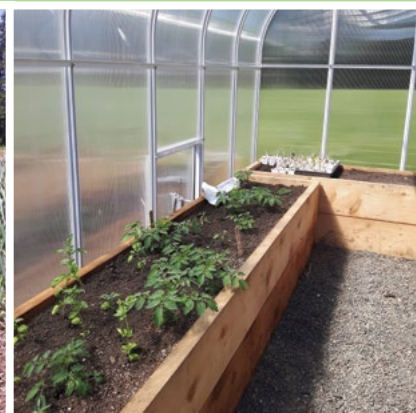




# Growing a Movement:

## Farm to school in the Comox Valley





BROOKLYN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, COMOX, BC

**FRONT COVER PHOTOS CREDIT (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT):**  
 ÉCOLE ROBB ROAD OUTDOOR CLASSROOM  
 AMARA FARM  
 ÉCOLE ROBB ROAD GREENHOUSE  
 AMARA FARM  
 AMARA FARM  
 AMARA FARM  
**BACK COVER PHOTO:**  
 ÉCOLE ROBB ROAD

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# Introduction

**FARM TO SCHOOL** is a movement gaining momentum in Canada to get students eating, cooking, growing, and embracing healthy, local food at school and in their community. There are many models of farm to school. In recent years the farm to school salad bar model has grown in popularity.

This case study presents the farm to school journey of five schools in British Columbia's Comox Valley between 2012 and 2019: Huband Park Elementary School, École Robb Elementary School, Lake Trail Community Middle School, Brooklyn Elementary School and Mark R Isfeld Secondary School. It details how they implemented their farm to school salad bar services, procured local food, and engaged students in food literacy activities as part of the Canada Digs In! initiative. The case study highlights not only the schools individual achievements, but how collaboration between the schools, including the formal development of a regional farm to school Learning Circle, has contributed to advancing farm to school in their region.

## What is Farm to School: Canada Digs In?

Canada Digs In! is a pan-Canadian multi-sectoral chronic disease prevention initiative designed to increase the procurement, service, and consumption of local food in schools while growing students' food skills and knowledge and engaging them in their broader community. Central to Canada Digs In! is the Farm to School Canada Grants program. Developed by Farm to Cafeteria Canada (F2CC) in partnership with Whole Kids Foundation; these grants provide schools with up to \$10,000 each and access to training and resources to implement farm to school salad bar services, while allowing students to engage in hands-on farm to school activities.

## What is a farm to school salad bar?

A salad bar is a flexible type of school food service that enables students to serve themselves from a selection of healthy foods, including a variety of vegetables and fruits, whole-grain, and protein options. Food served in a farm to school salad bar should:

- Be as locally and sustainably sourced as possible
- Reflect the local geography as well as cultures, traditions and preferences of the school community
- Offer a complete and balanced meal according to Canada's Food Guide
- Be made available to all students who wish to participate, regardless of means

The information presented in this case study was gathered through a series of interviews with key stakeholders in the 2018/2019 school year, as well as through school stories and progress reports as part of Canada Digs In. In the following chapters, we will see stories unfold that share how the farm to school approach integrates hands-on learning, school and community connections, and access to healthy, local food using a salad bar service.

## The Farm to School Approach

**What is farm to school?**



Farm to school brings healthy, local food into schools, and provides students with hands-on learning opportunities that foster food literacy, all while strengthening the local food system and enhancing school and community connectedness.

Farm to school activity may differ by school, but it is always directed toward getting more healthy local foods on the minds and plates of children and youth.

**Farm to school models strive to include:**

**Healthy, Local Food:** Schools source local food in many ways, including through direct farmer/harvester relationships, food distributors, school gardens, and the harvesting of wild and traditional foods. When local food arrives in schools it is often served in the form of a salad bar, hot lunch program, tasting activity, fundraiser, or community celebration.

**Hands-On Learning:** Step into any school offering F2S and you will find students learning about food in the school garden, greenhouse, kitchen or classroom. They may also be getting ready for field trips to local farms, forests, and shores.

**School and Community Connectedness:** Schools establish relationships with farmers, community members, and support organizations, tapping into local knowledge, passion, skills, and resources.

# Farm to School in the Comox Valley and School District 71

**THE BEAUTIFUL COMOX VALLEY**, is situated on the East Coast of Vancouver Island on the traditional territory of the K'ómoks First Nation. The valley is rich in farmland, and several farms are located within a few kilometers of the region's schools. Twenty-one elementary, middle, secondary and alternative schools are part of the region, which is also known as School District 71.

Farm to school programs and the salad bar model were first introduced in the area in 2012 at Huband Park Elementary School. Inspired by Huband's success, École

Robb Road Elementary and Lake Trail Community Middle schools, followed by Brooklyn Elementary and Mark R Isfeld Secondary also introduced similar salad bar models. Administrators at these schools shared an appreciation for making healthy, locally sourced food accessible to their students. This appreciation sparked a dedication to implement salad bars and provide an enriching farm to school experience for their school communities.

