



# Farm to School Learning Circles

BRINGING LOCAL, HEALTHY, AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD  
TO THE MINDS AND PLATES OF STUDENTS ACROSS CANADA





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the many people who took time to share their knowledge and experiences about this innovative and adaptable approach to bring more healthy, local, sustainable, wild, and traditional foods into the minds and onto the plates of students. We are deeply grateful for the expertise that shaped the development of this guide. Thank you to School Food Focus, the US based organization that developed an early Farm to School Learning Lab model - one that inspired the innovative models illuminated here. We offer a special thank you to our colleagues with the Public Health Association of British Columbia and the Greater Vancouver Farm to School Hub who championed and administered the funds for the first Canadian Learning Lab in Vancouver, BC. Thank you to our colleagues with the Heart and Stroke Foundation for their trust in our capacity to champion and administer the funds for a Learning Lab project in St John's, NL and a Learning Circle project in Haida Gwaii, BC as part of the Nourishing School Communities Initiative. Thank you to the partners at the Farm to School: Canada Digs In! table who continue to support and evaluate this process on Haida Gwaii and to our colleagues with the University of Waterloo who are currently supporting the adaptation and evaluation of this model in additional Indigenous communities. Finally, deep appreciation is extended to the many organizations and individuals in Vancouver, St John's, and the communities of Haida Gwaii. Thank you for embracing the early model, making it your own, and for sharing the way the model can be adapted to advance local foods to school activity in northern, urban, remote and Indigenous contexts.

## Joanne Bays

National Director, Farm to Cafeteria Canada

## Key Contributors:

**Joanne Bays**, National Director, Farm to Cafeteria Canada

**Ashley Byrne**, Research & Resource Coordinator, Food First NL

**Amber Cowie**, former Farm to School BC Vancouver Area Regional Hub Learning Lab Coordinator

**Shelly Crack**, Registered Dietitian, Northern Health Authority

**Kiku Dhanwant**, Haida Gwaii Local Foods to School Learning Circle Coordinator

**Sarah Ferber**, Program Manager, Food First NL

**Jim Sands**, former Project Manager, Social Planning and Research Council of BC

**Jesse Veenstra**, National Manager Farm to School Initiatives, Farm to Cafeteria Canada

**Barbara Zupko**, Senior Manager, Propel Centre for Population Health Impact, University of Waterloo

**Designed By** Tracey O'Neil, [www.simplelifedesigns.ca](http://www.simplelifedesigns.ca)

**Published By** Farm to Cafeteria Canada in partnership with Food First NL

## COVER PHOTOS CREDIT: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT)

CAROLINE ATTWOOD, UNSPLASH.COM

ST. JOHN'S F2S LEARNING LAB 2014-16

RONNY KIND, UNSPLASH.COM

KIKU DHANWANT, SHELLY CRACK, GEOFF HORNER, HAIDI GWAI, BC

KIKU DHANWANT, SHELLY CRACK, GEOFF HORNER, HAIDI GWAI, BC

(CENTER) ÉCOLE ROBB ROAD, BC

(BACK COVER) PATRICK FORE, UNSPLASH.COM



© 2019 Farm to Cafeteria Canada


Copies of this document, as well as other F2CC resources referenced throughout it, can be downloaded in English and French from: [www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca](http://www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca)



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . .	5	<b>CHAPTER 1:</b> Farm to School Learning Circles. . . . .	9	<b>CHAPTER 8:</b> Addressing Challenges . . . . .	23
Farm to School:		<b>CHAPTER 2:</b> Is a Farm to School Learning Circle Right for You? . . . . .	11	<b>CHAPTER 9:</b> Celebrating Accomplishments and Supporting Transition . . . . .	25
- Farm to Cafeteria Canada (F2CC) . . . . .	7	<b>CHAPTER 3:</b> The Role of a Coordinator . . . . .	13	<b>CHAPTER 10:</b> Farm to School Learning Lab & Local Food to School Learning Circle Stories from Across Canada. . . . .	26
- Farm to School (F2S) Approach. . . . .	7	<b>CHAPTER 4:</b> Inviting People to the Circle . . . . .	15	- Vancouver, B.C. . . . .	27
- Farm to School Models. . . . .	8	<b>CHAPTER 5:</b> Organizing the First Meeting . . . . .	17	- St. John's, N.L. . . . .	29
- Benefits of Farm to School . . . . .	8	<b>CHAPTER 6:</b> Identifying Shared Goals and Actions . . . . .	19	- Haida Gwaii, B.C. . . . .	31
		<b>CHAPTER 7:</b> Ongoing Information Sharing, Learning, and Action . . . . .	21		





