

Advancing Good Healthy Food in Schools

Envisioning How a Healthy School Food Environment
Could be Moved Forward in Ontario

October 2014



About Sustain Ontario

Sustain Ontario – the Alliance for Healthy Food and Farming was established in 2009 to be the provincial voice for organizations looking to improve our food system into one that is healthy, equitable, ecological and financially viable. Sustain Ontario works collaboratively to connect members, showcase food system innovations and champions, explore and research pressing issues in the food system, and advocate for a healthy and sustainable food system.

Sustain Ontario members represent diverse sectors - farming, health, food safety, environment, business, education, academia, government, Student Nutrition Programs (school meal & snack programs) and non- profit. Sustain Ontario engages with its membership and supporters to take a collaborative approach to research, policy development, and action by addressing intersecting issues related to healthy food and local sustainable agriculture.

Sustain Ontario is a project of Tides Canada Initiatives Society (TCI). TCI is a shared administrative platform that provides professional organizational support (e.g. governance, financial management, HR, and regulatory compliance) to 40 social justice and environmental projects.

About the Ontario Edible Education Network

The **Ontario Edible Education Network** has been established as an initiative of Sustain Ontario to bring together groups in Ontario that are doing great work to connect children and youth with good food. The network better enables these groups to share resources, ideas and experience, work together on advocacy, and facilitate efforts across the province to get children and youth eating, growing, cooking, celebrating, and learning about healthy, local and sustainably produced food.

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About Sustain Ontario's Say Yes! to Good Healthy Food in Schools Initiative

Everyone has the opportunity to Say Yes! to Good Healthy Food in Schools.

In March 2013 Ontario's Healthy Kids Strategy recommended a universal Student Nutrition Program for all Ontario publicly funded elementary and secondary schools. The recommendation put forward that programs should provide food literacy education including learning about where food comes from, the hands-on experience of cooking, and links to the school curriculum.



To build on this momentum, Sustain Ontario's Edible Education Network has developed a toolkit of case studies, fact sheets, presentations, messages and stories to help decision-makers envision how a stronger school food environment could be advanced in Ontario. We hope that parents, teachers, program providers, and other advocates will be able to use these resources to make the case to their provincial, municipal, and school decision-makers for stronger school food programs for all of our kids.

Visit sustainontario.com/work/edible-education/say-yes/ for more *Say Yes! to Good Healthy Food in Schools* resources.

We thank the following foundations for their support for this initiative:



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- Cooking classes at The Stop Community Food Centre

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Our Current Opportunity

Momentum is building for school food programs in Ontario. In 2012, the province set a target to reduce childhood obesity by 20% in five years. The Government of Ontario then established the Healthy Kids Panel (HKP) to develop a strategy to achieve this target. In March 2013 the HKP presented *No Time to Wait: The Healthy Kids Strategy (HKS)* to the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

Part 2 of the Strategy puts forward recommendations to “Change the Food Environment”, with Recommendation 2.8 focusing on establishing a universal Student Nutrition Program for all publicly funded schools across Ontario along with complementary food literacy education (see the full text of the recommendation below).

Purpose of this Paper:

Advancing Good Healthy Food in Schools has been developed to **inform the advancement of healthy and supportive school food environments in Ontario** as a part of Sustain Ontario’s Say Yes! to Good Healthy Food in Schools initiative. Recommendation 2.8 of the HKS has put forward a vision that contains many of the elements needed for a strong program. The ideas put forward in the pages that follow can inform decision-makers and community groups alike to how they can Say Yes! to advancing a universal Student Nutrition Program and support healthier school food environments.

Opportunity to Build on our Student Nutrition Program Successes:

The Government of Ontario currently provides funding to support Student Nutrition Programs across the province. It is estimated that over the 2011-12 school year, close to 700,000 students participated in government supported breakfast, lunch and snack programs. The province has since made a number of additional funding commitments following the release of the Healthy Kids Strategy.

Alongside the provincial commitment of funding, some municipalities support SNPs with program funding. The City of Toronto has been a leader in this area: in its 2014 operating budget the city increased its investment for SNPs by \$1.77 Million, bringing its support to 14% of participating program costs. Although most municipalities do not currently provide direct funding for SNPs, they do assign resources to support the programs through the involvement of their public health units.

In the meantime, evaluations of Ontario SNPs have shown that meal programs benefit academic achievement and learning outcomes, student health, classroom behaviour, school relationships, and a host of other indicators of student wellbeing. The significant efforts of coordinators, schools, and volunteers across the province are clearly making a difference.

While meals and snacks help students come to school ready to learn, these programs also offer major opportunities to bring related food literacy programming into schools. With the support of community partners, many SNPs across the province have been enabling students to learn about where food comes from, how to grow and prepare food, as well as to learn healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime.

With the release of the Healthy Kids Strategy, which places an emphasis on healthy school food environments, our current moment in time offers an **opportunity to continue to expand the reach and impacts of these programs and to better to enable our children and youth to develop healthy eating habits and food skills for life.**

Recommendation 2.8 of the Healthy Kids Strategy: Establish a universal school nutrition program for all Ontario publicly funded elementary and secondary schools. Leverage existing school nutrition programs, extending them to reach every child. These programs should include learning about where food comes from and how it is grown, as well as the hands-on experience of cooking and access to healthy foods for those coming to school hungry. Every effort should be made to ensure these programs are culturally sensitive. Consider engaging corporate sponsors and using a competitive social finance approach to fund breakfast and lunch programs where required. Ensure the programs incorporate the key features of successful school-based initiatives, including: ensuring a long-term commitment (i.e., at least 12 months), providing teacher training, integrating the nutrition program with the curriculum, promoting leadership from students and school food service staff, and involving parents at school and at home. The programs should also work to develop fundraising activities that promote healthy foods.