## Timeline of farm to school network development in Comox Valley

**2012**


**Huband Park Elementary School** became the first to implement farm to school and run a salad bar in the Comox Valley. Local farmer and parent, Arzeena Hamir, had just enrolled her children at the school and she pitched the idea of applying for funding from Farm to School BC. As interest grew, it became evident that the equipment initially installed was not enough to meet the demand of over 140 students so in 2016 the Parent Advisory Committee, with support from Principal Charles Schilling, applied for Farm to Cafeteria Canada's Farm to School Canada Grant. With this grant Huband Park was able to extend their salad bar service to the whole school community.

**2015**


**Lake Trail Middle School's** journey also began with a seed grant from Farm to School BC in 2015, which helped improve their concession service. The school's principal along with Lake Trail Community Education Society had also heard of the salad bar success at Huband and felt there was more opportunity to improve nutritious food offering at their own school. In 2016, they too applied and received a Farm to School Canada Grant from F2CC to scale-up a salad bar program.

**2016**


**École Robb Road Elementary School** received a Farm to School Canada Grant from F2CC and built their salad bar based on Huband Park's model. Parent Lauren Clark learned about the salad bar and, along with Principal Kyle Timms and other farm to school champions at the school, visited Huband to observe the salad bar in action and learn from the experience of their leadership, staff and volunteers.

**2017**


**Mark R Isfeld School** built their salad bar program based on École Robb Road's after their team visited and observed the school's success. In 2017 Mark R Isfeld received a Farm to School BC grant, and in 2018 they became the fourth school — and the first secondary school — in School District 71 to receive a Farm to School Canada Grant from F2CC. During the application process, both Mark R Isfeld and Brooklyn supported one another, sharing knowledge about where to source local, fresh food and how to design their proposed salad bars and food literacy activities.

The emerging farm to school network in the Comox Valley is composed of not only schools, but community members, as well as farmers and other local food providers. In this network, the engagement of the local farming community has been integral to sourcing healthy, local food at the five schools. The local suppliers (listed in the sidebar) have developed strong relationships with schools in the area and provide locally and sustainably grown food to schools year-round.



Salad bar at **Mark R Isfeld Secondary School**.

**2018**

**At Brooklyn Elementary school** it was parent, and LUSH Valley Food Action Society's Executive Director, Maurita Prato who saw a great opportunity to make healthy, local foods part of young children's school experience. LUSH Valley was already supporting Lake Trail School's program, and beginning a similar partnership at Brooklyn was a logical next step. Similarly, Principal Erica Black saw an opportunity to improve Brooklyn's hot lunch program by introducing fresh, healthy, local food. The school applied and received a Farm to School Canada Grant. Their successful application and implementation of the grant was supported by the knowledge and expertise that had developed in the other three schools.

“Suddenly principals were sharing ideas; ‘how do you do this? How do you do that? How do you get parents involved? How do you get a grant to raise money to purchase equipment?’ The language, the literature around food literacy began.”

(Mary Lee, Comox Valley Schools - [school video story](#) 2018-2019)

- 1. Huband Park Elementary School**  
5120 Mottishaw Rd,  
Courtenay, BC  
Students: 375  
Grades taught: K-7
- 2. École Robb Road Elementary School**  
1909 Robb Avenue,  
Comox, BC  
Students: 457  
Grades taught: K-7
- 3. Lake Trail Community Middle School**  
805 Willemar Ave,  
Courtenay, BC  
Students: 357  
Grades taught: 6-9
- 4. Brooklyn Elementary School**  
1290 Guthrie Rd,  
Comox, BC  
Students: 360  
Grades taught: K-7
- 5. Mark R Isfeld Secondary School**  
1551 Lerwick Rd,  
Courtenay, BC  
Students: 1013  
Grades taught: 8-12





# Huband Park Elementary School

## When does the salad bar take place?

Every Tuesday

## What is offered in the salad bar?

Typically, 7 staple vegetables and at least 2 protein foods. 1 grain option is added to match the weekly menu themes.

## Ordering system

The Parent Advisory Council collects payments through the hot lunch online payment system or at the door on the same salad bar day. A small profit goes to the Parent Advisory Council to sustain the program.

## Cost

\$3.00

**“As a rural school, there are a number of families connected to the school who own or work on farms and this was the driving force behind our salad bar project. A huge part of the credit goes to Arzeena Hamir, parent and farm owner.”**

**THE SALAD BAR JOURNEY AT HUBAND PARK**, started as a small project serving about 40 or 50 students in 2013. In 2016 the demand increased to over 140 students. Line-ups were long and children had to rush to finish their salad. By 2018, thanks to the Farm to School Canada Grant, the program grew to a much larger operation serving up to 220 students every Tuesday.

## Community Connections: The Farm to School Team



Arzeena Hamir is a parent, food security advocate, farmer, and Director at the Comox Valley Regional District. Along with the support of the Farm to School Canada Grant, Arzeena, Principal Charles Schilling, parent Shannon Simpson and other parents set out to enhance their existing farm to school activities by expanding their salad bar and making it accessible to all students, while also increasing food literacy and community connections at the school.

The salad bar at Huband is run by a core team of 16 volunteers composed of parents as well as students from nearby Georges P Vanier Secondary School's Culinary Program and Huband Park's own grade 6 and 7 classes. Without the assistance of the volunteers, who help pick-up, prepare and help serve food, the salad bar operation would not be possible.

