



Ontario Food Literacy Working Group's Proposal to Ontario's Ministry of Education:
Recommendations for next steps for Food Literacy and School Food in Ontario

PROPOSAL SUMMARY

Policy Issue & Current Situation

Canadians - including children and youth attending Ontario schools - often do not have the knowledge, skills and/or opportunity to actualize their personal health and well-being in relation to food, or to participate as informed and engaged citizens in their food systems.

There is minimal food literacy education in the Ontario school curriculum. The current curriculum teaches about food primarily through Health and Physical Education, Science and Technology, and Family Studies (Secondary). Hands-on cooking classes are voluntary and are taken by a minority of students.

Upstream food literacy interventions that are embedded into the school curriculum have been shown to reduce the prevalence of costly diet-related diseases, which currently add [\\$5.6 billion](#) in annual healthcare costs in Ontario and disproportionately affect those who already experience health inequities. Evidence shows that healthy eating habits developed during childhood are sustained into adolescence and adulthood have been associated with reduced risks of chronic diseases later in life, while good nutrition at school helps improve educational outcomes and academic performance.

Food literacy education would help Ontario students build healthy eating habits by fostering knowledge, skills, and critical thinking about food and food systems. This upstream intervention will help students advance their personal health and well-being and support them to effectively participate in food systems, as well as contribute to more sustainable healthcare and food systems.

Recommendations:¹

The Ministry of Education should:

- 1) **Develop a Strategy for Food Literacy Education in Ontario Schools** to support Ontario curriculum changes and updates related to food literacy education.
- 2) **Take a 'whole school approach' to weave food literacy into the broader school environment.**
- 3) **Collaborate with the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS) to integrate food literacy into the curriculum in order to build stronger school food programs.** The Ministry of Education can be a stronger partner in school food programming so that student nutrition programs are aligned with the education system to support the physical and mental health of all school aged children and youth.

¹ While we encourage EDU to consider the 3 recommendations outlined in this proposal, #1 is the immediate next step that could be taken to advance food literacy in the province.



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Recommendations for next steps for Food Literacy in Ontario

July 2023

The Ontario Food Literacy Working Group, coordinated by Sustain Ontario², is pleased to submit this proposal in support of building strong food literacy and school food programs in Ontario. We outline key elements to support your Government to continue your leadership of these initiatives with the goal of improving the health and well-being of students and promoting a healthy environment.

Recommendations were developed by Sarah Keyes and Carolyn Webb (Sustain Ontario), Alicia Martin, PhD Candidate (University of Guelph), Dr. Peggy O'Neil (Brescia University), Janet Nezon (Rainbow Plate), Andrew Fleet (Growing Chefs! Ontario), Diane O'Shea and Mary Carver (Ontario Home Economics Association), Dr. Leanne De Souza-Kenney (University of Toronto), and Dr. Rupa Patel (Food Policy Council for Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox and Addington).

Supporters of the recommendations in this proposal include:

- BGC Canada
- Brescia University College
- Canadian Cancer Society
- Door Number One.org
- Ecosource
- Food Policy Council for Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox, and Addington
- FoodShare Toronto
- Green Thumbs Growing Kids
- Growing Chefs! Ontario
- Headwaters Food and Farming Alliance
- Heart & Stroke Foundation
- Middlesex London Food Policy Council
- National Farmers Union - Ontario
- Nutrition and Food Literacy Canada
- Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association
- Ontario Dietitians in Public Health
- Ontario Family Studies Home Economics Educators' Association
- Ontario Home Economics Association
- Ontario Public Health Association
- Ophea – Ontario Physical Health and Education Association
- Ontario Public School Board Association
- Rainbow Plate
- Sudbury Shared Harvest
- summerlunch+
- Sustain Ontario
- The Table Community Food Centre
- The Local Community Food Centre
- UNICEF Canada

² Sustain Ontario developed the Ministry of Education funded [Food is Science](#) website, which includes resources for teaching students about food and food systems in Ontario's new Science and Technology curriculum. Sustain has been a leading organization working to advance [Bill 216, Food Literacy for Students Act](#), and has been supporting food literacy education for over 10 years through the [Ontario Edible Education Network](#). Sustain also coordinates the Ontario Chapter of the [Coalition for Healthy School Food](#), a growing network of 75 organizations working to advance school food in our province and Canada.