Intended Audience of this Paper:

The paper has been written primarily to inform representatives from the Government of Ontario, local governments, school boards and trustees who are in a position to directly advance school food policies and programs. The document can also inform and support individuals and organizations that are advancing school food initiatives across the province.

Note that the paper is not intended to suggest adding to the existing workload of those who are currently operating SNPs in the province but rather to inform how additional supports could be provided to build capacity for more holistic and expanded programs.

Symbols and Terminology:

Throughout the pages a number of initiatives have been **Highlighted in Green**. These policies and programs were put forward by those interviewed as ones that could be further supported, scaled up, or looked to in any effort to build stronger school food environments.

The following symbols have been used throughout the document:



The Edible Education Network logo marks opportunities that the network feels well suited to support (provided that we can find the resources and capacity to do so). Section 5.0 provides an overview of how the network can Say Yes! to good healthy food in schools.



A star has been used to indicate top priority recommendations for decision-makers to take action on in the interest of advancing a healthy school environment in Ontario.

Throughout this paper the terms **Student Nutrition Programs (SNPs)** and **school food programs** are used. SNPs refer to programs under the provincially supported Ontario Student Nutrition Program model that provides meals and snacks to students, primarily within the school system. This paper has used the term “school food program(s)” to refer to the comprehensive set of meal programs and food literacy initiatives that can support the short and long-term healthy eating habits and wellbeing of children and youth.

Participants who Informed this Paper

This document has been informed by interviews with stakeholders who are advancing school food programs in the province. Participants provided ideas as well as policies and programs that can be modeled and moved forward by both government and non-government leaders.

A diversity of non-government stakeholders was contacted to inform this work. The following individuals agreed to provide input into the paper and to having their names included as having informed its pages. We thank them for contributing to this conversation.

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1.0 Key Priorities and Recommendations for Ontario

We all have the opportunity to Say Yes! to building stronger school food programs in Ontario. In support of advancing a more holistic approach to school food, as is suggested in Recommendation 2.8 of the Healthy Kids Strategy, Sustain Ontario's Edible Education Network is presenting a wide range of opportunities for decision-makers to show their support for healthy school food environments.

We would like to begin this document by putting forward some key priorities that we believe the Government of Ontario could advance that would make a significant contribution to the issue. We have also included how the Ontario Edible Education Network could contribute to these themes.

Priority Recommendations for the Government of Ontario:

1. Endorse a vision of a Universal Student Nutrition Program (See Section 4.1)

The Ontario Edible Education Network can provide support by working with stakeholders to develop a collaborative vision for a Universal Student Nutrition Program. The Network can also host discussions to evaluate a proposed model as opposed to evaluating existing programs (See Section 4.2).



2. Develop a funding plan for Student Nutrition Programs by 2016. In particular, exploring opportunities for local solutions including centralized food production and distribution could make a marked difference for the programs. (See Section 2.3.1)

The Ontario Edible Education Network can provide support by researching and documenting best practices including cost and funding structures and creating resources and by hosting discussions for people to share their reactions and perspectives.



3. Better integrate SNPs within the purview of the Ministry of Education, in particular the Ministry's Healthy Schools efforts (See Section 4.4)

4. Fund community partners and school coordinators to provide programming that supports healthy schools. (See Section 2.1)

5. Celebrate the good work that is being achieved by Student Nutrition Programs (See Section 2.2)

The Ontario Edible Education Network can provide support by promoting celebrations and telling stories, as well as by considering integrating a School Food Day with the Great Big Crunch.



2.0 Opportunities to Say Yes! to School Food Programs

Over the course of the discussions that informed this paper, participants offered a wide set of ideas and suggestions for how the provincial government and local representatives can Say Yes! to advancing school food programs in the province.


2.1 Support Community Partners and Partnerships


There is a significant opportunity for decision-makers to support established local partnerships and to help community groups advance school food initiatives. Community partners are a critical element of SNPs and food literacy efforts; however, community involvement would benefit from additional financial as well as other forms of support.

2.1.1 Involve and Support Community Partners in Schools

Participants commented that teachers are overloaded and that food programming takes time and expertise. Too much pressure is being put on individuals, both volunteers and staff, at the school level. Decision-makers can support programs by funding “work time” for school food programs within the context of a broad healthy schools framework. These champions could work with community partners, parents, students, as well as a wide range of others to support a healthy school environment. Participants also supported the work being done by the Ontario Home Economics Association as well as others who are advocating to get food skills back in the curriculum.

Opportunities for All Decision-Makers to Say Yes!:

Support and fund community partners to work with school and SNP staff. Not-for-profits  have access to volunteers, resources, and expertise that make them a valuable and cost-effective asset. They could be supported through ongoing funding or grant streams.

Fund school coordinators to champion healthy schools. These coordinators could support  SNPs and other school food programming.

