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Farm to Cafeteria Canada is facilitating Learning Labs and strengthening the Learning Lab community of practice across the country.

The first Institutional Food Procurement Learning Lab in Canada is underway in Vancouver, BC. The first Farm to School Learning Lab in a remote, northern and aboriginal context within Canada is also underway in Haida Gwaii, BC.

Learning Labs

WHAT IS a Learning Lab?

A Learning Lab is a process designed to build or strengthen a community of practice in their efforts to scale up a particular activity. One of the first steps in the learning lab process is to bring the community of practice together to articulate their vision and key goals, and to come to consensus on a handful of priority actions that can realistically be accomplished in a short time frame. The group is brought together regularly to review progress and to reflect upon their action plan. At the conclusion of each session each participant departs with another set of quick achievable objectives.

WHAT IS an Institutional Food Procurement Learning Lab?

School Food Focus, a US based organization, has developed an Institutional Food Procurement Learning Lab. This Learning Lab model is designed to scale up efforts to procure more local foods for student meal programs within large school districts. The community of practice engaged in this model includes food suppliers, food distributors, food procurement officers, school meal coordinators, chefs, and others responsible for school food.

WHAT IS a Farm to School Learning Lab?

The difference between a Farm to School Learning Lab and an Institutional Food Procurement Learning Lab is focus. Procurement is only one aspect of Farm to School activity. Enhancing student knowledge and skills around food, increasing student and community consumption of fresh, healthy and local foods, building local food system infrastructure, and preserving traditional foods and traditional food ways may be other areas of focus.

“Learning Labs are a groundbreaking method of achieving realistic and practical changes in the food system within our institutions, our communities, across our provinces and around our country.”

Amber Cowie, Learning Lab Coordinator
Vancouver, BC



WHY Learning Labs?

People Benefit

- ✓ Those who live, work, are healed, learn and play in Canada's institutions have access to more fresh foods from nearby gardens, farms, forests, and waters.
- ✓ More students, patients, visitors participate in the meal service.
- ✓ Increased consumption of foods offered during meal service leading to improved health and reduced waste.

Institutions Benefit

- ✓ The institution's commitment to local food is formalized in policy and purchasing contracts.
- ✓ Difficult food system issues are teased out and steps are put in place to address concerns – regardless of complexity.
- ✓ An innovative- collaborative decision-making culture around food is fostered.

Communities Benefit

- ✓ Local farmers and fishers and foragers have access to new markets.
- ✓ Innovative systems and structures emerge to support transport of food from local, small and medium sized food suppliers.
- ✓ More funds stay in the local economy.

WHAT Kind of Goals Are Developed?

The goals of each Learning Lab are different and reflect the current situation, needs and values of the lab participants. Sample broad goals include:

- ✓ Build awareness and understanding about the importance of local, healthy and sustainable foods.
- ✓ Increase the procurement of healthy, local, and sustainably produced foods.
- ✓ Increase a the consumption of local. healthy and sustainable foods.
- ✓ Strengthen relationships between the eaters, the people responsible for providing foods meal service, and the people who grow, harvest, process and deliver the foods.
- ✓ Enhance the knowledge and skills around growing harvesting preparation and service of local, healthy and sustainable foods.
- ✓ Enhance the food distribution system to make the delivery of local healthy and sustainable foods easier.

The Canadian Experience?

Inspiration and direction arise in this collective, supportive environment!

- ✓ Learning Labs currently underway in Vancouver and Haida Gwaii are supporting and scaling up existing local food programs at the school level (e.g. school gardens and direct farm purchasing) by helping procurement and food service staff to buy more local, sustainable food from their major distributors and suppliers.
- ✓ Farmed and harvested foods are being recognized as an important part of healthy diets and a robust local economy.
- ✓ Communities are connecting to the land in which they live and the food which surrounds them.
- ✓ The students are engaging with their food and people and processes that move it from field to plate.

Learning labs are part of a movement across the country to bring more healthy, local and sustainable foods into schools, hospitals, campuses and other public institutions. Check out the national conversation at these Farm to Cafeteria Canada links:

