenbelt.

Part 2: Farm to school – Ontario’s local food opportunity

2.1 Why local?

With their substantial purchasing power, SNPs and school food programs more broadly can become key partners for local farmers and food and beverage processors, helping to strengthen local supply chains and support Ontario-grown food. In fact, Ontario’s school food market has the potential annual value of \$200 million.^{xv}

Beyond economics, increasing local food procurement in SNPs can:

- Enable the creation of partnerships and efficiencies for centralized food procurement, distribution, and logistics; helping SNPs capitalize on economies of scale to feed more students^{xvi}
- Provide stable and predictable markets for farmers and food processors^{xvii}
- Support strong and resilient local food systems, boosting rural economies, and creating jobs^{xviiiix}
- Increase school staff and student access to local food, as well as awareness of food systems and careers in the agri-food sector^{xx}

A more clearly defined and stable school food market would give farmers and processors the confidence to invest in expanding their operations, knowing there is reliable demand for Ontario-grown products. This stability would strengthen local supply chains and support long-term growth in the province’s agri-food sector.

**“Students get excited when they see small apples from nearby farms. Schools love introducing new items, and those local, low-maintenance foods are always a hit.” —
SNP Community Partner**

Despite challenges, some school food programs are working to incorporate more local food into their meal and snack programs, which has come with other benefits as a result. For example, in Northern Ontario, the Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program has prioritised purchasing lower-cost Ontario-grown fruits and vegetables, which has opened doors for purchasing other, more expensive imported fruits like mangoes, pineapple, and starfruit, exposing students to a greater variety of choices.^{xxi}

“One of our goals is always to introduce students to new foods. We work with health units and schools to plan menus early, rotate items through the year, and keep allergies in mind. Looking at past data helps us know which foods work best, but starting with Ontario produce gives us the flexibility to add in other choices.” — Program manager, Ontario school food program

Within SNPs, there is a clear ‘hierarchy’ of local; where staff aim to source as locally as possible, but products range from produced nearby, to produced within Canada (Figure 12).⁷ The majority of the interviewees stated ‘local’ was food from within the province. “A lot of schools think of local as anything grown, prepared, packaged, or shipped in Canada. But there are different levels of local. Food may be produced in the region but processed elsewhere. Local within the region is even stronger, but the closer you zoom in, the more complicated it gets.” — SNP regional staff

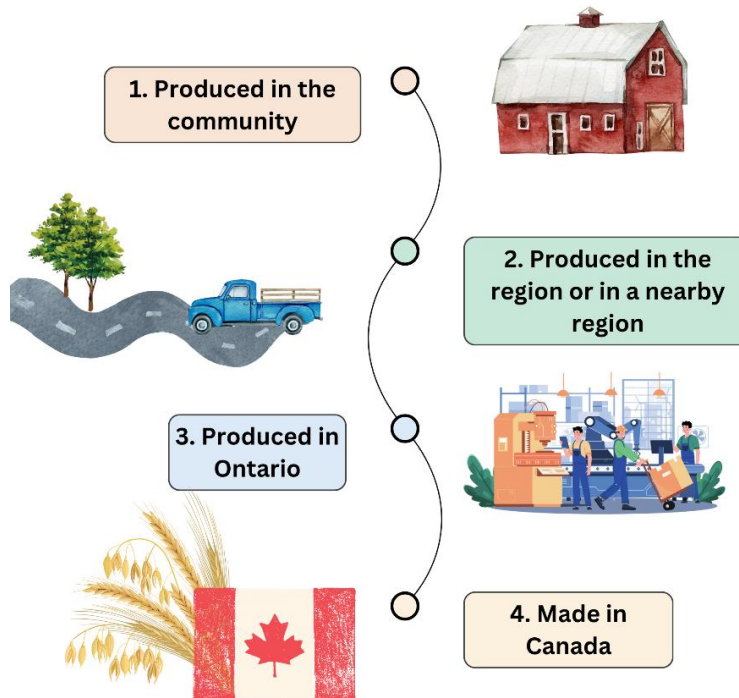


Figure 12. "Hierarchy" of local based on interviewee insights.

Local distributors and farmers are already playing an important role in supporting school food programs by supplying fresh, Ontario-grown products where there are opportunities. Many are eager to deepen this partnership and, with the right coordination, they are ready to continue and expand their support.

⁷ For this report, local is defined as food grown in Ontario but it is recognized that purchasing food grown in Canadian is the next best option.

2.2 Barriers and opportunities to increasing local food procurement

Highly localized program planning and purchasing

SNP delivery varies by region. For example, some of the regions' Lead Agencies fully administer and deliver funding or food directly to schools; in other regions, Community Partners will lead program delivery amongst their localized schools. Further, the roles and responsibilities between Lead Agencies, Community Partners, and volunteers vary.

The differing roles and responsibilities amongst SNPs mean that the actors with agency and capacity to procure local food vary across the province. For example, when school food program volunteers at individual schools are responsible for procuring food, they may not have capacity to foster partnerships with local farmers or know what distributors source local.

Spotlight on agricultural organization pathways: Dairy Farmers of Ontario rebate program

Dairy Farmers of Ontario (DFO) have committed \$250,000 annually to SNO through a rebate program designed to get more nutrient-dense local milk into schools. Schools track milk servings and report to their regional coordinators, who then send consolidated reports to the Lead Agencies.

For every serving of milk reported, schools receive a 10-cent rebate which is helpful for SNPs that often run out of funds by year-end. This program shows how relationships with agricultural organizations can be a powerful tool for bringing more local food into schools, often in the form of donations or cost offsets.