## Sourcing Local Food



Huband finds it to be cost effective to source local and often organic food. In the summer, before the salad bar begins for the year, the school coordinator contacts farmers to develop a weekly standing order. Any increase in the number of services is communicated to farmers throughout the season as needed. To receive payment, farmers invoice the Parent Advisory Council, which issues cheques every two weeks.

## Hands-on Food Literacy



Examples of how food literacy is integrated at Huband:

- Local chefs visit the school.
- Students garden — each grade has their own garden bed.
- Students participate in the school's Eco Club, which shares information on the benefits of zero waste practices, composting, and other environmental issues.
- A nutrition bulletin board is posted in the salad bar service area for everyone to see. It is updated monthly and includes everything from profiles on local farmers to healthy eating tips.



# École Robb Road Elementary School



## When does the salad bar take place?

Every Tuesday



## What is offered in the salad bar?

The school offers students as many servings of vegetables and fruit as their plate can hold, hoping they will select at least 3-4 each.



## Ordering system

Parents use the existing online hot lunch order system.

## \$ Cost

\$3.50 for students  
\$4.00 for staff

“Student and salad bar fan Adeline told her mom she wants to be a farmer and a healthy cook. You can’t underestimate the importance of offering nutritious food and allowing kids to prepare it. These are the formidable years for introducing healthy lifestyle choices and connecting children to their local growing community. As one young boy said to his school friend who was eating our salad bar for the first time, “You think this is good? It’s only the beginning!”

WHEN ÉCOLE ROBB ROAD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL decided to implement their farm to school program it was a logical and exciting step to take. They fundraised to run the salad bar program for a couple of years, and the Farm to School Canada Grant allowed them to purchase a second salad bar unit allowing them to serve an estimated 140 students and staff each week.

## Community Connections: The Farm to School Team



Parent Lauren Clark is a Registered Dietitian and was driven to start the farm to school salad bar to improve the food culture at the school. Huband Park served as a mentor, providing connections to farmers and sharing tips to successfully plan and run the program – they even shared their favorite student-approved recipes.

At École Robb Road a pool of 15 people runs the salad bar. Most of them are parent volunteers. The school has a very small, galley-style kitchen, therefore students are not able to participate in food preparation. The salad bar coordinator plans the menu weekly and coordinates the volunteer schedule. Parents help shop, chop, serve the salad bar and clean-up.

## Sourcing Local Food



Sourcing for food is equally important to running a successful salad bar. The school orders items like eggs and seasonal vegetables from local farmers each week. Eatmore Organic Sprouts are also purchased weekly throughout the year and served as a staple salad bar item.

## Hands-on Food Literacy



A number of hands-on food literacy activities keep students engaged and increase their knowledge and participation in food-related activities:

- Seed to Plate, a program run by farmer and parent Natasha Taylor and supported by teachers, engages students in planting, harvesting, and later planning and preparing a meal in the school’s outdoor classroom.
- École Robb Road has a garden that consists of 20 raised garden boxes, berries, a variety of native plants, 6 fruit trees, and 2 greenhouses.
- A school Garden Club provides leadership in stewarding the garden. It meets once a week throughout the year during recess, and once a month after school.



# Lake Trail Community Middle School



## When does the salad bar take place?

Every Wednesday



## What is offered in the salad bar?

In addition to the “build-your-own” salad ingredients, the salad bar serves a selection of prepared salads such as coleslaw and potato salad. Dressings are made from scratch.



## Ordering system

Salad bar is served in the school canteen, where it is available to any students who wish to participate.



## Cost

Free<sup>1</sup>

“As a Principal, I have had the pleasure of observing first-hand the benefits of a Farm to School Canada Grant. Farm to school funds have helped to dramatically change the food culture of our school... We serve a very high needs community and being able to bring fresh, local food to the mouths of our children is vital.”

**Principal Gerald Fussell**

<sup>1</sup>Note: The salad bar program at this school is organized by Lake Trail Community Education Society who also covers the cost of the service.

**BRINGING HEALTHY AND LOCAL FOOD TO LAKE TRAIL COMMUNITY MIDDLE SCHOOL** was game-changing. When farm to school activities began, there were a few volunteers helping with a regular lunch service, but the food lacked nutritional value and activities to connect students to fresh, local food were limited. Today, the school embraces a culture of healthy local food and enjoys a vibrant school garden that produces fresh greens for their breakfast smoothie bar and salad bar.

## Community Connections: The Farm to School Team



Before joining the farm to school program, Penny Mullan, was sourcing food from local farms for her own family. Later, as a farm to school champion, she connected with these same farmers to assess options for sourcing food for the school. Unlike other schools where a volunteer (typically a parent) acts as a coordinator, Lake Trail Community Middle School is fortunate to have a paid Healthy Foods Coordinator who is responsible for the salad bar program. This position is supported in partnership with Lake Trail Community Education Society, which runs the community school program.

Still, the program at Lake Trail would not be possible without volunteers. In fact, the heart of Lake Trail school's weekly salad bar is a core group of 10 incredibly dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers made up of parents, grandparents, and other community members that all believe in the program. The key to the volunteer group's success is their commitment to having fun — they value the opportunity to come together for a good cause.

