



**May 26, 2016**

The Honourable Liz Sandals  
Minister of Education  
Ministry of Education  
22nd Floor, Mowat Block  
900 Bay Street, Toronto, Ontario M7A 1L2

**Re: Consultations on the Future of Experiential Learning in Ontario**

Dear Minister Sandals,

On behalf of Sustain Ontario and the Ontario Edible Education Network I am very pleased to provide feedback in support of the Ontario Ministry of Education's *Community-Connected Experiential Learning Policy Framework*.

Across the province individuals and groups are working with schools to help get students eating, growing, cooking, celebrating, and learning about healthy, local and sustainably produced food. These efforts lend themselves to being experiential in nature, and they are often taught that way. We applaud the Ministry's efforts to expand experiential learning opportunities throughout our school system and offer the following feedback to inform your consultation process.

**Q1. What are some innovative opportunities for experiential learning that might be possible within your organizations under the proposed policy framework?**

The organizations that we work with provide a wealth of experiential learning opportunities for children and youth in schools across Ontario. These include support with establishing school gardens and visiting community gardens, cooking / food skills programs, farm visits, and visits from farmers. All of these activities allow for a wide range of experiential learning opportunities.

The proposed policy framework looks to have the potential to better support all of these types of initiatives by offering more opportunities for students to connect with external organizations, more legitimacy for experiential learning opportunities, and more opportunities for students to gain credit from engaging in good food programming.

The following are examples of innovative opportunities for experiential learning that organizations in our network currently offer:

- Organizations such as Ecosource (Region of Peel), Neighbour to Neighbour (Hamilton), The Stop Community Food Centre (GTA), Green Thumbs Growing Kids (GTA), Growing Up Organic (Ottawa), Seeds for Change (York Region), the 'Kids Can Grow' Program (Manitoulin Island),

FoodShare (GTA), and the Windsor/Essex County Community Garden Collective, to name just a few, support garden programming either off-site or on-site at schools. Gardening programs allow students to learn the hands-on skills of growing food and learning about where their food comes from. Students also learn about real-world themes such as about worms and other life in the soil, the importance of pollinators, adaptation, habitats in the garden, biodiversity, seasonal cycles and food seasonality.

- Many farms across Ontario, including Everdale (Wellington County) and the Headwaters Food & Farming Alliance (Dufferin County and Caledon) offer class visits from farmers or give students the opportunity to visit the farms and learn a wide range of topics in a powerful outdoor classroom setting.
- OAFE (Ontario) offers experiential activities such as an Ag Career Competition, which students can participate in. These events allow students to engage in hands-on tasks which require application of both technical skills and essential skills. The competitions also connect students with community partners and identify career pathways to a variety of occupations.

Other opportunities for experiential learning include:

- Schools may be able to provide opportunities for students to visit the sites where their Student Nutrition Program food is made to learn about food production.
- Some online virtual farm tools can be used to support classroom learning. These can enable students to assess how much food is needed to feed their class (math), assess the nutritional value of food (health), and determine the social impacts of production and distribution (social studies). Students can track food budgets and where every cent of a meal goes to, as well as evaluate the whole value chain of production (economics).

**Q2. How can you support students, during their experiential learning opportunity, in developing the skills needed for success in the future, such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, communication, and collaboration?**

Quite simply, food can be a powerful catalyst for acquiring the personal skills that contribute to long-term success. Organizations that teach food literacy regularly embed skills such as critical thinking and collaboration into their activities. Hands-on food literacy education initiatives such as gardening and cooking easily lend themselves to real-world problem-solving and communications. They bring curriculum material to life because everyone needs to eat and has a connection to food. These activities also inherently require students to think about complex issues including our health, the environment, the economy, and our broader food system.

The following are some examples.

- The process of planning out and harvesting a school garden inherently brings in **numerical skills** (“If we have 2 square feet of space and want to plant at least 16 seeds how far apart do they need to be planted?”); **communications and problem solving** (“how do we make a plan to take care of our garden and then put that plan in place?”); **creativity** (“how do we make a garden that’s beautiful for everyone who passes by?”); and **critical thinking** (“what are the trade-offs of planting zucchini as opposed to red peppers given our limited space?”).

Students learn hands-on skills such as measuring ("using non-standard units" in younger grades, and using rulers and measuring tapes in older grades); mapping (of the garden); and building (e.g. structures strong enough to support climbing plants). Garden educators may tie in language (both English and French) and art to garden programming, for instance having students write poems about composting; draw up-close pictures of flowers or animals; act out different garden scenarios; and create packages for seeds when learning about seed saving (this can connect to media studies - how to make a package that's attractive to buyers and also includes all of the necessary information).