- Some Ontario school boards have funded Education Assistants or consultants to support programs and bring a focus on physical activity and food and nutrition into the schools.
- Alberta’s **Apple Schools** model could be replicated in Ontario. This program hires individuals in schools to advance comprehensive school health including physical activity, mental health, food and nutrition, and other elements of healthy schools.
- Individuals could also be hired at the board level to work across schools. Some school boards in Ontario have funded nurses and physicians to better enable healthy school environments.

Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Focus the talents of its staff to help **support local, grassroots efforts.**

Give public health units a bigger mandate and resources (from OMHLTC¹) to help schools establish a comprehensive school nutrition environment.

¹ Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care

Opportunities for Local Representatives to Say Yes!:

School boards can **provide a stable contact person for food-related programming**. This could be especially helpful given high levels of principal turnover.

Community groups such as horticulture clubs and master gardener programs could be **partnered with to support school programs**.

2.1.2 Support Partnership Building

Governments at all levels can support and facilitate the development of partnerships for advancing school food programming.

Opportunities for All Decision-Makers to Say Yes!:

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.



Support partnerships between community groups and academics so that the impacts of programs can be better assessed and studied.

Engage youth in these conversations and enable students to take more ownership in programs. The Minister of Education's **Student Advisory Council** provides an excellent model.

Review Food Literacy Research results including those prepared by the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health.

Continue to provide and increase support for initiatives that connect children and youth with local food including:

- Government-supported efforts such as the **Fresh from the Farm – Healthy Fundraising for Ontario Schools**.
- Independent efforts such as **Chatham-Kent's Farm to School Pilot Program**. This partnership, involving the Chatham-Kent Public Health Unit, the Chatham-Kent SNP, and VON, is engaging diverse partners to enable a universal comprehensive farm to school program that has a targeted food literacy component, links with community food hubs, entails a full evaluation of health and social impact benefits, and supports local farmers.

Gain more union support as union issues may prevent teachers and others from volunteering for programs.

Examine how to get food skills back in the curriculum by connecting with stakeholders such as the Ontario Home Economics Association.

Opportunities for Local Representatives to Say Yes!:

Local governments can **foster partnerships between schools and other public institutions**. This can include facilitating transportation so that kids can access community gardens (e.g. at a fire hall down the street or local city park).

Parks and Recreation departments can **support summer care of school gardens** – e.g. through summer day camps. A garden / food educator could be housed in a community centre to support summer food literacy programming.

Local governments and school boards can support the food and farming sector and **facilitate relationships between farmers and food programs** to encourage local food procurement.

2.2 Champion Good Healthy Food in Schools

Provincial and local representatives could make a great contribution to advancing school food programs by championing the cause. This could involve providing public education about the programs, advocating for additional funder support, and becoming advocates.

2.2.1 Advance Public Education about Student Nutrition Programs

Respondents commented that SNPs are not well understood key stakeholders. Everyone involved, including municipalities, nutrition task forces, schools, parents, and taxpayers, need to **better understand why SNPs are important and why the universal program model is valuable**. Stakeholders also need to better understand how SNPs work, that programs must be designated to become eligible to receive 15% of their funding from the province (and that they need to fundraise the rest), that these programs must be universal to receive provincial funding, and that other schools do not receive program funding. Many stakeholders, such as principals and school boards, would benefit from basic education that SNPs exist and that some level of funding support is available for them.

Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Support public relations, the development of communications materials, and ongoing education about these issues to create broader awareness.



Declare a SNP celebration and appreciation day to gain media support and give credibility to the work that's happening.



Opportunities for All Decision-Makers to Say Yes!:

Participate in and support public education programs such as **FoodShare's Great Big Crunch**.



2.2.2 Advocate for Additional Funding Partners

While the Government of Ontario has allocated a significant amount of funding for SNPs and some for other school food programming, there is no support at the federal level for school food. Whether any program-specific municipal support is offered greatly depends on the region.

Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Champion an advocacy process to **leverage federal funding for SNPs**. This could be included in federal-provincial conversations about “downloading” of responsibilities.

Help with **outreach and advocacy to municipalities** to make a case for financial support for school food programs and that there is a strong municipal role to be played.



2.2.3 Become School Food Champions

While public education and leadership can be brought forward at the provincial level, local governments, school boards and trustees can make a big contribution by becoming school food champions and encouraging broad community support for school food programming.

Opportunities for Local Representatives to Say Yes!:

Become 1) aware and 2) advocates to communicate the value of food programming. Opportunities for communications are everywhere, from introduction to kindergarten sessions to public media channels. **My Food My Way** is an awareness project that was started by trustees and unions and could be supported by every level of government.

Champion school food programs, such as school gardens or kitchen projects, by **making calls to action, holding events, and by sending letters of support** when schools are trying to access external sources of funding.

Provide evidence for interventions recommendations.

Visit and learn about programs. This can raise program profiles, gain media attention, and allow decision-makers to understand the range of possibilities for the programs.

Model healthy food programs and policies in other municipal spaces including at city hall and school board offices.

Opportunities for School Boards to Say Yes!:

Ensure that student nutrition and school food are **represented on a relevant advisory committee** (e.g. an existing 'wellness committee'). If no relevant committee exists, establish a health and wellness committee to make sure that physical activity, mental health, food and nutrition, and other important issues concerning student wellbeing are being addressed. Alternately, a 'student nutrition committee' or 'school food committee' could be established that is dedicated to the issue, such as the **Toronto District School Board's Student Nutrition Advisory Committee**. This would strengthen the programs and ensure that many stakeholders are at the table to guide the vision and implementation of the programs. City council representatives could also sit on the committees and bring the information and messaging back to city council.