## Sourcing Local Food



At Lake Trail food sourcing is directly influenced by the seasons. During the growing season, the Healthy Foods Coordinator uses produce from the school garden and local farms. The salad bar is about 80% locally sourced. In the off-season food is purchased from the grocery store with as much as possible sourced from within BC or at least Canada. In the winter months, some local produce is served through an adapted approach that sees the salad bar transform to a soup bar, which makes use of ingredients that have been grown in the school garden and preserved during the fall harvest.

## Hands-on Food Literacy



This school points out the obvious, but at times overlooked, fact that salad bar service itself provides a tremendous opportunity for learning:

- Students help their peers during the salad bar and hot lunch services, talk about what is being served, and they encourage one another to try new foods.
- Students participate in composting, and help with clean-up.
- In addition to the salad bar, teachers use the school garden for curriculum and elective activities, allowing students to grow their own food.



# Brooklyn Elementary School



## When does the salad bar take place?

Every Tuesday



## What is offered in the salad bar?

Students choose from a variety of offerings that include 7 vegetables, 2 protein foods and 1 grain option (based on popular weekly salad bar themes).



## Ordering system

Parents or students can order salad bar meals using an online ordering system.



## Cost

\$3.00

**“Salad Bar was an instant “hit”!**  
We began with an ambitious kick-off promotion where every child and staff member were invited to a complimentary salad bar visit. Our farm to school grant application stated we would aim for 50 children maximum each time, and these launch days served up to 175 each day.”

**BEFORE APPLYING FOR THE FARM TO SCHOOL CANADA GRANT**, Brooklyn Elementary did not have any form of food service other than an occasional hot lunch program delivered by the Parent Advisory Council, which was often highly processed. Both, LUSH Valley Executive Director Maurita Prato and Principal Erica Black had a vision for a healthier school food culture, and the only way to know if students would try healthier food was if they were made available.

## Community Connections: The Farm to School Team



As the fourth school in the region to launch their salad bar program, Brooklyn was well supported by those in the community. For example, Maurita's experience working with the Georges P. Vanier Secondary School, as well as the school's relationship with parent and farmer Arzeena Hamir, were invaluable. Principal Black also found a support network in other school principals in the region who were operating salad bars at their schools and able to provide advice based on their experiences.

At Brooklyn, the salad bar coordinator oversees the food preparation, which is made possible thanks to a diverse group of committed parent volunteers. Students from a local high school also help with food preparation, service and clean-up.

## Sourcing Local Food



Brooklyn's salad bar service initially aimed (and met!) for 25% local and seasonal food sourcing during peak harvest, and slowly increased it by 5-10% each year. During the growing season the school orders weekly from local farmers. In the winter they do their best to source as locally as possible.

## Hands-on Food Literacy



- The school encourages food literacy by inviting farmers to present to classes about the food that they grow.
- Salad bar fact sheets were developed for parents and supports were created for teachers, including food-systems presentations and ideas for linking seasonal produce to holidays and diverse cultures.
- The school has developed teaching materials that focus on composting. These build awareness of environmental responsibility among students while enhancing their hands-on learning experience.



# Mark R Isfeld Secondary School



## When does the salad bar take place?

Every Thursday



## What is offered in the salad bar?

Students are offered a range of 7 - 10 vegetables, 1 - 4 protein foods and 1 grain option.



## Ordering system

Orders are placed online in advance. Students use cash on the day of, if the salad bar is not sold out.



## Cost

\$4.00

“The salad bar program has been such a success for our school. Many students have become involved in a variety of ways (like theme planning, recipe creating, veggie preparation, serving, and clean up) with the salad bar program. Students have increased knowledge about eating locally and healthy, and are genuinely excited about food literacy.”

**MARK R ISFELD IS SURROUNDED BY FAST-FOOD RESTAURANTS;** therefore, embracing healthy eating and food literacy became important goals for the school. Before the farm to school salad bar, the school did not serve any food, except the occasional snack. The former Principal, Jeff Taylor, observed that without a nutritious lunch students experienced an energy crash in the afternoon. The school community sought to bring healthier food options to the students so they would be better prepared to stay alert and engaged during their school day.

## Community Connections: The Farm to School Team



Before receiving a Farm to School Canada Grant, students at Mark R Isfeld were engaged in some hands-on learning activities and the principal observed it worked well when available. Inspired by this, and by the success of the salad bar program at École Robb Road Elementary, Mark R Isfeld modeled their program off of École Robb Road's. Realizing that the school would need additional equipment and financial support, school staff and parents came together to collaborate and apply for a Farm to School Canada Grant, which they received in 2018. The salad bar in this school serves about 200 students weekly.

At Mark R Isfeld, the salad bar preparation and service is overseen by a volunteer coordinator who works with a team of 8 to 10 other volunteers made-up of students and parents. Volunteers assist with all aspects of the service, from placing weekly produce orders and picking them up from local farmers, to preparing and serving the salad bar.

## Sourcing Local Food



The school sources from a variety of local suppliers, and parent volunteers help pick-up and deliver fresh vegetables to the school.

## Hands-on Food Literacy



Food literacy activities are well supported by teachers and their classes and clubs.

- The Farm to Table and Healthy Lifestyles classes, the Life Skills Program, and the Environment and Garden clubs are involved in the food preparation, service and clean up.
- Environment Club members seek ways to improve upon the school's composting program.