While this rebate program is positive in nature, the additional paperwork to access the funds can be challenging for school food programs which are often dependent on volunteers. Having a central information hub, such as a short video, website page, or presentation, outlining the program's purpose, eligibility, and step-by-step application process would make it easier for schools to understand and access available supports.

“There should be one central place where everyone can access consistent information. Local community sourcing is usually manageable because schools know their communities, but broader provincial sourcing is more challenging without centralized information.” — Dairy Farmers of Ontario representative

Variation in program delivery, and subsequently, food procurement, also means that farmers and packers do not have a single or streamlined point of entry into the market for SNPs or other school food programs. Where Lead Agencies or Community Partners play a role in coordinating procurement, relationships and bulk-purchasing arrangements can be brokered more easily. For example:

- In Central West, a local blueberry initiative occurred where a local farm supplied blueberries, Healthy Selections (a regional distributor) picked up, processed and froze them, and the Lead Agency developed labels to share the story. While freezer space was a challenge for some schools, Community Partners stepped in to coordinate allocations and secure external storage, making the collaboration possible. This example shows the interest in collaboration and also makes clear the number of steps in the process that need to be worked out for each new initiative using fresh local foods. Many of these products are harvested in summer but need to be used in schools in the fall or winter. So dependable access to infrastructure, transportation, and storage is key to making these partnerships possible.
- VON coordinates bulk purchases of apples, mini carrots, and mini cucumbers from local farmers each fall through its Harvest of the Month program. In 2024, the program sourced 254,596 lbs (1,690,140 units) of local produce, representing a total value of \$387,823.

Opportunities

This study does not seek to evaluate or recommend improvements to SNPs governance overall, as this would require engagement across all regions and a deeper assessment into the impact of different delivery models. However, several opportunities exist to enable programs to source more local food:

- a) Enhance collaboration between Lead Agencies, Community Partners, and distributors to improve food procurement processes and enable easier access to local foods through shared purchasing arrangements and collaborative transportation planning.
- b) Collaborate with agricultural commodity organizations to build partnerships with fruit and vegetable packers and growers.

Spotlight on procurement pathways: Southwest’s procurement through Produce Express

Based in Woodstock, Ontario, Produce Express is a food distribution company that offers home delivery and wholesale options for their customers. Produce Express prioritises sourcing products from local farmers where possible.

Produce Express’ journey into school food programming started with an interest in supplying local schools with milk. After learning more about the needs of school food programs, Produce Express ventured into schools as their third customer pathway. Produce Express built a portal on their website for schools to order food and beverage products. Through the schools’ portal, they offer:

- Only food and beverage products that align with the MCCSS guidelines for SNPs
- A wide selection of products that indicates when a product is sourced locally
- Some food products that are washed, portioned, and pre-packaged by Produce Express for snack programs
- A comment area in the ordering form for schools to indicate the best location for drop-off, scheduled delivery timelines, and specifications on shipment size and weight, ensuring ease of access for volunteers

Today, Produce Express supports student nutrition programming in more than 800 schools across the Southwest Region, Halton and Peel Region, and Haldimand County.



Figure 13. Photo of Produce Express staff.

Reliance on volunteers and limited staff capacity

A challenge for Ontario SNPs is their reliance on volunteers and school staff who have other full-time responsibilities.^{xxii} When it comes to programs that are stretched for volunteers, procuring local food may not be top-of-mind. Rather, these programs are more likely to focus on sourcing foods that are easy to access and low cost. In rural schools especially, reliance on staff and volunteers can be even more challenging as shopping trips to grocery stores to procure food may require longer travel distances than for urban schools.^{xxiii}

Interviewees shared stories of school programs run by some volunteers who have a passion for sourcing local, sometimes even brokering direct relationships with local farmers to support meal and snack programs. These volunteers are a tremendous asset to school food programming. In some cases, processes for handing over program knowledge and supplier relationships are already in place, helping ensure continuity when key volunteers step back. However, these practices are not consistent across all schools, and gaps remain where no formal handover process or staff resources exist to document and sustain programming for future volunteers.

Opportunities

- a) Explore provincial personnel (e.g. a provincial food and logistics coordinator) with connections to the agriculture and agri-food sector whose primary responsibility is to support local food procurement across Ontario school food programs including SNPs.
- b) Reduce the burden on school staff and volunteers to report on SNP purchasing. This could include creating streamlined data collection systems or producing tools such as a seasonal menu toolkit to simplify reporting and support local food procurement.
- c) Explore creative ways to strengthen staff and volunteer involvement in SNPs. This could include reallocating existing staff time (such as unused lunch supervision hours) or restructuring roles to include SNP preparation. Sharing and scaling these innovative approaches could help ensure programs are more consistent, sustainable, and effective across Ontario.



Preference for pre-packaged foods and limited infrastructure

In recent years, many SNPs have expressed an interest in moving away from single-serve, prepackaged foods toward preparing fresh, healthy meals and snacks on-site. This shift supports healthier eating, reduces packaging waste, and creates opportunities for students to engage in hands-on food learning. However, offering fresh or “high-risk” foods requires additional food safety measures and trained personnel, which can be challenging for programs that rely heavily on volunteers.

The MCCSS guidelines outline that programs can serve a more diverse range of food options (high-risk foods) if they have at least one volunteer who is trained and certified in safe food handling. Foods are considered high-risk if they are prepared on premise. This could include activities like:

- Cutting vegetables, fruit, or cheese,
- Pouring milk for cereal,
- Cooking oatmeal, and
- Portioning out yogurt from a larger container into smaller ones.

Given the reliance on volunteers and the volunteer shortage in many school food programs, this can present additional challenges.

While the preference may be to prepare fresh food on site, the reality is that single-serve packaged foods are convenient. Additionally, provisions surrounding the preparation of high-risk foods, in addition to behavioural shifts following the COVID-19 pandemic, have resulted in regular usage of packaged single-serve foods in SNPs.