Recommendation #1:

Develop a *Strategy for Food Literacy Education in Ontario Schools* (hereinafter referred to as “the Strategy”) to support Ontario curriculum changes and updates related to food literacy education.

1. The Ministry of Education should convene a task force to ensure that the *Strategy* be developed in consultation and collaboration with relevant Ministerial representatives responsible for children, community and social services, agriculture and food systems, health, environment, and Indigenous affairs as well as educators, school boards, and other relevant experts and public sector partners, including racialized and Indigenous community leaders.³
2. The *Strategy* should provide a vision, goals, direction, a multi-year roll-out plan for the implementation of experiential food literacy education in Ontario, as well as criteria for success. It could include:
 - A statement of the educational aims for food literacy education in Ontario, in alignment with EDU and relevant cross-ministerial strategic priorities.
 - Roles and responsibilities of the Ministry, school boards, and schools for program implementation and maintenance.
 - A plan to review, adopt and/or adapt existing benchmarks, [competencies](#), and [attributes](#) for age-appropriate food literacy education, including a review of Ontario’s curriculum to find gaps and explore how to achieve competencies throughout and across different subject areas for each grade level.
 - A comprehensive educator training and support plan to align teaching with evidence, best practices, safety, and innovations, and how to center culturally responsive and relevant and experiential pedagogical approaches. Pre-service and on-going professional development should be considered for training opportunities.
 - A review of facilities and equipment required to support experiential education, including low-cost and innovative options (e.g., portable units) for schools without teaching kitchens.
 - Guidelines for the development, selection and implementation of food literacy resources (e.g. evidence-based websites, textbooks, videos, etc.).
 - An evaluation framework to monitor and report on outcomes and success criteria.
 - Policy direction and guidance to help identify and develop [supportive policies](#) (e.g., [PPM 150](#), [Ontario Student Nutrition Program Guidelines](#), [Health Canada’s restricting food advertising to children \(proposed\)](#), [Quebec cadre for healthy eating/physical activity](#)).

³ We can provide you with a list of key stakeholders to involve in consultations if this recommendation is actioned. In addition, members of the EDU’s 2006-2018 Healthy Schools Working Group could also be considered for these consultations.

- A comprehensive feasibility study, environmental analysis, organizing structure, and a cost and return on investment (ROI) analysis of implementing this upstream health-promoting intervention.
3. The *Strategy* should take regional and place-based contexts for food literacy education into account to ensure students learn about community-specific histories and traditions, and to ensure learning complements and enhances place-based opportunities and geographical context for education.
 4. The *Strategy* should be developed immediately by consulting key stakeholders and should be updated over time to support changes to the Ontario school curriculum to include additional food literacy education.
 5. Curriculum subjects that are scheduled to be updated while the *Strategy* is in development should be reviewed for opportunities to embed food literacy education, such as in the 2022 Science and Technology curriculum. Please see our [Bill 216 Policy Briefing Note](#), Appendix A for an example list of food literacy competencies and subjects areas where food literacy learning could be embedded in upcoming curriculum updates. This review should be done while also reviewing recent publications and recommendations in academic literature and in consultation with key stakeholders.

Developing a *Strategy for Food Literacy in Ontario Schools* will establish a roadmap for success for food literacy education in Ontario. By hearing from multi-stakeholder groups and school representatives, the task force will understand the needs, opportunities, gaps, and assets that can be built upon to bring food literacy into schools. Developing a shared vision, goals, direction, and a multi-year roll out plan is essential in moving food literacy education forward.

Ontario's Ministry of Education has developed frameworks and strategies for [School Mental Health](#), [Community-Connected Experiential Education](#), [Indigenous Education](#), the Equity and Inclusivity [Strategy](#) and [Action Plan](#), and [Environmental Education](#).⁴ We recommend following this precedent so teachers, schools, and Boards are well supported to implement food literacy education in the provincial curriculum.

The *Strategy* will help actualize food literacy education in Ontario, supporting educators so students can learn to grow, prepare, and build knowledge about food, food systems, and nutrition including learning about regional and land-based foods (i.e. foods traditional to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples in Canada and other culturally relevant foods). Schools and classrooms, both indoor and outdoor, can be ideal settings for food literacy learning. Implementing hands-on food literacy education will equip students with essential life skills, knowledge, and confidence to support positive health outcomes, help reduce health care costs, and promote greater food systems sustainability.

⁴ We advise that the Ontario Food Literacy Strategy have built-in assessment tools and accountability mechanisms to evaluate change and progress over time.



