



Farm to School Learning Lab in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

About the St. John's Learning Lab

Food First NL is a provincial non-profit organization, whose mission is to actively promote comprehensive, community-based solutions to ensure access to adequate and healthy food for all people in Newfoundland and Labrador. Recognizing the vital role that schools play in our food system, in 2013 Food First NL formed a partnership with Farm to Cafeteria Canada to advance Farm to School (F2S) in the province.

One of the first key activities of Food First NL's F2S program was organizing the province's first F2S Learning Lab. Food First NL partnered with the School Lunch Association and Farm to Cafeteria Canada to facilitate a two-year (2014-2016) dialogue aimed to support the advancement of F2S within the St. John's region.

School Lunch Association is a registered charity whose mission is to operate a non-stigmatizing program that provides a hot, nutritious lunch for school children, regardless of a family's financial situation. Food First NL recognized that School Lunch Association has an important role to play in moving the F2S vision forward in Newfoundland and Labrador. At the time of the F2S Learning Lab, School Lunch Association was celebrating their 25th Anniversary, and joining the F2S movement was a new opportunity for this established organization.

From 2014 to 2016, the St. John's F2S Learning Lab team hosted meetings every six months. Feedback was collected from participants after each session and used to expand and build upon the previous session and bring new participants to the table.

Goals of the Learning Lab

The St. John's F2S Learning Lab brought together representatives from 18 different public and private sector organizations along with students, teachers, chefs, producers and other food champions. Together they collectively developed goals to guide their action:

1. Support School Lunch Association to procure more healthy, local, and sustainable foods.
2. Empower school communities to become champions for a healthy, local, sustainable food system in Newfoundland and Labrador.
3. Forge strong school-community relationships to build F2S programs.
4. Increase the capacity of the Learning Lab community to sustain its Farm to School efforts long-term.



Who Was Involved and Consulted?

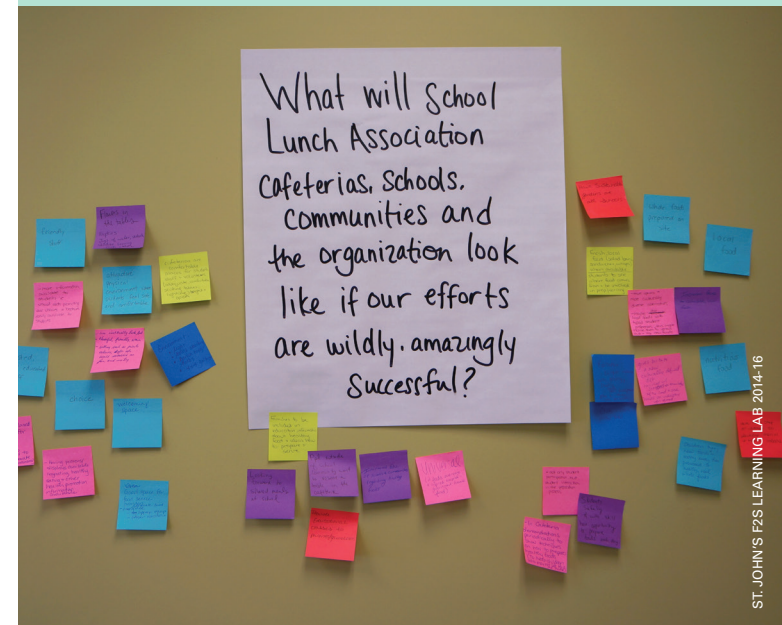
- Food First NL
- School Lunch Association
- Eastern Health- Regional Nutritionists
- NL English School District- School Health Promotion Liaison Consultants
- Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (various departments related to environmental health, public health and education)
- Students
- Teachers
- School administrators
- Fishing for Success (advocating for Fish to School)
- Farmers and gardeners
- A wholesale food distributor
- Enactus Memorial (a campus organization)
- Restaurant Association of NL (chefs)
- A Memorial University PhD candidate (researching the school food environment)
- Farm to Cafeteria Canada
- Propel Centre for Population Health Research, University of Waterloo (evaluation partner)

Successes of the Learning Lab

The F2S Learning Lab helped Food First NL and the School Lunch Association to establish valuable partnerships in the drive to make cafeterias better champions of healthy eating and local food.

Some of the accomplishments of the Learning Lab included:

- Collaboration with Lester's Farm to put more local produce—like fresh, crisp carrots—on students' plates in School Lunch Association schools.
- Eastern Health Regional Nutritionists now provide ongoing guidance to support School Lunch Association in meeting and exceeding NL's School Food Guidelines.
- The F2S Learning Lab team provided input to inform the inclusion of food literacy skills and knowledge in provincial K-6 curriculum.
- Wholesale distributors serving School Lunch Association are now aware of the growing interest in F2S.
- School food players that are usually disconnected from one another are now communicating and collaborating. F2S is a concept that they are now familiar with and spreading.
- New research activities were inspired to gather data and best practices to advance healthy eating in schools.
- Efforts in Newfoundland and Labrador are increasingly linked to and supported by the exciting national movement of F2S with the help of Farm to Cafeteria Canada.



Looking to the Future

Since the completion of the F2S Learning Lab process in 2016, participants have kept the momentum going. In 2017, Food First NL collaborated with another key partner, Kids Eat Smart Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, to host a provincial school food gathering. Dialogue from that gathering is now informing an update to the province's School Food Guidelines. As of the 2018-19 school year, the School Lunch Association has expanded to provide upwards of 950,000 meals to 34 schools in the province and they are actively partnering with schools to implement F2S salad bars funded by Farm to Cafeteria Canada. Food First NL continues to support schools in their efforts to connect with farmers in their community, create self-serve salad bars that offer healthy local produce to students, create school gardens and greenhouses, and promote food literacy in their classrooms. These initiatives not only improve youth's understanding of nutrition and increase openness to trying new fruits and vegetables, but they also help to place healthy, local foods on the minds and on the plates of students.