Where this does not currently occur, join SNP program Steering Committees or find other ways to build channels of communication, understand the needs of the programs and support them. School board advocates can enable programs by helping with communications and coordination and by advocating to key stakeholders such as principals. As an example, **3Acres: Tastebuds' Local Harvest Program** in Hamilton has a number of principal, secretary, facility, and other representatives on its steering committee including school board representatives.

Invite community partners to speak at principals meetings so that the principals are aware of the benefits of quality food programs and how they add to the school environment and wellbeing of students.

Give direction and set policies that are supportive of evidence-based food programming with evidence-based food standards and standards that integrate with curriculum.

Forward community partner bulletins to teachers, principals and other staff. This would bring about more buy-in for programs than if the information was to come directly from community partners.

2.3 Provide Financial and In-Kind Support

Participants put forward the opportunity for decision-makers to provide financial and other in-kind contributions to support school food programs.

2.3.1 Support School Food Programs with Financial Contributions and Investment

Many of those who informed this paper encouraged all levels of government to financially support school food programs.

Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Fund school coordinators to advance a healthy school environment. (See section 2.1.1)

Involve multiple ministries in investing in and marketing school food programs. Currently, only 1 ministry is responsible for each aspect or funding stream. This has led to a somewhat fragmented approach to school food programming. **British Columbia** offers a model for how cross-ministry investment could advance kids' health.

Review the current SNP funding model when expanding the program. One challenge is that many schools that have financial need may not qualify. For example, many public schools that are extremely needy are not designated and therefore only receive a very small amount of funding. In some cases this is because the funding model breaks down in rural settings that have large catchment areas. Also, private schools are also not eligible to qualify for program funding.

Contribute a fixed amount per student per day towards school meals and programming.

Support additional SNP coordination when programs are expanded. When additional funds are provided to expand SNPs to more schools, a portion of the funding should be allocated to program coordination.

Take a step back to figure out the best place for investing funds in school food and kids' health. As will be discussed in Section 4 of this paper, there is an opportunity to look at and plan out how a broad comprehensive program could be advanced in Ontario.



Continue, expand and extend targeted grant programs such as the **Healthy Eating in High School Grant Program** that was piloted by the Government of Ontario in March 2014, and the **Local Food Fund** launched in 2013. **Provide health promotion support** during the proposal development stage.

Expand the Fresh from the Farm – Healthy Fundraising for Ontario Schools program, piloted by the Government of Ontario, Dietitians of Canada, and the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association in 2013. This program was highlighted by several participants as an excellent opportunity that could be expanded and used to support and provide community education about school food programs. MCYS could be brought on as a partner alongside the Ministry of Education and OMAF so that schools could fundraise for SNPs.

The **Washington DC Healthy Schools Act** was pointed to as a model of how government financial support could advance comprehensive school wellness. The legislation enables a soda pop tax to fund a granting program that supports a suite of efforts including farm to school initiatives, wellness programs, and school gardens. The program then leverages partnerships to help schools with the projects, taking the pressure off of the teachers. This model enables sustainable support for the programs and provides opportunities for community involvement.

It was put forward that gardens, culinary skills initiatives, and other programs require **stable funding** due to their ongoing nature. Multi-year grants would be useful to support food programming initiatives.

The Ministry of Education could **change the funding formula** so that more funding goes to schools if they foster a healthy school food environment. However, this should in no way penalize schools who cannot foster such an environment because of resource or capacity issues.

Governments could also commit to supporting the SNP cost-sharing model using programs such as the National Child Benefit Reinvestment.


Participants spoke to a wide range of initiatives / aspects of school food programs that could be funded and that would make a significant difference for the overall aims of the programs:

Invest in kitchen facilities. Many schools, elementary schools in particular, do not have access to kitchen facilities or refrigerators. Food programs in these schools either have to buy food each day, which is onerous for staff and volunteers, or rely on pre-packaged processed food. This makes it difficult to bring fresh, healthy foods to the programs and is costly because it limits bulk purchasing. Investing in school kitchens could also strengthen communities if they were to be used as communal cooking spaces where kids, SNPs and community groups could access them outside of school hours. This fits within the idea of using schools as community hubs.

Support **community kitchens and help students to access them.**

Support portable food skills programs to bring properly trained staff and portable equipment into the schools to help children and youth develop cooking skills.

Help ensure that schools have clean and safe **communal eating spaces** to support strong food programs and community building.

Continue to enhance support for centralized food production and distribution. The hiring of Food and Logistics Coordinators across all of the SNP regions has provided additional capacity for centralized procurement. Many other opportunities could be considered and advanced in collaboration with other government ministries. The **Berkeley Unified School District's Nutrition Program** in California was pointed to as a model program. They have a centralized production and distribution hub that makes lunches for 20 schools / day, feeding 10,000 kids. The centralized system is able to hire an executive chef to lead the program, maximize value through bulk purchasing and production, and support meaningful employment. 

Support farm-to-school activities through bolstering the value-added processing sector to make local, healthy food that is ready for school consumption.

Expand the Northern Fruit & Vegetable Program to reach all students and schools.

Build greater capacity for social enterprise, social finance, and income-generating models so that programs can support themselves.

Opportunities for Local Representatives to Say Yes!:

Participants expressed the tremendous benefit that could be gained from consistent local government and/or school board funding to support SNPs and other school food programs. While some local governments do offer such financial support, others do not. Many participants responded that local governments and school boards needed to better understand and acknowledge how these programs benefit the kids in their regions and that program funding would be a form of community investment.