Figure 14. Examples of single-serve packaged foods made with Ontario products. Left: MADEGOOD granola bites. Source: <https://www.madegoodfoods.ca/products/chocolate-chip-and-mixed-berry-granola-minis>. Right: Martin's Family Farms Apple Smash pouch. Source: <https://martinsapples.com/eng/product/apple-smash-smashed-honeycrisp/>

Of course, local Ontario products are already available in single-serve packages and purchased by schools, and bulk purchasing systems for some of these items are in place. However, Ontario's value-added food and beverage processing sector continues to face its own challenges

and barriers to growth. This includes limited access to capital, shortages of skilled labour, and reliance on international expertise and equipment. These challenges make it harder for smaller companies to adopt automation and scale production efficiently.^{xxiv}

Many elementary and secondary schools in Ontario do not have the proper kitchens or equipment needed to prepare food for students. Most rely on outdated or makeshift spaces, which makes it hard to serve fresh, healthy meals.^{xxv} SNPs have only recently, via the National School Food Program funding, had access to more dedicated funding to cover things like fridges, ovens, or storage space.^{xxvi} Without better facilities, schools depend more on pre-packaged food or outside help, making it challenging to run in-school meal programs with more selection and stronger food quality.

Opportunities

Continue to support the direction being encouraged by many SNP regions, to move away from pre-packaged foods and more toward fresh healthy meals and snacks. Where packaged foods must be used:

- a) Encourage more innovation amongst Ontario farmers and agri-food processors to develop healthy, single-serve products using local fruits and vegetables that are compliant with SNP guidelines.
- b) Explore incentives for Ontario distributors or processors to process local foods into single-serve portions for SNPs. For example, incentives may include tax benefits on single-serve environmentally friendly packaging materials.
- c) Support planning policies for on-farm diversified uses to enable farmers to work with municipalities to expand processing, packaging, or storage options that strengthen their ability to supply SNPs with fresh fruits and vegetables and/or pre-packaged local products.
- d) Encourage cross-regional sourcing between SNP regions to fill supply gaps and ensure a consistent, reliable flow of Ontario-grown products to schools.



Seasonality of local produce

Ontario farmers produce a variety of fruits and vegetables available throughout the year. However, the school year runs from September to June, leaving a gap in availability of some fresh fruits and vegetables (Table 4).

Table 4. Fruit and vegetable seasonality. Source: Foodland Ontario [Food Availability Guide](#).

	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	Jul	Aug
Apples	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Beans	X	X								X	X	X
Blueberries	X										X	X
Broccoli	X									X	X	X
Carrots	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cauliflower	X	X	X							X	X	X
Celery	X										X	X
Cherries											X	X
Cucumber (greenhouse)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Lettuce	X	X								X	X	X
Peaches	X										X	X
Pears	X											X
Peppers (greenhouse)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Plums	X	X									X	X
Spinach	X	X							X	X	X	X
Strawberries (greenhouse)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Tomatoes (greenhouse)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Watermelon	X										X	X

The seasonal nature of Ontario’s fruit and vegetable crops only pose a challenge for SNPs as it relates to serving fresh products within season. Opportunities exist to fill the gap in preserving local foods for SNPs. For example, this may include:

- Frozen berries or fruits for smoothies or yogurt parfaits
- Freeze-dried berries or fruits for yogurt parfaits or baked goods
- Shelf-stable preserved fruit and vegetable products like canned fruits and vegetables, fruit cups with no added sugar, jam, etc.
- Processed single-serve foods incorporating local products like fruit pouches, fruit-flavoured yogurt, egg-bites, whole-wheat berry muffins, etc.

Opportunities

- a) Explore incentives for distributors to process local foods into single-serve portions for SNPs. For example, incentives may include tax benefits on single-serve environmentally friendly packaging materials. *(same as above)*
- b) Leverage Ontario's greenhouse sector to extend the availability of fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables during the school year, helping to bridge seasonal gaps outside of peak field harvests.
- c) Provide schools with practical menu-planning tools and training to adapt to seasonal availability. Prioritize fresh Ontario-grown produce in peak months while integrating preserved, frozen, or greenhouse-grown items during the winter (e.g., recipe cards, menu planning guides, and seasonal calendars tailored to SNP needs).
- d) Explore opportunities to collaborate with high school classes to prepare frozen food portions (e.g. soups) that can be distributed within the regional school network



Gaps in data collection and knowledge sharing

Generally, SNP funding flows from the MCCSS through to the Lead Agencies, who then distribute funds to Community Partners or schools who purchase food. This places the burden of data collection and reporting on schools and often volunteers, who may be strained for time and resources. This design also creates a “blind spot” for knowledge of local food sourcing within SNPs – as this type of data has not previously been included in regular reporting.

For programs that utilize wholesalers and distributors, the distributors can collect and track data in real-time using their sales systems, making data collection and reporting more accurate, streamlined, and effective. Wholesalers and distributors also have systems in place for product traceability, which can make local food sourcing knowledge more readily available if they are able or willing to communicate information in a way desired by those purchasing the foods.

Improving efficiencies in data collection amongst SNPs is not only important for reducing the burden on volunteers and school staff, but it can also contribute to more evidence-based SNP policies and support advocacy efforts for program improvements at the provincial level.

Spotlight: New Hampshire’s Local Food for Local Schools Pilot

New Hampshire recently launched its Local Food for Local Schools Purchasing Incentive Pilot Program, designed to encourage schools to buy more local food. A key feature of the program is a **standardized Excel template** provided to all participating schools to track purchases of New Hampshire–grown and produced foods.

