



Student Nutrition Programs & Food Literacy

Student Nutrition Programs and food literacy complement one another to support healthy kids.

A Student Nutrition Program (SNP) offers a healthy breakfast, morning meal, snack and/or lunch to students before, during or after each school day.¹

Food literacy involves understanding:

- where food comes from;
- the impacts of food on health, the environment and the economy; and
- how to grow, prepare, and prefer healthy, safe and nutritious food.²

Food literacy education can be advanced through a wide range of efforts in schools including school gardens, cooking programs, learning about food and nutrition during classroom lessons, and taking part in farm tours.

An example of how Student Nutrition Programs and Food Literacy can complement one another is that hands-on food skills education can be integrated into meal and snack programs by involving children and youth in planning, preparing, serving, and sharing food and beverages.

¹ FoodShare Toronto – Student Nutrition: Available online: <http://www.foodshare.net/student-nutrition>.

² Sustain Ontario uses this as a framework for how we can think about food literacy.

Many definitions for food literacy exist including that developed by the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health: “Food Literacy is a set of skills and attributes that help people sustain the daily preparation of healthy, tasty, affordable meals for themselves and their families. It builds resilience, because it includes food skills (techniques, knowledge and planning ability), the confidence to improvise and problem-solve, and the ability to access and share information. It requires external support with healthy food access and living conditions, broad learning opportunities and positive socio-cultural environments.” The full OSNPPH initiative “Making Something Out of Nothing” is available at <http://www.osnpph.on.ca/resources/index.php>.

A strong school food environment incorporates both a meal program and food literacy education.

While SNPs allow children and youth to access to food during the school day and help them to achieve greater academic excellence and adopt healthy eating habits, food literacy education engages children and youth to learn skills that will enable them to make healthy food choices throughout their lives.

SNPs and food literacy strongly support each other. Meal programs bring students together to eat and enjoy nutritious foods. They offer great opportunities for teaching children and youth about their food and food systems. Also, food literacy programs can amplify the benefits of student meals by getting students excited about choosing, trying and eating healthy options.

SNPs and food literacy have the potential to...

...reduce the incidences and burden of illness

Findings consistently show that student nutrition and food literacy programs:

- result in students eating more fruits and vegetables per day in the cafeteria, classroom, or at home
- result in students making positive lifestyle changes
- improve knowledge and attitudes about healthy eating.³

...provide children with essential life skills

Student nutrition programs and food literacy education in schools can help student gain the skills needed to make healthy food choices and increase their self-efficacy to prepare nutritious meals for themselves.

- Children are not always provided with food skills or knowledge at home.⁴
- Making food literacy part of the mainstream school curriculum is supported by 95% of Ontarians.⁵
- Student nutrition programs have the potential to go beyond providing meals and snacks. Food provides an avenue for education on a wide variety of topics.

³ Joshi, Anupama, Andrea Misako Azuma, & Gail Feenstra. 2008. Do Farm-to-School Programs Make a Difference? Findings and Future Research Needs. Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition, Vol. 3. Available online: http://www.cahpf.org/GoDocUserFiles/504.Farm_to_School_Programs.pdf.

⁴ Health Canada, 2010. "Improving cooking and food preparation skills: A synthesis of the evidence to inform program and policy development. Available online: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/child-enfant/cfps-acc-synthes-eng.php>.

⁵ FoodShare, 2010. "Ontario Online Polling Results." Strategic Communications Inc.

Experiential activities such as food gardens, food skills, and cooking programs help to bring education to life for children and youth, especially when linked to the curriculum. Children and youth can become more engaged in learning about topics from math and science to English and history and gain useful and marketable skills.

• School gardens are a fun educational vehicle for virtually every subject area. “They allow students to become familiar with the challenges and rewards of growing food. In many cases students also learn how to prepare the products of their labour into nutritious and tasty meals.”⁶

Meal programs also offer students a chance to connect with each other in a relaxed setting and to build a community with one another through the act of preparing and eating food together.

...improve academic attendance and performance

For many children and youth, breakfasts, snacks or lunches provided by student nutrition programs are the only meal or the only healthy meal that they eat during the day.⁷ A vast body of evidence shows that student nutrition programs contribute significantly to reducing tardiness and illness, to improving students’ behaviour in class, and to improving students’ abilities to concentrate, retain and apply information.⁸ Involving children and youth in growing and preparing food can also help excite and engage students in their school environment.

A number of other studies have demonstrated improved academic performance and higher test scores, particularly in the areas of math and science, as a result of garden-based education. Overall improvements on standardized achievement tests have also been well documented.⁹

6 Wittman, Hannah, Annette Aurélie Desmarais & Nettie Wiebe. 2011. (eds.) *Food Sovereignty in Canada: Creating Just and Sustainable Food Systems*. Fernwood Publishing: Black Point, N.S.

7 Muthuswamy, E. 2012. “Feeding Our Future: The First- and Second-Year Evaluation.” Toronto District School Board. Available online

8 Tufts University Center on Hunger, Poverty & Nutrition, 1994. *Nutrition Policy*. Retrieved from the Ontario Student Nutrition Program website.

Available online: <http://www.osnp.ca/menu.php?list=595&page=135>.

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And Toronto Public Health, 2012. *Nourishing Young Minds*.

Available online: <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2012/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-48313.pdf>.

9 Block, K., Gibbs L., Staiger, P.K., Gold, L., Johnson, B., Macfarlane S., Long, C. & Townsend, M., 2012. Growing community: The impact of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program on the social and learning environment in primary schools. *Health Education & Behaviour* 39(4), 419-432.

Williams, D.R., & Dixon, P.S., 2013. Impact of garden-based learning on academic outcomes in schools: Synthesis of research between 1990 and 2010. *Review of Education Research* 83(2), 211-235.

California Department of Education, 2013. “School Garden Program Overview”.

Available online at: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/he/gardenoverview.asp#top> (accessed May 29, 2014).

A brief that compiles many of these studies has been produced by members of the University of California Garden-Based Learning Workgroup, February 2008. “Reasons to Garden: School Gardens Improve Academic Performance”.

Available online: ucanr.edu/sites/thevictorygrower/files/101533.doc.

...enhance Ontario's economic resilience

Nutrition programs, culinary programs, cafeterias and contracted food service providers in Ontario schools purchase millions of dollars of food annually. Ontario has a lot to gain by supporting public institutions to buy local, sustainably produced food.

- Shifting some of the dollars spent towards purchasing Ontario food would create new markets for Ontario products and support the local economy.
- Strengthening institutional purchasing would build up a predictable base of demand for local food and provide opportunities to help rebuild local food infrastructure.¹⁰
- For farmers, farm-to-school programs can be a new market, an additional source of income, a way to become a part of the community, and an outlet to educate future consumers and potential farmers.

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

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

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