Recommendation #2:

Take a 'whole school approach' to weave food literacy into the broader school environment for implementation success.

- Leverage [Healthy Schools Certification](#) implemented across Canada in partnership between Ophea, PHE Canada, and Ever Active Schools. Currently more than 450 schools in Ontario, and 600 schools across Canada undertake this annual certification process to support them in planning and prioritizing health topics that require evolution or attention within their school communities.
- 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.
- British Columbia's [Farm to School model](#) could be replicated in Ontario. Regional Farm to School Animators support educators across the province to teach the curriculum through food with an emphasis on healthy eating, experiential learning, community connections, and sustainable food systems.
- Promote and publicize Ontario-based resources that teach the curriculum through food (e.g. [Food is Science](#), [Rainbow Plate](#), [Growing Chefs! Ontario](#), [ODPH's Bright Bites](#), and Sustain Ontario's local food [webinar series](#); (make it place-based, establish a school garden, visit a farm, participate in the [Great Big Crunch](#), etc).
- Invest in pre-service and professional development opportunities for teachers by integrating food literacy training in the Bachelor's of Education curriculum, Additional Qualification training, and continuing education courses (e.g., [Ecosource's Teacher Training](#); [Food and Body Talk](#); [Healthy Eating Toolkit](#), [You're the Chef/Let's Get Cooking](#)) for longer term food literacy education implementation.

Recommendation #3:

Collaborate with the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS) to integrate food literacy into the curriculum in order to build stronger school food programs. The Ministry of Education can be a stronger partner in school food programming so that student nutrition programs are aligned with the education system to support the physical and mental health of all school aged children and youth.

The Ministry could support Ontario’s Student Nutrition Program (SNP) by supporting links between food literacy education and SNPs, including:

- Building SNP time into school staff schedules so there is a dedicated on-site SNP coordinator.⁵ Train staff to involve students in food preparation and program delivery, treating SNPs as opportunities to enhance experiential learning (i.e., sensory tasting, learning about, preparing, and serving foods, where possible). See Ontario-based examples in Appendix A.
- Investing in school-level infrastructure that would enable SNPs to provide more nutritious, fresh, and local (where possible) foods in each school (e.g., kitchens, gardens).
- Revising design standards for new and refurbished schools to include teaching kitchens or portable units for increased cooking opportunities, as well as areas for outdoor and experiential instruction (e.g., [Lab-Ecole](#) in Québec).
- Exploring innovative models from around the world that embed food literacy into school food programs (e.g., [Finland](#), [Japan](#), [France](#))
- Being supportive of the Federal government’s plan to develop a cost-shared national school food program for Canada that will increase funding to provinces and territories to help them build innovative programs, which would be an asset for the implementation of food literacy education.
- Asking MCCSS to share key findings from their current (2023) Ontario SNP review process with key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, to get further insights about partnership opportunities to support student nutrition and food literacy education.

⁵ SNPs that have designated coordinator roles, with staff responsible for the program at the school level, report greater efficiencies and reduced costs. See details on page 2 of the Coalition for Healthy School Food’s [SNP review submission](#) to MCCSS, 2023. For further recommendations of how the Ministry of Education could support Ontario SNPs, also see p.6-7.



Rationale

Diet-related illnesses are estimated to cost the Ontario healthcare system [\\$5.6 billion](#) annually and disproportionately affect those who already experience health inequities. Food literacy education can help reduce these costs by helping students build skills and knowledge about food and food systems, supporting them to develop positive relationships with food from an early age.⁶ Evidence shows that healthy eating habits developed during childhood are sustained into adolescence and adulthood have been associated with reduced risks of chronic diseases later in life.⁷ Unfortunately children and youth's intake of some key nutrients, vegetables and fruit, and beverage intakes are [not keeping up with current dietary recommendations](#). Further, Ontario's Fiscal Accountability Office predicts a [\\$23.1 billion dollar shortfall](#) of funding for health-related programs and services from 2022-23 to 2027-28, this upstream intervention is urgently needed.

Food literacy education links with several EDU priorities. It has been associated with improved educational outcomes and academic performance⁸, and linked to positive mental health, self-esteem and improved resilience.⁹ Food literacy also helps students develop an understanding of food and the environment, including food production and food systems, as well as the importance of supporting Ontario's agri-food industry and career opportunities in the food sector. Teaching the curriculum through food also allows the use of experiential and culturally relevant pedagogies.