While supporting vital local communication, local governments could provide **community initiative grants** towards school food programs.

Local governments could hire an organization to **raise corporate money for SNPs**.

Local governments could **provide infrastructure and equipment funding** that could support many programs at a time. Healthy meal programs need to access affordable, easy to prepare fresh food. Shipping containers and refrigerated storage units that could be used by multiple programs to store food outside of school hours could be extremely valuable investments to make. Another exciting example is to support community-shared processing equipment to enable programs to very quickly cut up fresh vegetables for snack programs.

Opportunities for School Boards to Say Yes!:

Fund school coordinators to advance a healthy school environment. (See section 2.1.1)

Ensure that schools allocate budgets and time towards school food programs, including providing release time for teachers to attend training.

Add SNPs to electronic payment programs for parents, and establish opportunities for parents to contribute to the programs where such electronic payment systems do not exist.

Provide items such as toasters or other equipment at a low cost.

2.3.2 Support School Food Programs with In-Kind and Logistical Support

In addition to providing financial support, governments and school boards could offer in-kind and logistical contributions.

Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Support food distribution between farmers and schools, including helping to coordinate the bulk purchasing and distribution of surpluses.

Facilitate provincial data collection for SNPs, local food and food literacy so that players can better understand the demographics, scope and nature of existing programs.



Opportunities for Local Representatives to Say Yes!:

Support logistics and distribution so that nutrition programs are able to serve fresh, healthy food. This could involve supporting the establishment or expansion of food distribution hubs. Working with the provincially hired Food and Logistics Coordinators would be a great way to achieve these aims.

- One way to do this is to provide a depot space in each region that has fridges and freezers so that farmers can drop off food and schools can pick it up whenever it is convenient for them.
- Local governments can help find locations for hubs, support transportation for farmers to bring their produce to schools, or simply advocate for the idea.
- Another approach is to support existing facilities such as food distribution warehouses, and encourage them to build local partnerships and make their spaces available to SNPs. These hubs already have the infrastructure and trained personnel needed for safe food handling and can provide an easy access point for other types of programs. As an example, **Kawartha Food Share** runs a warehouse to distribute emergency food to food banks. The organization, which receives municipal funding, has extended the use of its warehouse space and collective buying power to the region's SNPs.
- Programs such as **Feeding Halton** could be looked to as models for what a community hub could look like.

Support schools to access community gardens by providing city staff time and land. A partnership between **Ecosource and the City of Mississauga** is an excellent example of how cities can support community garden programs.

Provide technical support or guidelines for programs to develop online ordering portals that connect farmers to schools so that schools can easily access farm-fresh food and healthy products. As examples, **Ontariofresh.ca** and **Farms at Work in Peterborough** offer online portals that connect local farmers with purchasers.

Share relevant research and data that they have collected. Partners such as local economic development councils can be brought on board to share information and achieve mutually advantageous goals.

Support farm to preschool programs that can then be leveraged to support procurement for schools.

Opportunities for School Boards to Say Yes!:

Support logistics and distribution, such as by providing school buses to transport food.

Help **facilitate logistics** associated with school gardens and other programs, for instance by encouraging principals to work with the programs to ensure that they can access what they need (water access, existing equipment, etc.)

Encourage and support the school-as-a-community-hub model, where individuals and families can access resources, gather, and have multiple needs met. These can be excellent for rural communities in particular where communal spaces can be lacking and where schools have a lot of under-utilized space. As examples, schools can share their spaces after school hours to enable groups to offer free cooking classes, provide food literacy education to parents, support the distribution of good food boxes, and provide a range of other food literacy or other community engagement and education opportunities. This is already happening in various locations in Ontario. For example, the **Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board** has developed a Community Use of School Facilities policy that allows school facilities and amenities to be accessed by community groups.

2.4 Develop and Enhance Supportive Policies and Guidelines

Participants noted that governments and school boards can encourage strong school food programs by developing and enhancing policies and guidelines.

Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Modify PPM 150 to make it more comprehensive and not as prohibitive. Ensure it prohibits high sugar, high salt, high fat processed foods. It could include elements such as goal-setting for local food and support for administrators and teachers to roll the policy out in a way that supports its intentions. The policy could ensure that the spaces around the school provide healthy food options such as neighbouring recreation centres.

Develop food safety guidelines so that school boards and schools would have more clarity and a consistent understanding about how school food programs can be safely implemented and to better facilitate access to healthy food, local food options, and food literacy. These could include, as examples, guidelines for growing and eating foods grown on school grounds or food safety guidelines for purchasing and handling foods for SNPs including from local farmers.

Develop public health policies that support and advance school food programming rather than restrict options.

Revise and update the 2008 Nutrition Guidelines provided by MCYS to reflect current nutrition best practices. These guidelines should include a focus on whole, fresh food rather than packaged foods, reflect cultural sensitivity, and encourage options for students to enhance their food skills and food literacy (such as knowing where food comes from, and how to grow and prepare food).

Harmonize and provide clarity around the multiple nutrition standards that apply to schools.

Develop policies to restrict the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and youth.