- Schools submit the completed spreadsheet to receive reimbursement at a rate of **\$1 for every \$3 of federal dollars spent** on local food.
- The tool simplifies reporting while ensuring consistency across districts.
- Additional support is offered through office hours with New Hampshire Farm to School and the New Hampshire Food Alliance, helping schools source products and complete reporting accurately.

This streamlined approach reduces the administrative burden on schools and creates a clear pathway for tracking and incentivizing local food purchases, a model Ontario could adapt to support SNPs.

Opportunities

- a) Reduce the burden on school staff and volunteers to report on SNP purchasing. This could include creating streamlined data collection systems or producing tools such as a seasonal menu toolkit to simplify reporting and support local food procurement. *(same as above)*
- b) Develop standardized data collection tools (e.g., reporting templates or digital spreadsheets) that can be used consistently across SNP regions, improving accuracy while minimizing duplication of effort.
- c) Use improved data collection to improve and streamline reporting for local food.
- d) Partner with food distributors and wholesalers to leverage their existing sales and traceability systems for streamlined data collection on local food purchases, reducing the reporting burden on individual schools while improving accuracy and consistency where procurement is centralized.

Spotlight: Prince Edward Island – Bon Appétit App for School Food Programs

PEI's school food program uses the Bon Appétit ordering system (also adopted in Nova Scotia) to streamline meal service across multiple delivery models, including internal hub kitchens, external contracted vendors, and school-based services in French-language schools. In 2024/25, the program served over 1 million meals across these models.

The system allows different account types and permissions for students, parents, staff, and vendors, supporting smooth operations while maintaining transparency. It also emphasizes local food sourcing, providing hubs and vendors with curated listings of available regional products and continuously researching local producers to improve distribution.

A farmer who delivers to schools in Ontario highlighted that having SNPs use a tracking system makes it easier to deliver to schools: *"Delivery access. Using a web tracker ordering system makes it easier to organize delivery. A region we started delivering to did not use a web tracker and we had to stop delivering to that region. Each school would call with different orders and change orders just before delivery. I would have needed to hire someone just to answer the phone and keep track of all the changes. Also, the region wanted me to track how much money was spent by who and provide reports. Web trackers make life so much easier."*

Ontario could benefit from a similar system to streamline ordering, support accurate reporting, and make local food procurement more efficient across SNPs. A centralized platform could reduce administrative burdens on schools, volunteers, and farmers while also improving transparency and the ability to track local food sourcing.

Limited channels connecting farmers and schools

From conversations in both the Southwest and Central West Regions, connections between farmers and schools (or distributors who source directly from local farmers) are seen in some programs. However, it is highly dependent on who is running the SNP or distributor company. A common barrier is the limited channels connecting farmers with schools, and a lack of established contacts or dedicated staff to facilitate these relationships.^{xxvii}

With the launch of the [National School Food Policy](#), it is recommended that government funders allocate dedicated resources to strengthen farmer–school board relationships, ensuring farmers have the tools and support to connect with local schools, and school boards have clear guidance on sourcing and integrating local food.

Learning from other local food connections

Efforts in other sectors (such as hospitals, long-term care facilities, and other public institutions) show how partnerships can strengthen farm-to-table supply chains.

Initiatives like the [Serving Up Local](#) led by the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance have positively impacted local food procurement in these settings. Building on these models can help schools develop similar connections with local farmers and distributors.

Opportunities


- a) Explore provincial personnel (e.g. a provincial food and logistics coordinator) with connections to the agriculture and agri-food sector whose primary responsibility is to support with local food procurement across school food programs. *(same as above)*
- b) Support more centralized procurement models that leverage distributors' existing relationships with local farmers, making it easier for school food programs to access consistent, Ontario-grown products.
- c) Create a farmer resource hub to support a province-wide network of farmers interested in connecting with school food opportunities, making it easier for school food programs to identify and source from local producers.

Part 3: The path forward

This section outlines key recommendations to strengthen local food procurement in SNPs and other school food programs across Ontario. This includes suggested steps for implementation and proposed timelines for each. These recommendations are intended as an action guide for collaboration across all parties involved with SNPs including provincial ministries. The following section on pilot projects builds on these recommendations, illustrating how they could be put into practice.

3.1 Recommendations

A. Develop a Provincial School Food and Logistics Coordinator



In 2013, Ontario's SNP started funding one staff member, called a Food and Logistics Coordinator, in each of the 14 Lead Agencies across the province, to help schools build partnerships with producers and distributors and buy food in bulk. These individuals helped set up regional programs that work with local food distributors to organize and combine school food orders. When these roles have focused on local food, this approach has led to more Ontario-grown fruits and vegetables being served to students, helping kids eat healthier and supporting local farmers at the same time.^{xxviii}

Food Banks Canada was recently looking to fill a position for Manager, Agri-Food Projects & Partnerships. This role is responsible for coordinating food acquisition, transformation, distribution, and in-kind programs, while also building partnerships and supporting program evaluation. A similar logistics-focused role for SNPs could help streamline local food procurement and strengthen supplier relationships.

There is now a need for a province-wide coordinator to connect farmers, distributors, and wholesalers with school food programs. This role could:

- ✓ **Facilitate knowledge sharing** between the 14 local coordinators, including best practices from pilot projects and seasonal menu planning.
- ✓ **Develop and maintain partnerships** between SNPs and agriculture/agri-food stakeholders, including farmers, distributors, and processors.
- ✓ **Support coordinated procurement initiatives**, including bulk purchasing and connecting schools with local producers.
- ✓ **Enable streamlined, standardized data collection** across SNP regions, leveraging distributor systems and other tracking tools.