# Best Practices for a Successful Salad Bar Program

## Sourcing locally

**HAVING LEARNED FROM ONE ANOTHER**, all five salad bar grant recipients in the Comox Valley have similar approaches to sourcing, ordering and delivery of salad bar ingredients. These systems are essential for a successful salad bar program while creating scale for local suppliers.

Each school needs to start by nurturing relationships with the farming community. These relationships enable them to know what is available when, and to understand how they can best support the local economy, including the need to pay farmers a fair price for their produce. For example, as a policy, Huband Park School does not request discounts from farmers. With careful attention to planning and by taking a collaborative approach, both the farmers and the school win.

Despite the Comox Valley being an agricultural community, it is not possible for the schools to source 100% local all year-round. As such, these five schools take a scaled approach to local food: their first priority for sourcing is within the Comox Valley, second Vancouver Island, third the province (British Columbia), fourth Canada, and finally North America. The schools also try to use their school garden produce whenever possible. As a farmer herself, Arzeena Hamir has been instrumental in connecting first Huband Park, and then several other schools, with her own farm and other local farmers in the valley.

### Tips from Farmer-to-Farmer

Partnering with a local school can be a learning experience for both school and farmer, but it is one that is rewarding and helps students to become life-long healthy eaters. Here are some tips for farmers starting their relationship with a school from parent and farmer, Arzeena Hamir.

- ✓ Seek to establish long-term partnerships with schools that benefit both parties and can grow over time
- ✓ Set clear expectations of what produce is available each season
- ✓ Let schools know about crop failure and have a back-up plan for when it happens
- ✓ Develop a delivery system that works for both parties

## Local Food Suppliers

1. **Fiesta Greenhouse**
2. **Eatmore Sprouts**
3. **Amara Farm**
4. **Island of Eden Farm**
5. **Sieffert's Farm Market**
6. **School gardens**
7. **Merville Organics Growers Cooperative**
8. **Comox Valley Farmers Market**
9. **Tender Greens Farm**
10. **Minto Farm**
11. **Lush Valley Fruit Tree and Farm Gleaning programs**
12. **Butcher Block**
13. **Gunter Bros Meats**
14. **Salish Seafood**





# A Balanced Meal

The farm to school salad bar should offer a complete and balanced meal in line with the Canada Food Guide's Eat Well Plate. As a minimum, schools are asked to serve at least 3 vegetables and fruit, 1 protein food and 1 whole grain option for students to choose from in every salad bar service. Below are some staple ingredients shared by the Comox Valley schools.

Vegetables and Fruit Options	Protein options	Whole Grain options
Mixed greens	Farm-fresh eggs (boiled)	Whole grain tortillas
Carrots	Plant-based proteins, including cooked whole pulses and homemade hummus	Rice
Celery	Cheese	Pita
Cucumbers		Pasta
Peppers		Whole grain buns
Sprouts (e.g. sunflower)		
Cherry tomatoes		
Beets		
Broccoli		
Peas		
Seasonal fruits		

Schools have also developed their own salad bar dressing recipes. Below are examples of two recipes developed by Huband Park Elementary that are now enjoyed by multiple other schools.

## Sunshine Dressing

1 cup nutritional yeast  
 2/3 cup water  
 2/3 cup soy sauce or tamari  
 2/3 cup apple cider vinegar  
 4 cloves garlic, pressed  
 2 Tbsp tahini  
 1 cup olive oil  
 1 cup grape seed oil

## Raspberry / Balsamic Dressing

4 cups olive oil  
 2 cup balsamic vinegar  
 1 cup raspberry vinegar  
 10 cloves garlic pressed (less for kids)  
 2 Tbsp Dijon mustard  
 1 cup jam (raspberry or other)



ÉCOLE ROBB ROAD, CONNEX, BC

## Salad bar tools of the trade!

Along with great partnerships, a school needs to have kitchen equipment that allows the team to efficiently prepare and serve the salad bar. The following equipment is recommended by schools for quick prep, service and clean-up!

- ✓ Salad bar unit
- ✓ A good quality food processor
- ✓ Dishwasher (commercial grade is ideal)
- ✓ Reusable plates and cutlery
- ✓ Storage system for plates and cutlery
- ✓ Large kitchen or prep area (ideal, but not required to make it work!)

## Encouraging Student Involvement

In all schools, students are involved in the decisions that make the salad bar possible. For example, to develop a suite of healthy, locally sourced menu options, the **Lake Trail Community Middle School** team engaged students in helping to create menu items that would:

- Replace low nutrient convenience foods with fresh, minimally processed alternatives
- Be easy for concession staff and volunteers to produce on a routine basis
- Be student-approved

Students love salad bar themes! Themes are a great way to present salad bar meals in fresh and exciting ways while capturing the interest of students. Themes can be inspired by the cultural traditions of the students and their families, seasonal foods or festivities, or simply student favourites. For example, it has been important to the Brooklyn Elementary School community to offer meals

inspired by the local Indigenous community traditions and heritage of some of their students:

“We chose the Indigenous theme in honour of an Indigenous student who won a national contest and oozes pride for her heritage. To celebrate her, we looked at adding items to our basic salad offerings, and chose seaweed, pine nuts, blueberries as well as bannock as a grain offering and smoked salmon as our first meat-based protein.”