Mandate food literacy programming. A number of stakeholders have developed recommendations about what this could entail including the Ontario Home Economics Association and the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

Mandate universal meal programs for schools. **France's school meal program** offers a potential model for how this could be achieved. While the program is subsidized by the government, families are expected to contribute based on their means and they are billed at home at the start of the school year, which makes the program a social assistance initiative and ensures that students are not stigmatized. Schools are required to purchase a certain percentage of local food and point people in communities support purchasing and establish relationships with farmers. The program serves healthy five-course meals and encourage students to savour the food experience.

Develop guidelines to set out direction for healthy corporate sponsorship.

The Ministry of Education could **revise design standards** for new and refurbished school grounds to ensure that the grounds include areas for outdoor instruction and community building.

Evaluate and revise policies to minimize unintended consequences.

Look to other jurisdictions for examples of supportive policies and programs.



Opportunities for Local Representatives to Say Yes!:

Examine by-laws and policies to determine where they are posing barriers to healthy school food initiatives.

Support the implementation of established and the development of new food charters. These can get communities talking about food and food security to increase understanding and guide supportive programs.

Set goals and an accountability framework for program funding.

Opportunities for School Boards to Say Yes!:

Develop school food policies that drive healthy school food environments. This could include examining purchasing and consumption patterns and designing policies to support healthy food (procurement policies etc.).

Support mandatory food literacy education and programming.



2.5 Support Training and Curriculum Development

Staff training and developing supportive curriculum were repeatedly raised as major opportunities to advance school food programs.

2.5.1 Support Staff and Teacher Training

Many participants commented on the value of training for the wide range of staff involved in school food programs including teachers, SNP providers, and food service staff. Teacher training in particular could be a way for the provincial Ministry of Education to provide a significant contribution to school food programming. It would be valuable if teacher training were to support a comprehensive approach to bringing food literacy education into the classroom and as well as throughout the whole school environment.

Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Include food literacy training in the BEd curriculum. This would build awareness among incoming teachers about the benefits of healthy eating, school meals, and other food literacy initiatives. This training could be tied to broader health and wellness education, as teachers are increasingly being relied upon to address health issues in the schools.

Encourage subject associations to support comprehensive training, as well as to have their conferences and summer institutes include a focus on food. Ministry representatives could be asked to speak about school food at these events.

Support the development of resources for teachers, including tools that highlight opportunities in the curriculum to provide nutrition education and activities to engage students. Inspiring stories could also be brought forward.



Opportunities for School Boards to Say Yes!:

Provide teacher training education around these subjects or partner with community educators to provide professional development. One idea was that a hands-on professional

development day that involves gardening, cooking, sprouting and curriculum lessons could be an excellent initiative to bring hands-on experiences to staff.



Extend teacher training to broader staff training to include all those involved in school food including EAs, custodial staff, principals, and parents.

Fund additional staff or community partners to support school food programs (see 2.1.1). **OAFE's Teacher Ambassador Program**, for instance, provides classroom educators to teach agri-food related subject material and supports teachers to understand how to teach these subjects.

2.5.2 Support Food Literacy in the Curriculum

In addition to providing teacher training, the Ontario Ministry of Education can ensure that school curriculum is supportive of and builds on school meal programs.

Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Support SNPs to work with schools to connect their programs to the curriculum.

Bring in and seriously consider the perspectives of a diverse group of stakeholders when reviewing the curriculum to bring food literacy into the expectations.

Scale 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 engage in experiential activities such as preparing food for meal programs.

Integrate 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.

3.0 Opportunities to Frame a Healthy School Food Environment

The Healthy Kids Strategy recommendation puts forward a vision for a universal Student Nutrition Program that provides meals and that also advances food literacy to support children and youth in developing healthy food skills and behaviours for life.

Those who informed this paper regularly stated the need for such a holistic school food environment and put forward ideas to advance both:

- a) A comprehensive approach to fostering health, food literacy, and other complementary aims, also known as **comprehensive school health**, as well as
- b) A healthy school food environment where **school food programming efforts complement each other**.

Participants also pointed to the power of school food to **advance other policy priorities** and that food can be used as a catalyst to facilitate broader student wellbeing.

3.1 Advance Comprehensive School Health

There is a huge opportunity to advance multiple elements of comprehensive school health, including food literacy, food access, environmental literacy, physical health, mental health, and other aspects of student wellness in a coordinated way. It would be valuable if school food programming was implemented within and was able to leverage this more comprehensive approach. Participants pointed to models that could be replicated or scaled up to support such a framework:

The healthy schools framework / **Healthy Schools Recognition Program** could be revisited as a model for advancing comprehensive school health in Ontario.

The **Washington DC Healthy Schools Act** provides an excellent model for how a healthy schools framework could be implemented and supported. The legislation aims to improve the health and wellness of students by providing guidance and support for schools to address breakfast/lunch access, school nutrition (serving healthy food), farm to school, physical activity & education, health education, school environment, competitive foods, and health & wellness.

3.2 Advance a Healthy School Food Environment

Many participants put forward the opportunity to advance a broad healthy school food environment where programs complement one another. Evidence suggests that the more programs can connect to each other, the more the food literacy goals of each individual program are strengthened.

It was suggested that we need to use a **whole school approach** to nutrition that appreciates the school as an environment that can promote healthy eating (rather than focusing on what each child eats in isolation).

One participant noted that **SNPs have the ability to address a wide range of aims at the same time** including reducing the negative effects of poverty, advancing student health, supporting food literacy, providing environmental programming, and achieving many other gains through the same set of actions. Curriculum objectives can be met through a comprehensive nutrition program if the right supports and systems are available.

