

The Local Foods to School (LF2S) Learning Circle, Haida Gwaii, British Columbia

About the Haida Gwaii LF2S Program

Haida Gwaii is an archipelago located 80 kilometres west of the North Coast of British Columbia and the traditional territory of the Haida Nation. It is an archipelago of over 150 islands, including two main islands Graham and Moresby. Haida Gwaii is home to approximately 4500 people within the two Haida villages of HIGaagilda (Skidegate) and Gaw (Old Massett) and 5 additional towns/rural areas. Haida Gwaii is renowned for its rich Haida Culture, astonishing beauty and for the rare ecology, including many species unique to the islands.

The official Farm to School (F2S) initiative started on Haida Gwaii in 2010 thanks in large part to the vision and leadership a Registered Dietitian with Northern Health Authority, and the Provincial Manager of Farm to School BC, an initiative of Public Health Association of BC. The initial F2S initiative was designed to build on a variety of school food initiatives that sprouted and developed over the years with the passion and commitment of multiple community members from across the islands.

Initial funding provided by the Public Health Association of BC as part of the Produce Availability Initiative supported key infrastructure at 8 different schools including gardens, greenhouses, kitchen renovations and salad bars. While these separate school-farm initiatives increased student and staff exposure and connection to farmed food, the responsibility of organizing F2S activities and sustaining the programs depended on a few individuals with limited resources. Like many small communities with staff turnover, this continued to be a major challenge.

In April 2014, Haida Gwaii joined St. John's, NL and Vancouver, BC in trying out the Learning Lab model as way to engage the broader community in a regional approach to support and sustain F2S. A local Learning Circle Coordinator, was hired by Farm to Cafeteria Canada with funds through the Nourishing School Communities initiative to champion the project. The intent of the Learning Lab was to bring previous F2S champions together with new members involved with school food systems to share ideas, imagine possibilities and brainstorm ways of achieving them together.

Very quickly, the participants recognized the need to redefine the terminology and scope of the project to reflect local culture and values. The name Learning Lab was changed to Learning Circle, and F2S was changed to Local Foods to School (LF2S) to recognize the diversity of local and Haida traditional foods available on Haida Gwaii. Greater Haida representation and leadership at the Learning Circle was apparent and recognized as being integral to developing and sustaining LF2S programming within schools and communities in a culturally appropriate manner.

The Haida Gwaii Learning Circle continued to involve all eight schools on the islands. These schools met twice a year over a two-year period. Each time, the vision and goals were refined and understanding of the issues and connections strengthened. Discussions among a range of school and community members highlighted three key issues that schools had been grappling with for years and ones that could be better addressed through a coordinated approach between all island schools and community partners.





“Living among the rich food culture and traditions of Haida Gwaii has given me a real sense of gratitude for the place and people who live here. It has been an honour to work alongside Shelly Crack, Sarah Stevenson and Jenn Dysart to support and learn from the generous and dedicated people like Margaret Edgars, Mary Lynn Hunt, Vicki Ives, Bernadette Marie, Dan Schulbeck and so many others who have been so integral in strengthening access to local food and learning opportunities for our youth and the broader community.”

Kiku Dhanwant, Local Foods to School Learning Circle Coordinator



Goals of the Learning Circle

The Learning Circle began with the idea that “if money was no object, what would you like to see for school food programming”. The initial vision which emerged was as follows:

“To shift culture to a life centred around locally grown food: collectively growing, preparing, preserving, eating and sharing”

This vision was later changed to acknowledge that this type of culture already exists among the Haida and island communities and there is a need to “return” rather than “shift” to this way of doing things. An emphasis was added to also sustaining places where the food comes from.

The following represents goals articulated during the second round of the Haida Gwaii LF2S Learning Circle:

1. Ensure sustainability of the LF2S Program;
2. Increase access to local food from farmers and harvesters;
3. Integrate Haida traditional, wild harvested and locally preserved foods into the school menus;
4. Build capacity in schools/community in planning, education and communication;
5. Work with community members to share assets and resources; and
6. Enhance and maintain the food delivery system.

