

# Farm to School Learning Circles

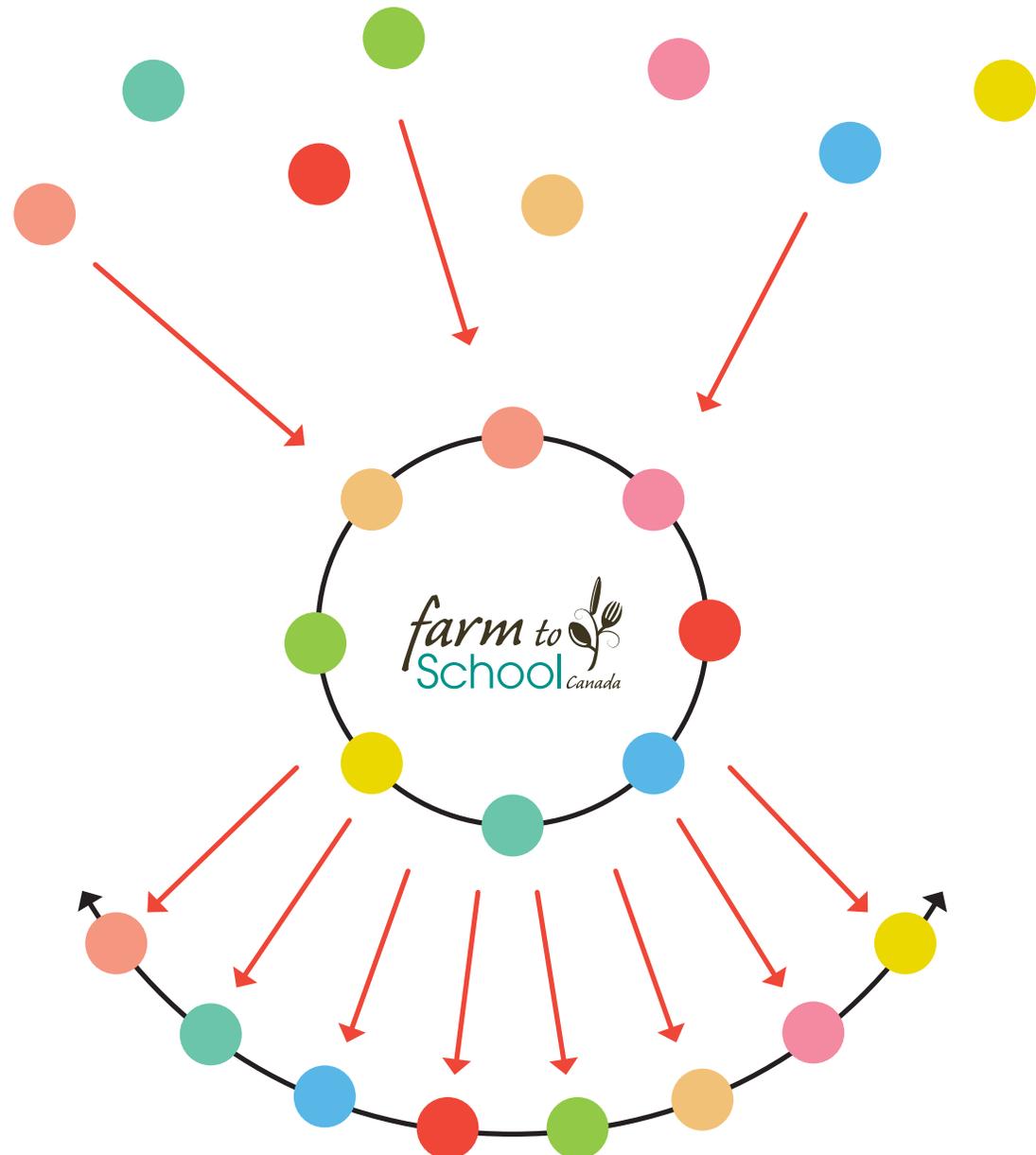
## What is a Farm to School Learning Circle?