- ✓ **Coordinate and promote farmer engagement opportunities**, including networking events and resource hub participation.
- ✓ **Support initiatives to expand local product availability** (e.g., apples and other Ontario-grown produce) in SNPs.

Creating a role like this can also help with other food programs in schools (e.g., FNSNP and NFVP) across the province. It can help ensure that all school food efforts benefit from consistent support and stronger connections within the broader provincial food system.

This Food and Logistics Coordinator role could be housed within an existing organization with strong ties to the agriculture and food sector. Options include Student Nutrition Ontario or the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, which currently hosts a similar role for [Northern Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program](#).

Developing a provincial SNP food and logistics coordinator implementation timeframe

Short term (1 year)	Establishing this position will require coordination across ministries and/or partner organizations and could begin as a pilot within an existing institution before becoming permanent.
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B. Formalize Partnerships with Agricultural Commodity Organizations

Ontario Apple Growers emphasized that with a little more data and planning, it would be relatively simple to connect apple growers and distributors with schools based on the amount and type of apples they require. Opportunities also exist to build stronger connections with local processors who can provide products such as apple sauce and other apple-based foods that fit SNP needs. These insights point to a broader opportunity because with clear pathways and consistent planning, agricultural commodity organizations can become vital partners in strengthening the school food system.

Creating and expanding these connections would not only benefit SNPs but could also support other initiatives, such as the FNSNP and other school food efforts across the province.

Establishing relationships with commodity organizations can help these programs identify suppliers, streamline logistics, support mapping of the food supply system, and access locally produced foods more easily.

By formalizing these partnerships, school food programs can achieve multiple goals at once:

- Ensure schools have reliable access to safe, high-quality local foods.
- Reduce administrative and logistical burdens on school staff and volunteers.
- Create stable and scaled markets for Ontario farmers and processors.
- Support student food literacy through education from commodity groups.
- Enable a scalable model that can be replicated by other organizations to expand the farm-to-school value chain.

Food safety:

Many commodity groups (like Ontario Apple Growers) already meet programs like CanadaGAP for food safety requirements.

Formalizing partnerships with agricultural commodity organizations implementation timeframe

Short to medium term (1–2 years)	Partnership agreements can begin quickly with interested commodity groups and processors, with expansion to other sectors over time.
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C. Support Local Food Innovation and Processing for Schools

Ontario should establish a dedicated funding stream to support farmers, packers, and processors in developing innovative, school-friendly local food products and processing solutions. While some SNPs rely on single-serve options for convenience and food safety, there is growing interest in reducing packaging and offering more fresh, minimally processed, and environmentally sustainable foods.

Popular single-serve products in SNPs:

- Apple slices
- Greenhouse cherry tomatoes
- Frozen berries
- Other portioned fruit and vegetable options

Investing in local food innovation and processing capacity would help make Ontario-grown food more accessible to schools year-round. This could include items such as frozen fruits and vegetables, prepared soups, sauces, and other healthy ready-to-use products. A model for this approach exists in the Grow Ontario Strategy, which emphasizes “supporting organizations and communities undertaking food supply chain initiatives to increase Ontario-grown food for Ontarians.”

Existing programs such as the former [Supply Chain Stability and Adaptability Program](#) and the [School Food Infrastructure Fund](#) (SFIF) provide strong examples to build upon. The SFIF has recently supported both large-scale warehousing upgrades and smaller infrastructure improvements for non-profit organizations involved in school food programs, while the Supply Chain program could be re-established with a focus on innovations that bring more local food into schools. Putting efforts towards funds like these could strengthen local processing and distribution capacity, support community food systems, and make it easier for schools to serve healthy, Ontario-grown foods year-round.

Organizations like the Schad Foundation, Greenbelt Foundation, and Sustain Ontario, who supported this report, are well-positioned to amplify this recommendation with government partners. By highlighting the alignment with existing provincial strategies and the tangible benefits for both schools and the agri-food sector, these organizations can help champion the establishment of a funding stream that drives innovation and strengthens Ontario’s commitment to feeding students with local food.

Supporting local food innovation and processing implementation timeframe

Medium to long term (3–5 years)	Developing new funding mechanisms and supporting innovation within the processing sector will take time but can build on existing provincial strategies and programs.
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D. Develop a Seasonal Menu Toolkit for Schools

Many SNP coordinators and volunteers are already doing an excellent job sourcing food for their programs. A seasonal menu toolkit would act as a practical asset to help them build on this success, supporting schools as they move toward purchasing more Ontario-grown foods. The toolkit would provide clear, easy-to-use guidance on what produce is in season, helping programs make informed choices whether they purchase from distributors or rely on grocery stores. This ensures that even when schools self-buy, they can prioritize in season, local products.

There is already a strong foundation to build from. The Ontario SNP Southwest Region website includes resources such as a [food literacy toolkit](#) with produce-specific guides for a variety of different popular produce for the program. There is also the Foodland Ontario's [seasonal availability guide](#). These tools provide valuable information, but they are scattered across multiple places and are geared toward general awareness or focusing on making healthy food choices. A consolidated, user-friendly local toolkit would bring this information together in a way that is directly useful for the people designing menus for SNPs.

To be most effective, the toolkit should:

- Highlight the top 10 foods that are locally grown that are purchased by SNPs.
- Be tailored for different procurement methods (bulk distributors and self-buying through retail).
- Account for varying levels of school food infrastructure (e.g., refrigeration, storage, and prep capacity).
- Highlight seasonal availability, menu planning ideas, and recipes that align with SNP guidelines.
- Emphasize Ontario-grown produce, reinforcing the educational value of connecting students with local food.