Gardens offer many opportunities for students to show leadership and mentor each other as older grades often work alongside younger grades. They also enable parents, grandparents and community members to be involved in intergenerational and often cross-cultural learning through sharing recipes or discussing different planting methods.

- Participating in a program such as Scarborough's Bendale Market Garden (an initiative in partnership with FoodShare), in which students grow a sizeable amount of produce in their school garden to sell at the local farmer's market, offers the opportunity for students to answer questions such as "How much should this bunch of carrots be sold for?"; "How do we make our stand attractive for producers?"; and "How do we make sure our produce reaches buyers while it's still fresh?".
- School-based culinary programs, including those that are supported by organizations such as Growing Chefs! Ontario (London), Ecosource (Peel Region), Farmers in the Playground (Muskoka), and FoodShare (GTA), can equally bring these learnings to life: "If we double our recipe, how many cups of flour do we need?"; "How could we improve the look / presentation of this meal?"; "This soup looks a bit watery – what could we do to make it thicker?".

Those who provide experiential food-based learning regularly hear that hands-on experiences that let students connect with food are exciting, that they engage even those students who are less enthusiastic about school than others, and that they help make learning real as illustrated by this quote: "Wow – I never understood fractions before but now that I had to measure out a half a cup of tomatoes to add to the salsa recipe I get it!".

### **Q3. What are some of the challenges or barriers to your participation in providing these experiential learning opportunities? What are the solutions?**

- Organizations are often financially stretched to offer their services. Potential solutions include offering granting programs or fees-for-service to support the time of community organizations such as garden educators and/or cooking programs.
- Transportation costs are often a barrier for classes to participate in field trips. Decision-makers could facilitate transportation so that students can access community gardens, community kitchens and farms.
- Teachers are often stretched to understand the immediate curriculum connections for experiential programming. It could be valuable for organizations to have access to a curriculum "expert" so that they can make the curriculum connections of their experiential learning opportunity explicit for teachers.

- It is sometimes difficult for organizations to reach the teachers who are looking for programs. This could be addressed by developing a centralized list of community connections. The Hamilton Edible Education Guide provides an exciting model of a centralized place for teachers looking for activities: <http://www.tastebudshamilton.ca/edibleeducation/>. Decision-makers could help provide forums for stakeholders to engage, better understand each other, and partner to advance school food programming. These forums could be particularly effective at the local level and could be initiated by school boards or other decision-makers. School Boards could also be encouraged to forward community partner bulletins to teachers, principals and other staff.
- Organizations usually connect with specific teachers or principals. If there is staff turnover a program opportunity may vanish. School boards can be encouraged to provide a stable contact person for food-related programming so that there is some continuity in the case of school staff turnover.
- School boards can sometimes be difficult to navigate when an organization needs to gain permission for a program to happen in a school.

The Ontario Edible Education Network has documented a wide range of opportunities to support school food initiatives in its 2014 document [Advancing Good Healthy Food in Schools: Envisioning How a Healthy School Food Environment Could be Moved Forward in Ontario](#).

**Q4. As a business or community organization, how can the ministry support your efforts in providing experiential learning opportunities for all students, as outlined in the policy framework?**

The Ministry of Education could support the efforts of our members, who are providing experiential learning opportunities relating to healthy food systems, by:

- Mandating experiential food literacy programming, as cooking and gardening, in schools. A number of stakeholders have developed recommendations about what this could entail including the Ontario Home Economics Association and the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.
- Partnering with community educators to provide professional development. One option is to organize hands-on professional development days for teachers that involve gardening, cooking, sprouting and curriculum lessons to bring hands-on experiences to staff.
- Scaling up the Specialist High School Major (SHSM) program, which offers culinary, horticulture and agriculture specializations. These offer powerful opportunities for high school students to learn about food systems and to engage in experiential activities such as preparing food for Student Nutrition Programs and other meal programs.
- Integrating more opportunities for youth leadership and engagement into the school curriculum, including peer training programs relating to good food education and engaging students in designing innovative food programs for their schools.

Thank you again for proposing an expanded framework for Experiential Learning in Ontario. Sustain Ontario and the Ontario Edible Education Network are very pleased to see this critical issue being

made a priority for children and youth in the province. Please don't hesitate to contact us should you want to discuss any of our comments further.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Carolyn Webb". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Carolyn Webb**

Coordinator, Ontario Edible Education Network  
Sustain Ontario - the Alliance for Healthy Food and Farming