The goals of the Learning Circle were revised regularly as the priority actions were accomplished and objectives adapted to meet ongoing challenges and opportunities.

Who was Involved?

A total of 77 participants took part in four gatherings from 2014-2016 and included:

- School District 50 staff, including cooks, teachers and principals;
- Elders;
- Local and traditional food gatherers;
- Food growers;
- Old Masset Village Council Culinary Arts program staff;
- School youth;
- School district board members;
- Funders;
- Researchers;
- Practitioners;
- Other interested Community members;
- Farm to Cafeteria Canada (Sponsor);
- Northern Health Authority (Sponsor and contributor); and
- Social Planning and Research Council of BC (Sponsor).

Success of the Learning Circle

Through dialogue and discussion in the first three Learning Circles, the group identified three key barriers to the stated goals and ways of addressing them:

1. The first challenge was moving food from the farmers and harvesters to school kitchens in a timely manner. Given the small scale of farming and food gathering on Haida Gwaii, coordinating deliveries to meet school and farmer schedules involved complicated logistics and challenging delivery methods.

Outcome: Through group discussions, it was noted the SD #50 (the islands' School District) already worked with a local courier service that operated between the district schools. Rather than creating a new distribution system, the program worked with the food suppliers, courier service and the school district administrators to develop a food delivery process that was workable and subsidized by SD #50.

2. Another challenge was the ability of schools to source local and traditional food year round due to seasonal constraints of a northern climate, limited human and financial resources or regulatory barriers.

Outcome: Learning Circle members proposed the idea of creating local food pantries to source, store and distribute local food (e.g., produce, berries, fish, meat, etc.) for schools and interested community organizations. The pantry's role involved food sourcing, securing infrastructure to preserve and process local food, and developing food safety processes and regulations to ensure that the foods served met regulatory requirements.

3. Supporting capacity to harvest, grow, prepare, and preserve local and traditional foods strengthened students' connection to food, community, and food environments.

Outcomes:

a) Facilitated workshops - In partnership with the school district and local food organizations, Local Food Pantry coordinators facilitated over 43 workshops over a two-year period. These included canning workshops, smoking fish, fishing trips, school farm tours, as well as supporting greenhouse and garden activities.

b) Incorporating local food learning into curriculum - Partly through the increased awareness and programming around local food and the engagement with school district administrators, goals around local food programming were incorporated into the strategic plans of many Haida Gwaii schools. The Pantries have become increasingly involved in supporting teachers and school staff to develop culturally appropriate curriculum activities and resources for hands-on learning.

Other key milestones include:

- Supporting a bulk buying system directly from farmers;
- Development of new food safety plans for food sourced, stored, preserved and distributed by pantries;
- A system of tracking LF2S food purchases, donations and activities;
 - Creation of food safety protocols and processes for traditional foods such as wild game;
- Receiving, storing and distributing local food donations from government agencies, local organizations and community members;
- Support for collaboration between two elementary schools and the Haida Health Center to revive unused garden beds;
- Coordinating efforts to maintain school garden beds and greenhouses over the summer break; and
- Fundraising for LF2S program and schools to meet Learning Circle and individual school goals.



Looking to the Future

Since 2016, the Learning Circle has continued to be supported through a variety of sources.

For example, Farm to Cafeteria Canada has recently provided Farm to School grants to strengthen the amount of healthy local foods served in salad bars at all 8 schools through the [Farm to School Canada Digs In](#) initiative.

Moreover, the learning circle has been supported in Haida Gwaii and has been adapted in three other Indigenous communities through funding from the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) through the Pathways to Health Equity for Aboriginal Peoples Initiative. The project, Learning Circles: Local Healthy Foods to School, aims to support holistic health and chronic disease prevention in school communities supporting Indigenous youth.