Harvest of the Month: A Simple Step Toward Seasonal Menus

Harvest of the Month is a great example of how SNPs can start small while making a big impact. By highlighting an in-season local product and introducing students to the farmers who grow it, this initiative builds awareness, supports local agriculture, and connects students to the source of their food. It also helps schools begin integrating seasonal menu planning without overhauling their entire program, making it an accessible first step toward a broader seasonal toolkit.

Developing a seasonal menu toolkit implementation timeframe

Short term (within 1 year)	The toolkit can be developed quickly using existing resources and regional expertise.
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E. Streamline Data Collection and Reporting Systems

A key opportunity to strengthen Ontario’s SNPs would be exploring the adoption of a province-wide digital reporting tool, such as Prince Edward Island’s [Bon Appétit](#) platform. This tool could serve as both an ordering and reporting system, reducing the administrative burden on school staff and volunteers while generating reliable, real-time data on food procurement. Importantly, Bon Appétit has built-in flexibility to accommodate a variety of delivery models, making it adaptable to Ontario’s diverse SNP landscape.

Distributors are well-positioned to integrate into such a system, since many of their ordering platforms already track sales, delivery, and product sourcing. A tool like Bon Appétit would allow them to upload and share this information seamlessly, creating efficiencies for suppliers while giving administrators accurate and consistent data. New Hampshire’s pilot project offers another example, where a centralized food tracking system provided consistency across districts and streamlined communication between schools and vendors.

Adopting a province-wide system would bring multiple benefits:

- Improved accountability
- Stronger evidence for policymaking
- Reduced reporting duplication
- More transparent sourcing information

For schools, volunteers, and farmers, this would ease communication and ordering, while for distributors, it would simplify their role and make participation in SNPs more efficient and attractive.

Streamlining data collection and reporting systems implementation timeframe

Medium to long term (3–5 years)	Implementing a province-wide data system will require coordination, piloting, and technical development before a full rollout.
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F. Invest In Tools and Networks that Connect Farmers to SNPs

Building strong relationships between farmers and school food programs is essential to improving the accessibility, consistency, and volume of local food supplied to Ontario’s SNPs and broader school food programs. Supporting these connections creates a foundation for dependable supply chains, can help reduce administrative barriers for local food getting into schools, and ensures farmers have a clear understanding of the opportunities to engage with SNPs. Strengthening links between farmers and the distributors already connected to school food systems can further streamline logistics, making it easier for local products to reach schools efficiently and reliably.

Time and investments should be directed toward initiatives that strengthen these relationships, including the following pilot projects (*discussed further in Section 3.2*):

- **Local Food Distributor Pilot Project:** Leveraging distributors’ existing relationships with local farmers to increase access to consistent, regionally sourced products for **Farmer Resource Hub Pilot Project:** Establishing a province-wide network of farmers interested in supplying SNPs, providing a centralized platform for connection, information sharing, and relationship building (including networking events).
- **Expanding Ontario Apple Procurement Pilot Project:** Using a model that clearly outlines product specifications, volumes, and timing for a commodity group. Therefore, building connections between growers, packers, distributors, and schools to expand local procurement.

Together, these projects create a scalable framework for building relationships between farmers and SNPs. Beyond increasing access to fresh, healthy, local foods for students, they strengthen Ontario’s broader agricultural system by creating demand pathways that farmers can depend on.

Organizations such as the Greenbelt Foundation, Sustain Ontario, and the Schad Foundation, are well-positioned to champion and advocate for these initiatives and communicate their benefits to the provincial government and other supportive organizations.

Investing in tools and networks that connect farmers to SNPs implementation timeframe	
Short to medium term (1–3 years)	Working towards the proposed pilot projects, networks and engagement tools can be expanded and scaled across the province in the near term.



G. Mapping the School Food Supply System

Mapping the supply system for school food programs can provide benefits for planning, coordination, and transparency. By identifying and visualizing the warehouses, distributors, food hubs, and farms involved in supplying local food to schools, partners can gain a clearer understanding of the procurement and logistics landscape. This type of mapping helps pinpoint gaps and opportunities, strengthens regional connections, and supports more efficient use of existing infrastructure. [ConnectON](#) is an economic development tool that provides geo-mapped data and dashboards that could be a good starting point for this type of mapping.

A comprehensive map would highlight food hubs, which play an important role in aggregating, processing, and distributing local food. Expanding or leveraging existing hubs can improve regional access to local food, simplify logistics for schools, and reduce barriers for smaller producers who want to participate. Identifying where these hubs already exist, and where new ones may be needed, can guide future investment and collaboration.

Centralized kitchens are another resource that can be incorporated into mapping efforts. These shared or institutional kitchen spaces offer certified facilities for preparing and distributing food on a larger scale. Including these facilities on a provincial map would help identify where additional kitchen capacity could be used to process or package local food for school meals.

Learning from Prince Edward Island's School Food Program

Prince Edward Island's School Food Program offers a strong model for how public-facing mapping can support communication and coordination. Their [website](#) features a Google Map that identifies distributors, food hubs, and food service providers across the province, alongside a list of vendors and the schools they support. This accessible approach helps share information, promote participating businesses, and build public awareness of the local food system that underpins school meals.

Examples of Centralized Kitchens in Ontario

- [Commissary Kitchen](#) (Hamilton)
- [Harvest Commercial Kitchen](#) (Ottawa)
- [Kingston East Community Centre](#) (Kingston)
- [Kitchen24](#) (Toronto)
- [The Kitchen Collective](#) (Hamilton)

In addition to mapping food hubs, it would be valuable to include farms and greenhouses that are both currently involved in school food programs and not yet engaged. This would help identify where new partnership opportunities exist and highlight areas with potential for greater local food connections. Collaboration with agricultural commodity organizations (e.g., OFVGA) could further support the development of these maps and strengthen relationships across the supply chain.