Students in the farm to school programs are also actively engaged in gardening, promoting, preparing, serving and clean-up. In some schools, older students help serve their younger peers. This is a great way to get students involved, strengthen peer-to-peer relationships and improve student connectedness within the school.



The student volunteers at **Huband Park** have made it cool to be part of the salad bar team. Monogrammed school aprons generously made and donated by a community partner.

## Making the salad bar accessible for all

In all cases, the schools started with smaller salad bar operations that slowly grew as there was more student curiosity and demand, and as the confidence of administrators to deliver the salad bar increased. For example, École Robb Road started out with one salad bar unit and, as popularity increased, they added a second salad bar unit.

Another way to maximize efficiency in service is to alternate grades served. At École Robb Road and Brooklyn Elementary salad bar is served every week, but to primary students one week and older grades the next. This alternating schedule allows both cohorts to fully enjoy the salad bar twice a month, while making service manageable for volunteers and administrators.

Schools that receive a Farm to School Canada Grant must guarantee that all students will have access to the salad bar regardless of their means to pay and without stigma. To achieve this, each school has developed a system that works for their own community. To maintain confidentiality, principals connect with parents and teachers to determine the need for each student who wishes to participate.

Some approaches to increasing the accessibility of salad bar include:

- A portion of the salad bar budget goes towards covering a set number of free weekly salad bar meals. Funds may be contributed through fundraising efforts, district subsidized meal programs, or the Parent Advisory Council budget.
- The salad bar is priced at a fee slightly above cost recovery. Profits are invested back into the program and cover a number of low or no-cost meals. Some schools choose to charge slightly more for school staff to participate (e.g. École Robb Road charges \$4 for a staff meal vs \$3 for a student meal)

- Families who are ordering for their own children through the online lunch ordering system can anonymously purchase extra salad bar meals. The extra meals go into a pool that are then made available to students who may not otherwise be able to participate.
- Lake Trail Community Middle School has a partnership with a not-for-profit society that provides the salad bar at a subsidized rate to the entire school community.

Revenues generated from the salad bar can also be used towards the purchase of new equipment or supplies, to support food literacy activities, or to otherwise assist with program sustainability.

## Reducing food waste and environmental impact management

An integral part of having a food service is to be conscious about the environmental impacts of waste created by the service. As part of their farm to school efforts the five participating schools in the Comox Valley have demonstrated a strong commitment to reducing food waste and minimizing their environmental footprints. These schools have adopted a number of environmental measures including:

- ✓ Reducing their carbon footprints by sourcing food from school gardens and local farmers
- ✓ Adopting an 'order only what you need' mindset by monitoring food services and adjusting purchasing weekly to minimize waste
- ✓ Selecting minimally packaged and processed goods to reduce packaging waste
- ✓ Using reusable dishes instead of disposable ones
- ✓ Sorting cardboard, plastic, tin and glass for proper recycling
- ✓ Setting a goal of zero salad bar waste and encouraging healthy competition among teachers and students to help achieve it



**Huband Park** has excelled at reducing food waste from their salad bar. They teach students about food waste by weighing their waste each week. Any scraps that are produced are provided to a local farmer as feed for their chickens, whose eggs are then regularly featured in the salad bar, creating a closed-loop system!

## Measuring salad bar success

Schools can witness first-hand the success of the salad bar by tracking milestones. Here are some of the ways that the Comox Valley schools are tracking their own successes:

Indicators of success	Method and measurement
Increase in student participation in the salad bar	Count the number of meals per week by counting the number of dirty plates
Increase in locally sourced vegetables and fruits	Track the amount spent in locally sourced food after each service
Increase in number of community partnerships and volunteers	Track the number of individuals, organizations and local businesses involved with, or contributing to, the salad bar
Increase in the amount of equipment and functional items needed	Track the salad bar unit and other functional items that are needed to meet increasing demand of students
Increase in food literacy activities	Track the number of classes that start planning their activities such as field trips to farms, gardening, cooking, and other food literacy activities
Decrease in food waste	Weigh compostable food waste each week and monitor it over time
Increase in salad bar profit	Track weekly salad bar sales and compare to costs

## The importance of volunteers & advice for salad bar teams

Farm to school volunteers are a great source of energy and expertise. They provide important insights into the day-to-day operations of farm to school activities. For example, they can tell you if they have noticed relevant changes in students' food preferences, appetites or behaviours, while offering suggestions for improvements.