Increasing food literacy education in Ontario has also been a recommended course of action by academics ([Martin & Massicotte, 2021](#); [Martin et al., 2022](#); [McEachern et al., 2022](#)), health promotion organizations ([Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy, 2017](#); [LDCP, 2017](#)), and the Ontario government ([Local Food Act, 2013](#)). It is also supported by Ontario's agri-food sector (e.g., [Six by Sixteen](#)) and is a call to action in the [Grow Ontario Strategy](#) to ensure the agri-food labour market is supported into the future.

School food programs increase opportunities for food literacy education.¹⁰ Best practices around the world have shown that school food programs that are embedded into the curriculum are the most effective and successful for achieving desired outcomes and student success. E.g. [Finland](#), [Japan](#), and [France](#). School food programs that are embedded into the curriculum are also supported by parents.

There is a huge opportunity in Ontario to advance food literacy in schools and ensure the proper supports are in place to make sure it is successful. By acting now, we can empower students with the necessary knowledge and skills to become informed citizens, leading to healthier lives and promoting a more sustainable future.

⁶ [Tran et al., 2014](#); [Locally Driven Collaborative Project \(Public Health\), 2017](#); [McEachern et al., 2022](#); [Cancer Care Ontario, 2023](#)

⁷ [Health Canada, 2012](#); [Ratcliff et al., 2011](#); [Chaudhary et al., 2020](#)

⁸ [Williams and Dixon, 2013](#); [Berezowitz et al., 2015](#)

⁹ [Desjardins & Azevedo, 2013](#)

¹⁰ [Martin & Ruetz, 2021](#)



Food literacy in Ontario

The advancement of [Bill 216](#)¹¹ and leadership of the Ministry of Education has put Ontario in the national and international spotlight for food literacy education. The changes to the Science and Technology curriculum in 2022 signaled an important step towards more food literacy education in the provincial curriculum, and was seen to organizations across the country as a significant advancement in the food literacy movement.

Since then, attention to the importance of integrating nutrition and food literacy into the curriculum has become more wide-spread. In May 2023, Dr. Leanne De Souza-Kenney from the University of Toronto held a food literacy event attended by experts from across the country with the aim of developing a two pronged approach to educating Canadian children, teachers, and their families including a) a course of study for the Bachelor of Education curriculum to train teacher candidates in food literacy and b) a food literacy curriculum interwoven into K-12 subjects. See [Nutrition and Food Literacy Canada](#) for more.

Recent media on the importance of food literacy and school food includes:

- National Post: [Frank Stronach: Healthy school lunches, the greatest gift we can give our children](#)
- The Agenda: [Do We Need to Rethink Healthy Food Trends?](#)
- Ontario Gov't: [Governments Helping Workers Start Careers in the Agri-food Sector](#)
- Western News: [Study underscores the need for food literacy, national school food program](#)
- Toronto Star: [The time has come for teaching food literacy in schools](#)
- The Conversation: [School gardens and kitchens could grow Ontario's proposed food literacy act](#)

¹¹ Bill 216 was supported and advanced by the organizations listed on page 2 of this proposal.

Appendix A

Examples of linking food literacy and student nutrition programs:

- Partnership between [Green Thumbs Growing Kids'](#) and Winchester Public School (Toronto): produce is grown with student support in the school garden, then provided to the full-service kitchen and prepared for lunch including in a Salad Bar.
- [Carleton Village Sports & Wellness Academy](#) (Toronto): The school's SNP has incorporated more fruits and vegetables through its salad bar; students learn food skills to contribute to the meal; and students have participated in urban farm field trips and gardening.
- [Oakwood Public School \(Oakville\)](#): Has operated a salad bar lunch with the support of the nutrition program and partnership with Halton Food For Thought. The program has involved gardening, visits with growers, food literacy education and food skills development.
- [The Wake Up Wellington Program](#): has linked the school's culinary arts program to the SNP by tailoring the SNP meals to the curriculum, and having students spend part of their week preparing food for the SNPs
- [Grey-Bruce VON - Proctor Silex Hot Pots](#): Partnership between United Way of Bruce Grey and SNP where 7 schools in the region form a cooking group to teach food skills with hot pots, preparing students who are graduating and/or experiencing food insecurity to cook for themselves with basic pantry ingredients. Each student receives a hot pot as part of the program.