Beyond logistics, mapping supports transparency and promotion. When publicly available, this information can raise awareness of participating producers and distributors, celebrate local success stories, and make it easier for new partners to get involved.

Culinary schools can also support local food preparation, training, and partnerships for school food programs:

- [Algonquin College](#) (Ottawa)
- [Canadore College](#) (North Bay)
- [Centennial College](#) (Toronto)
- [Conestoga College](#) (Waterloo)
- [Fanshawe College](#) (London)
- [George Brown College](#) (Toronto)
- [Georgian College](#) (Barrie)
- [Humber College](#) (Toronto)
- [Niagara College](#) (Niagara-on-the-Lake)
- [St. Clair College](#) (Windsor)

Mapping the school food supply system implementation timeframe

Short to medium term (within 1-3 year)

Developing a comprehensive map will require coordination among regional partners and dedicated staff time, but can begin with existing data and tools like ConnectON.



3.2 Pilot projects

Based on the findings of this research, several pilot projects are recommended for consideration, with a particular focus on opportunities in the Southwest and Central West Regions.

Pilot 1: Local food distributor

*Key research question: Can centralized procurement of local food be better coordinated within a SNP region/selection of regions through a **coordinated bulk local food purchasing initiative**?*

Collaborating with local food distributors presents a timely opportunity for SNPs to gain access to more local food. Centralizing procurement and delivery is a proven, effective model.⁸ Leveraging opportunities to source more local food at-scale will require testing a coordinated bulk purchasing initiative, where schools can place orders for commonly sourced items and distributors can deliver in a timely manner according to school needs.

The aim of this pilot project will be three-fold:

- 1) Gain an understanding of the **top 5-10 locally produced foods** most sourced across SNPs
- 2) **Enable bulk purchasing** and distribution of these top products across the region, prioritizing local sourcing (leveraging existing distribution pathways where available)
- 3) **Evaluate** the effectiveness and any long-term benefits of a more centralized approach to procurement and distribution of food for SNPs

The first step in this pilot project will be to establish a provincial food and logistics coordinator. The provincial food and logistics coordinator's role will be to support with convening the regional SNP food and logistics coordinators and gathering data with the purpose of supporting local food procurement. To support this position and the development of the core competencies, a collaboration with SNO, Sustain Ontario, The Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, and the Ontario Produce Marketing Association will be beneficial.

For this pilot project, the Provincial Food and Logistics Coordinator (as per our recommendation), regional distributors/wholesalers, and Community Partners will each play distinct roles. Their activities will range from early data collection and coordination, to adapting

⁸ For example, through the Southwest Region's Fruit and Vegetable Delivery Program, and Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program.

distribution systems, to supporting schools with procurement and promotion over the course of three years. Table 5 below outlines the key responsibilities and timelines for each group.

Table 5. Breakdown of the activity and timelines for the different key leads in the local food distributor pilot project.

Key lead	Activity	Timeline
Provincial food and logistics coordinator	Collaborate with Community Partners and schools to collect data on the top 5-10 local foods currently sourced by schools	Early year 1
	Convene local SNP food and logistics coordinators and local food distributors to collaborate, forming a local school food supply hub.	Year 2-3
	Prepare a briefing with estimates of annual volumes and specifications (e.g. varieties, sizes, etc.) of fruit and vegetable products in their region	Early year 1
	Ensure Lead Agencies and Community Partners have the resources they need to promote the pilot with their schools	Year 1-3
Local distributors and wholesalers	Collaborate with regional food distributors, SNP representatives, and agri-food sector stakeholders to determine gaps in local food procurement	Year 1
	Adapt existing online ordering systems to share data in a more provincially-centralized way	Year 2
	Procure and deliver food directly to schools in the region and track local product origin and volumes throughout the school year	Year 3
	Collaborate with the provincial food and logistics coordinator to regularly report on total and local product origin and volumes	Year 3
Lead Agency / Community Partners	Support with data collection to determine the top 5-10 local foods sourced by schools	Early year 1
	Collaborate with the Lead Agencies and provincial food and logistics coordinator to share relevant data to inform the informational briefing with specifications for schools	Early year 1
	Communicate with local schools about the opportunity to procure their food and beverage products through the local distributor	Year 1-2

Pilot 2: Farmer Resource Hub and Networking Events

*Key research question: **How can farmers be better supported and connected** into pathways that bring local food into SNPs?*

Currently, there is no clear pathway for farmers who want to supply food into SNPs, either through local distributors/wholesalers, directly to SNPs, or directly to schools. Farmers often lack information about program requirements, purchasing processes, or who to contact. At the same time, distributors and SNPs need reliable sources of local products that align with program needs. Creating more accessible pathways and resources for farmers is a critical step toward strengthening the local food value chain for SNPs.

The aim of this pilot project will be three-fold:

- **Develop a farmer resource hub** hosted on SNO’s website, outlining what farmers need to know about SNPs (nutrition requirements, food safety, packaging, delivery requirements) and how to connect with local distributors or schools.
- **Engage local agricultural organizations** (e.g., OFA, OFVGA, OPMA, and other Ontario producer associations) to share the resource hub with farmers producing in-demand foods.
- **Host a farmer–distributor networking event** to build relationships, answer questions, and foster long-term connections that can help bring more local food into schools.

For this pilot project, the Provincial Food and Logistics Coordinator (as per our recommendation) will take the lead in developing the resource hub on the SNO website.⁹ They will also coordinate outreach to agricultural organizations and plan the farmer–distributor–school networking event. Regional distributors/wholesalers and Community Partners will play supportive roles by identifying top local foods already being purchased by schools and helping share the resources hub through their networks. This project emphasizes clear communication and relationship-building so farmers can more easily connect to the SNP supply chain. Table 6 outlines the roles, activities, and timelines.