**A FARM TO SCHOOL (F2S) LEARNING CIRCLE** is a process to build, strengthen, and expand collective F2S efforts. One of the first steps in the Learning Circle process is to bring together interested individuals and organizations to articulate a shared vision and key goals, and to agree on some priority actions that can realistically be achieved together. The group is brought together regularly to review progress and to reflect upon their action plan. After each session, each participant leaves with another set of achievable objectives. The hope is that more can be achieved through collective, focused action than by each participant working alone.

Each F2S Learning Circle defines their own goals and chooses how specific or broad their focus will be. Some may focus on a shift in food procurement or school-community connectedness; while others may choose to focus on the food environment, food literacy, or food culture and traditions.

“Learning Labs are a ground-breaking 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**



## CONDUCTING FARM TO SCHOOL LEARNING CIRCLES

F2S Learning Circles seek to support F2S initiatives by developing an action-oriented community of practice that works to achieve specific goals. While each Learning Circle will be different, some common characteristics include:

- **Consistent** – F2S Learning Circles are typically conducted as a series of gatherings (usually at least four) that occur at regular intervals (e.g., every six months). These gatherings encourage consistent, meaningful effort and create accountability to ensure progress towards goals.
- **Composed of committed participants** – F2S Learning Circles are made up of invited individuals and organizations from across the food system. Participants are invited who share a common vision of getting more healthy, local and sustainable foods on the minds and plates of students. Participants may include students, parents, teachers, local farmers, food service providers, and chefs, among others.
- **Action oriented** - At F2S Learning Circle gatherings, participants work toward identifying actions to address systemic barriers to getting fresh, local food on the minds and plates of students. Each gathering is an opportunity to reflect on what has been accomplished and to plan for continued action.
- **Supported** - A coordinator works between gatherings to encourage relevant actions and build the capacity and relationships of the F2S Learning Circle. For example, they may host smaller workshops and strategic meetings or develop and share helpful resources.
- **Flexible** - Each F2S Learning Circle is a unique creation reflecting the priorities, needs and circumstances of each community. The model provides a structure to work within, but the ingredients added to it are the community's own.
- **Welcoming** - F2S Learning Circles should have an atmosphere of openness and inclusion that encourages participants and other interested people to observe the process, ask questions, and connect with participants.
- **Celebratory** – Throughout a F2S Learning Circle there will be many milestones that can be celebrated. At each session, participants should be encouraged to share accomplishments and lessons learned. A F2S Learning Circle is a journey rather than an end goal. It is also important to remember that this process gains strength from efforts that came before and will continue afterward, and those efforts should be acknowledged and valued.

## FARM TO SCHOOL LEARNING CIRCLE GOALS

The goals of each F2S Learning Circle are different and reflect the context, needs and values of the community.

Some broad sample goals may include:

- Build **awareness and understanding** about the importance of local, healthy and sustainable foods in schools.
- Increase **procurement** of healthy, local, and sustainable foods in schools.
- Increase **consumption** of local, healthy, and sustainable foods in schools.
- Strengthen relationships between the people who grow, harvest, prepare, process, deliver, and eat school food.
- Enhance knowledge and skills among students about how to choose, grow, harvest, preserve, prepare and serve local, healthy and sustainable foods.
- Strengthen food distribution systems to improve access to local, healthy, and sustainable foods at schools.

### THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

**Inspiration and direction can arise in collective, supportive environments.**

F2S Learning Labs conducted in St. John's, NL and Vancouver, BC as well as the ongoing Local Foods to School Learning Circle underway on Haida Gwaii, BC, have supported and expanded local food programs at the school level (e.g. school gardens and direct farm purchasing). By supporting the procurement and service of more local, sustainable food, and engaging youth in hands-on learning, locally sourced foods are being recognized as an important part of healthy diets and a robust local economy; communities are connecting to their land or the land on which they live and to the food that it provides; and students are engaging with their food and the people and processes that get it to their plates.

*[See Chapter 10 for more in depth description of these Learning Lab and Learning Circle stories from across the country].*