At **École Robb Road**, during the first year of running the salad bar, volunteers noticed children's plates getting increasingly more colorful. Similarly, volunteers at **Lake Trail** reported:

- Noticeable change in students' food choices
- Long line-ups of smiling faces, eager to fill their plates
- Willingness of students and staff to try new foods
- Students surprising themselves by liking a new vegetable that they had never tried or heard of before
- Students returning for second helpings of salad
- Students being polite and grateful for the healthy food they received

Salad bar services require strong and committed teams to ensure the sustainability of the service. This is especially true at schools where there is no cafeteria or other food service, as is the case for all five of these Comox Valley schools. Several of the following recommendations come from farm to school salad bar coordinators, volunteers and school community members in the Comox Valley:

- ✓ Develop a solid plan and systems from the get-go, and don't be afraid to plan ahead – one team member recommends planning three years ahead!
- ✓ Start small, and don't worry too much about participation numbers at first. Salad bar participation and interest in food literacy activities will grow!
- ✓ If you can, visit and volunteer for another program to learn first-hand how they operate the salad bar (*Tip: if you are unable to visit another school, ask F2CC team<sup>2</sup> to link you with an experienced salad bar coordinator who is willing to share their knowledge!*)
- ✓ Keep an open mind. Don't be fooled into thinking students don't like vegetables and that a salad bar is not going to be popular among kids — they will surprise you!
- ✓ Build a strong and diverse team who sees the value in a salad bar.
- ✓ The salad bar service thrives on the contribution of several volunteer hours. A strong group, and time invested in planning, goes a long way to ensuring success.
- ✓ Recruit more volunteers than you think you will need. Many hands make lighter work!
- ✓ Support your volunteers! Ask for feedback, understand their needs and work with them to find solutions to any barriers.
- ✓ Success depends on partnerships. It cannot just be volunteers or parents; leadership from school administration is paramount – connect with them regularly.

<sup>2</sup>F2CC can be reached at: [info@farmtocafeteriacanada.ca](mailto:info@farmtocafeteriacanada.ca). You can also visit the [F2S Resource Centre](#) for a list of videos where teachers and coordinators share their tips.

- ✓ Communicate often and clearly – communication is key to a strong and happy and productive team!
- ✓ If you can, have two coordinators to share the responsibility and ensure continuity of services.
- ✓ Shop at your local farmers' market to get many local ingredients in a one-stop-shop (Note: you will need to arrange for proper refrigeration until salad bar preparation happens).
- ✓ Work with farmers to either pick-up ingredients directly from their farm, or arrange a central drop-off location where they can deliver food for multiple schools or other clients, such as restaurants.

## The role of school principals as farm to school champions

Principals at each of the five schools demonstrated strong leadership and vision to embed farm to school salad bars and food literacy into their school culture. This dedication is proportional to the success of the program. Strong Principal champions:

- ✓ Demonstrate “can-do” attitudes. If you believe in farm to school approach, perceived barriers will diminish... logistics, timing and local procurement are all manageable, and by demonstrating leadership and support others will come along for the journey.
- ✓ Coordinate and actively participate in meetings for the grant application and implementation processes.
- ✓ Ensure program funds are administered and deliverables are met.
- ✓ Foster an environment to increase food literacy, school garden support and connections to in the

local farming community.

- ✓ Connect with other schools to learn from their experiences.
- ✓ Act as an available resource and problem solver.
- ✓ Are available to attend regional training opportunities to learn from and network with other schools.
- ✓ Encourage students and staff to participate in the salad bar services.
- ✓ Are present during salad bar service, assist with flow in salad bar access, and help younger students with tasks such as carrying plates.
- ✓ Allow flexibility at lunch time. For example, calling students to join the salad bar 10-15 minutes early, allowing extra time to build and enjoy their salads.
- ✓ Celebrate the hard work of volunteers and staff who make the salad bar happen.
- ✓ Ensure a salad bar succession plan is in place, in case coordinators or teachers with a leadership role move to another school.
- ✓ Share their school's experience, provide feedback and participate in the development of resources like this case study!



# Farm to School Learning Circle & Visions for the Future

**IN THE FALL OF 2018**, inspired by the potential to grow farm to school in their region, the principals and other engaged community members at these five schools convened an informal working group to identify areas of synergy, share knowledge, and provide mentorship to other schools. Their hope was to coordinate knowledge, learning systems and resources. It soon became apparent; however, that dedicated coordination was necessary to help organize the group towards a common vision and goals.

This presented an opportunity to establish a Farm to School Learning Circle and, in the fall of 2019 Farm to Cafeteria Canada and its administrative sponsor, the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC) provided the community with a Learning Circle Grant, which allowed for the hiring of a part-time regional coordinator.

Jenn Meilleur was hired as the region's Learning Circle Coordinator to facilitate an 18-month collaborative effort to advance a common vision and goals for farm to school in the Comox Valley. To ensure that efforts were well-grounded in the work that was already happening and to build on community strengths, Jenn pulled together an Advisory Circle. Together, they set a vision and principles to guide the Learning Circle work. The Advisory Circle included:

- **Arzeena Hamir**, *Organic Farmer and Comox Valley Regional District Director*
- **Barb Whyte**, *K'omoks First Nation Elder*
- **Maurita Prato**, *Executive Director, LUSH Valley Food Action Society*
- **Serina Alison**, *School District 71 District Teacher in Environmental and Outdoor Education*
- **Sheila McDonnell**, *Board of Education Trustee*

The first Learning Circle meeting was hosted in February of 2020 and was co-facilitated by Jenn and Maurita. About thirty people attended from all across the Comox Valley representing diverse groups of people who support healthy, local food in schools. This included farmers, students, teachers, Indigenous support workers, salad bar coordinators, administrators, and non-profit partners. Outputs from the meeting included a draft common vision, as well as four goal areas:

## Vision

Food is medicine and nourishment. We celebrate the intimate connection between children, healthy food, community, culture, and planet. Local food is at the centre of our schools, integrated into all aspects of learning - in school yards, classrooms, farms, and Indigenous communities.

