


Growing Local:

Strengthening School Food Programs with Ontario Food

A conversation with the Ontario Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food to discuss the soon-to-be released report
March 5, 2026

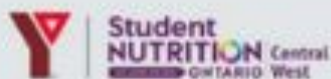


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Our Goals

- Understand the landscape of school food program purchasing in Ontario including barriers and opportunities from the perspectives of both the agri-food sector as well as school food programs.
- Identify affordable, reliable, and straightforward opportunities that exist or that could be developed to bolster local food procurement (with a focus on fruits and vegetables) in school food programming through policy, infrastructure and other solutions.



Overview of Recommendations

Develop a **Provincial School Food and Logistics Coordinator**

Why this matters:

- Local food coordination varies across Ontario's 14 SNP regions.
- A provincial coordinator would align efforts, reduce duplication, and connect partners.

Expected impact: Stronger collaboration, efficient procurement, and more Ontario-grown foods in schools.



Formalize **Partnerships** with **Agricultural Commodity Organizations**

Why this matters:

- Ontario commodity groups can supply safe, high-quality local food but lack structured pathways to schools.
- Formal partnerships would simplify logistics and expand access.

Expected impact: Consistent local supply, stable markets for farmers, and stronger food literacy.



Support Investment in School Food Infrastructure & Staff/Volunteers

Why this matters:

- In order to find, receive, and prepare more local foods, schools need appropriate places, and enough people, to do the work

Expected impact: More capacity to access and use a wider variety of foods; more interest from schools to purchase local.



Support **Local Food Innovation** and **Processing** for Schools

Why this matters:

- Schools need convenient, healthy, locally produced foods.
- Farmers and processors lack resources to adapt products for school use.
- A funding stream would spark innovation and expand supply options.

Expected impact: More year-round Ontario foods, in different formats for use, and stronger regional processing capacity.



Support **Local Food Innovation** and **Processing** for Schools

How to make it happen:

- Establish a dedicated funding stream for school-focused food innovation.
- Support processors to develop frozen, portioned, or ready-to-serve local products.
- Model after the former Supply Chain Stability and Adaptability Program, or School Food Infrastructure Fund.
- Work together to champion a new funding stream.



Develop a **Seasonal Menu Toolkit** for Schools

Why this matters:

- There is a lack of easy, centralized guidance on what's in season locally.
 - Information exists across multiple sources but isn't tailored for schools' uses.

Expected impact: Easier planning, more Ontario-grown products, and increased student food literacy.



Streamline Data Collection and Reporting Systems

Why this matters:

- Reporting and ordering can be time-consuming and inconsistent across SNPs.
- Lack of standardized data limits understanding of local food purchasing.

Expected impact: More efficient reporting, stronger evidence for decision-making, and simpler processes for schools and suppliers.



Streamline Data Collection and Reporting Systems

How to make it happen:

- Adopt a province-wide digital platform. See PEI's Bon Appétit platform for an example.
- Integrate distributor data for real-time procurement tracking.
- Coordinate training and rollout.
- Start small before scaling province-wide.



Invest in tools & networks that **connect farmers** to SNPs

Why this matters:

- Many farmers are interested in selling to schools but lack clear entry points.
- Distributors and schools need better tools to identify and engage local suppliers.

Expected impact: Stronger farmer-school relationships, dependable supply chains, and local economic benefits.



Mapping the School Food Supply System

Why this matters:

- Ontario lacks a complete picture of how local food moves (or could move) from farms to schools.

Expected impact: Better planning, identification of supply gaps, opportunity to find or create more Hubs, and greater transparency and engagement.



Mapping the School Food Supply System

How to make it happen:

- Use platforms like ConnectON to map farms, food hubs, and distributors.
- Collaborate with commodity groups to collect and verify data.
- Include both active and potential suppliers.
- Make maps public to celebrate local participation and attract new partners.



Discussion

Are these recommendations on track? Any concerns?

Do any additional barriers and opportunities come to mind?

How can we advance these recommendations?

What's doable? What's a first step? Which are most important to you to move forward?

Who needs to hear these recommendations?

Reach Out!

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