Nutrition Tools for Schools[®] sets out a strong framework for a healthy school nutrition environment and would be an excellent model to use and expand. The 9 elements that are a part of the framework can be supported and advanced in all schools.

3.3 Use School Food Programs to Address Other Policy Priorities

A number of participants spoke about the **power of school food to be a catalyst for achieving other policy priorities**, for instance health or employment aims. The value of food programs is that they can simultaneously engage and excite students, support health objectives, enhance classroom behaviour and outcomes, and teach healthy skills for life. For example, SNPs offer a rare opportunity to use real food to discuss and learn about food systems.

There is a great opportunity for school food programs to support **youth employment**.

Youth could be employed to prepare snacks and meals for SNPs. This would provide cost-effective labour and help youth to build skills that are applicable to their daily and working lives. **VON's Plentiful Harvest Program** is an excellent example of this model at work, where youth are employed during the school year to prepare snacks and meals for SNPs and they also teach cooking skills and food literacy to younger students who visit the facilities on class trips, supporting curriculum requirements. **Liberty's Kitchen in New Orleans**, which employs and trains vulnerable youth to produce 3200 meals and snacks each day for school meal programs, offers another example of this model.

Summer youth employment opportunities include working with local producers to create value-added snacks and meals for programs (such as those that can be flash-frozen).

FoodShare's School Grown Program engages high school students in growing, preparing and selling fruits, vegetables, and preserves during the school year. In the summer months students are employed to run urban market gardens and sell the produce.

Community-based food and farming vocational programs offer exciting opportunities for youth to gain employment and learn skills while supporting the food and farming sector.

Food can be used as a catalyst for teaching about a wide range of **curriculum requirements**:

As an example, 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). These efforts can also be achieved without online tools.

Schools can provide opportunities for students to visit the sites where their SNP food is made to learn about food production. A whole series of projects could be formed around these types of ideas in a way that is very engaging for students.

School food programs can **support and celebrate diverse food cultures**:

Meal programs and broader food programming offer the opportunity for a diversity of foods to be integrated into meal plans, supported and celebrated. This can bring students together to understand and appreciate each others' cultures.

4.0 Opportunities to Build Stronger Vision, Collaboration and Governance

A number of those who contributed to this discussion highlighted the opportunity for Ontario to take a step back and to look at the question of **“What do we want to achieve relating to school food programs?”**, as well as to ensure that we are offering the best programs possible. Several participants brought up the issue that if we could set a collective vision for the province, we could then figure out how to best allocate resources to support food access and food literacy in our schools.

It was suggested that the province could undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the current school food framework and to develop, through collaborative processes, mechanisms to work across government ministries and sectors to determine how to advance strong programming in our schools.

Participants also highlighted the need for stronger inter-ministerial collaboration to advance school food programs, as well as for greater provincial oversight, guidance, coordination and support for programs.

4.1 Support the Development of a Vision and Goals for School Food in Ontario



Participants suggested that we have an opportunity to take a step back, ask what we want for our kids in terms of healthy school food environment, ask the students themselves what they want, and then develop a collective vision and steps to achieve these aims.

Opportunities for All Decision-Makers to Say Yes!

Collaborate to develop a visionary document that acknowledges what it will take to advance a universal SNP and broader school food program. This could include best practices in fundraising (using Fresh from the Farm ideas); cafeteria programs; local food; food skills; garden programs; inter-ministerial coordination; protocols for corporate sponsorship; cultural sensitivity; incorporating food skills into the curriculum; and many other areas. It would be valuable if this vision spoke to an intention to establish a quality program that **seeks to address comprehensive school health and building skills for life**. Such a vision should speak to the need to better advance food literacy and food skills.



Collaborate to develop age appropriate food skills and food literacy benchmarks as well as a common evaluation system.



Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!

Develop an accountability framework for school food programs with clear and measurable goals, a strong evidence-based understanding of community impacts, mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, and measures for accountability.

Look to other countries and their comprehensive school food programs as examples that we could model.



4.2 Evaluate the Existing Student Nutrition Program Model

Instead of limiting ourselves to adding to the current framework, some participants noted that it would be valuable to assess the current Student Nutrition Program system and model and to consider how it could be adapted to advance a broader provincial vision for school food and healthy schools. While those involved in the programs are doing a great deal with the resources available, a systematic review would help all those involved and support the development of a sustainable and comprehensive

program model. A long-term process could then be put in place to shift our system to one that is intentionally designed to best support healthy kids.

Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Undertake a thorough evaluation of the current SNP model with the aim of ensuring a universal program that provides high-quality meals and is based on a community partnership model. Such an evaluation would explore what gaps exist using a food literacy lens, and would suggest opportunities to align the current program with a broader vision for school food. It would be valuable to go even further than this by undertaking an evaluation of the broader school environment and how a healthy schools framework could be funded and implemented.

An evaluation could also be taken to explore possible models that could be moved towards.

Develop a strong evidence-based commission to look at where we are, where we've been, what other countries are doing, and how we could move forward.



4.3 Use Collaborative Processes for Visioning and Implementation

Many participants spoke about the need for collaborative mechanisms to develop and advance a vision for school food in the province, whether this is to set a broad vision for Ontario or to implement a universal SNP and school food as set out in Recommendation 2.8 of the Healthy Kids Strategy. This issue is too big and complex for any player to solve in isolation.