## Lens

We do this work with a focus on cultural safety, social justice, sustainability, and collective action toward reconciliation. We are part of the global climate action movement.

## Goal areas:

1. Centralized School / Food Coordinator and Hub
2. Food Programs at Every School
3. Food Literacy Curriculum Development
4. Community Supports for School Food (adopt a farm, University students etc).

Formal Learning Circle activities are on-going until April 2021 with a view to continuing to build capacity and sustainability of the farm to school movement in the Comox Valley.

## What is a Farm to School Learning Circle?

### A FARM TO SCHOOL LEARNING CIRCLE

is a process to build, strengthen, and expand collective farm to school 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.

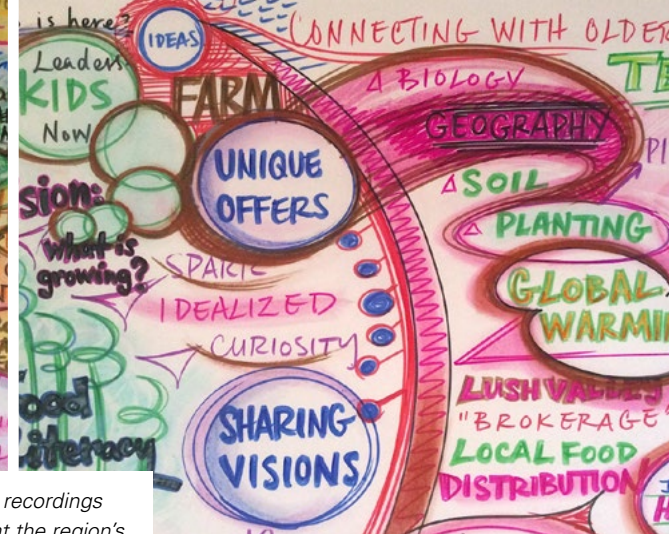
Each Learning Circle defines their own goals and chooses how specific or broad their focus will be. As examples, some may focus on a shift in food procurement or school-community connectedness; while others may choose to focus on the food environment, food literacy, or food culture and traditions.



Want to learn more about Farm to School Learning Circles? Check out our [Learning Circle Guide](#).



Graphic recordings captured at the region's first Learning Circle meeting in February 2020.



## Conclusion

**ALL SCHOOLS HAVE DIFFERENT RESOURCES** and approaches to implementing school food programs. The farm to school approach offers a framework that can be adopted and adapted in almost any setting based on its three core pillars:

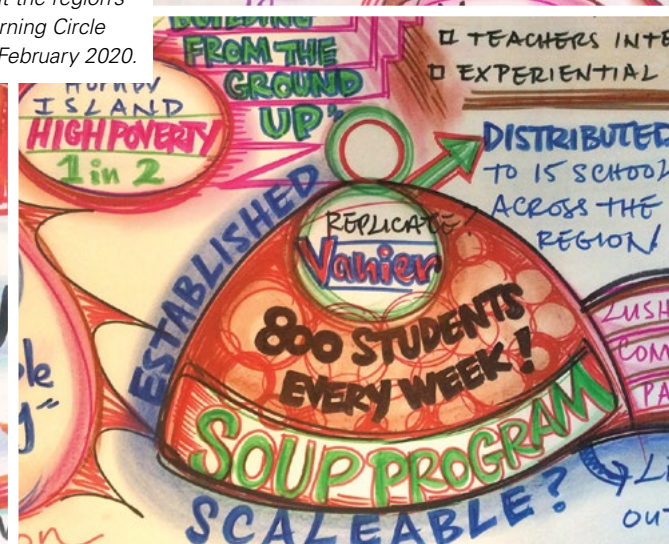
1. Healthy, local food in schools
2. Hands-on learning
3. School and community connectedness

This case study is a testament to the farm to school approach and its potential to progressively scale-up activities from a single school to a whole community.

Individually and together Huband Park Elementary School, École Robb Road Elementary School, Lake Trail Community Middle School, Brooklyn Elementary School and Mark R. Isfeld Secondary School offer inspiring examples of how regional food systems can be transformed to be more vibrant, resilient and sustainable, starting with a single school.

While their journey continues, they leave us with some important ingredients for success for any school looking to begin or advance their own efforts in farm to school:

- **Strong leadership** from school administration
- **Building relationships with local farmers** and other food producers
- Offering a full and **balanced meal** that is **accessible to all**
- Encouraging **student participation** in food growing, preparation and service
- **Monitoring progress**, adapting where necessary
- **Engaging** community partners and **celebrating** their contributions
- Identifying synergies, and **collaborating toward a common vision and goals** to enable continued progress and sustainability



JILL BANTING, STAR QUILL CREATIVE



*Outdoor classroom at Robb Road Elementary School*



*Farm to School: Canada Digs In!* is a multi-sectoral chronic disease prevention initiative lead by Farm to Cafeteria Canada in partnership with the Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia, the Public Health Agency of Canada, Whole Kids Foundation, Meal Exchange, Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, Food First NL, New Brunswick Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, Equiterre, Sustain Ontario and the Public Health Association of British Columbia.



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