⁹ In the absence of a provincial coordinator, an organization like Sustain Ontario could take on the leadership of this project.

Table 6. Breakdown of the activity and timelines for the different key leads in the connecting farmers to SNP pilot.

Key lead	Activity	Timeline
Provincial food and logistics coordinator	Identify top local foods already being purchased (linked to Pilot Project 1 data collection)	Early year 1
	Develop farmer-focused webpage content for the SNO website	Year 1-2
	Work with SNO to launch the updated resource hub	Year 2
	Create communication packages for agricultural organizations, including outreach language and graphics	Year 2
	Develop and manage an interest form/email sign-up on the SNO website to share updates or opportunities	Year 2-ongoing
	Coordinate farmer–distributor–school networking event	Year 3
Local distributors and wholesalers	Share purchasing data to help identify top local foods	Early year 1
	Participate in networking event to explain procurement processes and opportunities for farmers	Year 3
Lead Agency / Community Partners and local agricultural organizations (OFA, OFVGA, OPMA, etc.)	Share outreach materials with local farmers	Year 2
	Promote website resources and event through newsletters, meetings, and networks	Year 2-3

Suggested Website Content Outline (on SNO site)

Title: Supplying Local Food to Ontario’s Student Nutrition Programs

Sections:

- **Introduction:** Why local food matters in schools (short overview).
- **How the Student Nutrition Program Works:** Simple explanation of the different regions, procurement, distribution, and school participation.
- **Steps for Farmers to Get Involved:**
 - Join the farmer-distributor-school networking event.
 - Connect with your local distributor/wholesaler (directory or links).
 - Explore direct-to-school opportunities (if available).
 - Review seasonal needs, top foods purchased, and opportunities for preserving food.
- **Top Local Foods Purchased by Schools:** Highlight 5–10 top local products.
- **Frequently Asked Questions:** SNP nutrition guidelines, payment terms, volumes, and food safety requirements.
- **Stay Connected:** Interest form/email sign-up for updates.

Pilot 3: Expanding Ontario Apple Procurement for Student Nutrition Programs

Key research question: How can partnerships with Ontario's agricultural organizations support and expand local food procurement for SNPs, creating stronger, long-term connections between farmers and schools?

Ontario's apple industry is well-positioned to supply SNPs. Apples are abundant in Ontario, have a long storage life, and are already sorted by size and quality through existing packers. All growers selling through packers are required to be part of the CanadaGAP food safety program, which ensures their apples meet the standards needed for procurement into SNPs. Smaller apples, often sold in bags or at lower retail prices, are ideal for students and could be redirected into schools with clear procurement specifications. With early forecasts on volume, variety, and packaging, growers and packers can commit to supplying apples that meet school needs, while distributors can coordinate transportation to ensure cost-effective delivery. This approach builds on the sector's existing capacity and aligns with schools' desire for nutritious, student-friendly, and Ontario-grown food.

Ontario Apple Growers have also expressed interest in supporting this type of initiative: "If there was a spec list of the regions and counties that identified what type of fruit they would want, Ontario Apples could help coordinate where the apples could be found. We can also provide a list of packers who could be connected with these programs." Their willingness to share information between schools, distributors, and packers strengthens the feasibility of this pilot. Table 7 below outlines the roles, activities, and timelines needed to test and evaluate this model.



Table 7. Breakdown of the activity and timelines for the different key leads for working with Ontario Apple Growers to get more Ontario apples into schools.

Key lead	Activity	Timeline
Lead Agency / Community Partners	Develop apple-specific procurement guidelines (specs on apple size, preferred varieties, packaging in 10 lb bags or 42 lb boxes, timing/seasonality).	Early year 1
	Coordinate with Ontario Apple Growers (OAG) to identify participating packers and growers.	Year 1
	Facilitate early forecasting of school demand (top 3–5 apple varieties, volume, delivery frequency).	Year 1
	Work with distributors to design delivery pathways into schools.	Year 2
	Share procurement resources with SNP coordinators and schools.	Year 2
Ontario Apple Growers & Packers	Provide lists of packers and growers able to meet SNP specs.	Year 1
	Commit to contracts based on early demand forecasts.	Year 2
	Sort and package apples according to agreed specifications.	Year 2
Local distributors and wholesalers	Partner with packers to transport apples into schools.	Year 2
	Share delivery logistics and help schools understand ordering procedures.	Year 2

This apple-focused pilot could serve as a model for future initiatives with other agricultural organizations, such as the Ontario Tender Fruit Growers or the Berry Growers of Ontario, helping to establish scalable pathways for increasing the presence of local fruit in SNPs across the province. By connecting farmers, packers, schools, and SNPs, these initiatives strengthen local food networks and foster long-term relationships among all actors in the supply chain. They also provide opportunities for agricultural organizations to engage directly with students and educate them about where their food comes from.

Ontario Apple Growers sends posters showcasing different apples grown in Ontario to classrooms, helping students learn about local agriculture and reinforcing the connection between the farm and the food they eat.

3.3 Conclusion

Ontario's SNPs have a powerful role to play in strengthening connections between schools, farmers, and the broader agri-food sector. By building on best practices like centralized systems, bulk purchasing, and strong farmer-distributor relationships, SNPs can expand access to Ontario-grown food in ways that are practical, affordable, and sustainable. The next step is clear: stronger investment in collaboration across government, Lead Agencies, distributors, and farm organizations is needed to scale these efforts. With coordinated investment and innovation, Ontario can ensure that students are nourished with healthy, local foods while supporting the vitality of the province's agri-food sector.



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