Opportunities for All Decision-Makers to Say Yes!:

Establish a task force across municipalities / school boards to work on this issue, reach agreement, and collectively inform the Government of Ontario.

Use a process of “open government” to involve all levels of government. Such a model would involve bringing together representatives from the federal, provincial, and municipal governments with other key stakeholders to focus on a common issue. The players could spend some days together, seek input from an advisory group, and develop and agree to a series of actions that can be implemented at all levels of government at the same time.

Build a cohesive movement and network to bring all stakeholders to the table. This would help people to engage at the broader level and make sure that a diversity of voices are heard.



Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Have an MPP or another champion **develop a government-sponsored working group** at the provincial level to determine how to advance a universal and coordinated model for student nutrition and other aspects of food literacy. Additional forums could be developed to advance and support school food efforts in ongoing and flexible ways.


Build on previous federal-provincial discussions around advancing education and health to inform and enhance comprehensive support for food literacy.

Establish an inter-ministerial working group to focus specifically on school food and to support the achievement of targets amongst various ministries.

4.4 Establish Systems for Inter-ministerial Collaboration

A number of participants spoke to the need for inter-ministerial collaboration at the provincial level to advance school food programs in the province. Several ministries are involved in school food programming. Systems could be put in place for more coordinated ministerial efforts.

Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Better **integrate SNPs with the purview of the Ministry of Education**, in particular the Ministry's Healthy Schools efforts. The vast majority of SNPs are run within schools. Meal programs could be much better integrated with food literacy programming, better involve school boards and public health units, bring together community partnerships, and advance other elements of a strong comprehensive school food program. 

Better **integrate SNPs with the purview of the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care**. Health units, that support SNPs and other student nutrition efforts, are funded by the Ministry and it would be valuable to better align these initiatives.

Ensure that initiatives such as the Healthy Kids Community Challenge complement school food initiatives.

4.5 Provide Provincial Direction, Coordination and Oversight

Participants noted that within the current SNP system, programs tend to be implemented differently across the province, in large part due to a lack of coordinated direction and oversight. Many of those interviewed spoke to the need for greater provincial oversight, direction and support for SNPs so that programs can be consistent with one another, meet objectives set out for them, and have the support needed to advance quality programming. Such support and guidance would help to ensure that programs are universal, that they are able to leverage community partnerships, and that they support broader goals of food literacy.

Opportunities for the Government of Ontario to Say Yes!:

Provide broader oversight, guidance and coordination support to ensure that programs are able to interpret program goals consistently, that they can use common messaging to communicate information about the program, that programs can work together to achieve common aims, and that they are able to advance the **Community Partnership Model**. This model brings a wide range of players to the table to provide meal programs and was noted by participants as an exciting and successful model that is important to strengthen.

Review, update, and enhance the Student Nutrition Program guidelines in line with providing more extensive guidance to programs. These guidelines should clearly speak to the goals of the program and ways of operating, provide clarity and direction about data collection and reporting, and offer other supportive direction to keep the programs consistent and aligned with a provincial vision for healthy school food environments.

Support the collaboration function of the Ontario Student Nutrition Program Network (OSNPN). There is currently little capacity for the OSNPN to coordinate action and direction among lead agencies. The Government of Ontario could provide some much-needed capacity building support – perhaps hiring a staff person for the OSNPN – to enable such coordination to take place on an ongoing basis. The Network could also be supported to hire a consultant or coordinator to develop a unifying vision, define what is common across programs and what

differs, and determine what key strategic elements the lead agencies can collaborate on. The Government of Ontario may also provide a representative to attend meetings of the OSNPN to offer program support and guidance.

Support opportunities for different regions to network and share information so that they can learn from one another.



Support programs to better integrate cultural sensitivity into their programming. This could include sample recipes or considerations that could be given to this issue.

5.0 Opportunities for the Ontario Edible Education Network to Support these Recommendations

Actions that can be taken by the Ontario Edible Education Network to support the recommendations in this document	Reference in this document	Reference in the Ontario Edible Education Network Action Plan
A. Engage a multitude of stakeholders to meet and engage with one another to define success and to discuss and advance these issues.	Sections 2.1.2, 4.3, 4.5	Section A.1
B. Explore and share successful program, policy and partnership examples, stories, and models as well as community contacts.	Throughout	Section A.1
C. Support the development of communication and advocacy materials and efforts.	Sections 2.2.1, 2.2.2	Section B.4.1
D. Develop a comprehensive snap shot of the state of student nutrition programs in Ontario.	Sections 2.2.1, 2.3.2	Section B.1.13
E. Research, compile and document existing SNP best practices including cost and funding structures; host discussions for people to share their reactions and perspectives.	Section 2.3.1	Section B.3.7
F. Inform the development / revision of policies and guidelines; undertake and provide research that showcases examples of supportive policies and programs.	Section 2.4	Throughout
G. Work with stakeholders / groups to come up with collaborative vision, to evaluate a proposed model (not individual programs), and to explore how funding could be allocated.	Sections 4.1, 4.2, 2.3.1	Section B.3.7
H. Support the development of resources for teachers.	Section 2.5.1	Section B.4.5
I. Support teacher training education.	Section 2.5.1	Section B.2.1, B.2.2
J. Support a process to develop age appropriate food skills and food literacy benchmarks as well as a common evaluation system	Section 4.1	Section A.1.8
K. Promote celebrations and tell stories; consider integrating a School Food Day with the Great Big Crunch.	Section 2.2.1	Section A.1