**// The aim of the Learning Lab or Learning Circle is to help ensure that local, healthy foods are on the minds and plates of students by bringing key people together in a well-facilitated, supportive environment to share ideas, develop common goals and collaborate on actions aimed at systems change. Within this context, each Learning Lab determines its own focus and priorities aimed at addressing barriers and building capacity to achieve the vision outlined above."**

**- Joanne Bays,  
National Director  
Farm to Cafeteria Canada**





## OVERVIEW

This guide provides an introduction to the use of Learning Circles as a means of furthering Farm to School (F2S) efforts across Canada. It is primarily intended for use by local and regional F2S Coordinators to support their work to increase the availability of healthy, local, and sustainable food to children and youth. However, anyone interested in taking F2S action may also benefit from reading about and implementing a F2S Learning Circle.

.....

## SUMMARY

This guide is intended to:

- Introduce Learning Circles as a strategy for advancing F2S;
- Showcase successes and lessons learned from Learning Labs and Circles in three different locations (Vancouver, Haida Gwaii, and St. John's); and,
- Describe the steps involved in hosting a F2S Learning Circle.

# INTRODUCTION

## IN RECENT YEARS, A SURGE OF INTEREST IN FARM TO SCHOOL (F2S) HAS SWEEPED ACROSS CANADA.

In schools large and small, rural and urban, preschools through to college and university campuses, an impressive variety of programs are working towards the goal of ensuring that local, healthy, and sustainable food is on both the minds and plates of students.

F2S brings more of the local harvest into schools, both farmed foods and wild foods. School communities have tailored their efforts to suit their contexts, giving rise to local food to school, fish to school and forest to school initiatives. The emerging landscape of F2S activity involves farmers, gardeners, fishers, hunters, chefs, school food providers, wholesalers, teachers, students, elders, and whole school communities, and is being supported by champions in school boards, funding organizations, researchers, the non-profit and private sectors, and all levels of government.

The F2S movement includes the introduction of indoor and outdoor school gardens, greenhouses, teaching kitchens, wild food harvesting, food preservation, and composting. It also includes the redesign of school cafeteria menus, procurement practices, and food services. It focuses on reconnecting children and youth to the land, waters, food, and cultural practices, in a myriad of ways that are significant and achievable.

## WHAT IS A LEARNING CIRCLE?

The F2S Learning Lab and Learning Circle model has been a promising practice that has helped to support collaborative actions by a range of players.

The F2S Learning Lab was originally developed in the United States. Early Learning Labs brought together the

people responsible for school food service with the local food supply sector, to identify feasible and experimental ways to shift the school food system to increased procurement of local food. The Learning Lab Coordinator then set out to test new ideas over six month periods, reporting back to the group. If ideas were unsuccessful, the Learning Lab would reflect on that experience to learn from it and then moved on to its next strategy.

Following its success in the US, Canadian F2S practitioners have since adapted and expanded the model to include a greater focus on building capacity to address a variety of systemic issues related to school food – from the production, distribution and procurement of food to food literacy.

The term Learning Circle originated in Indigenous communities and has been used with F2S and local foods to school efforts to highlight the collaborative and community effort behind this work, and its roots in local knowledge, traditions, and culture.

While both terms, Learning Lab and Learning Circle, are used in practice, throughout this guide we will be applying the term Learning Circle as it builds upon the US Learning Lab model and it reflects the inclusive, comprehensive, and capacity building approach developed in Canada. Similarly, we will be using the term F2S, noting that it is synonymous to local foods to school, fish to school, forest to school, and other contextual variations.

This guide includes an outline of the strategies involved in hosting a F2S Learning Circle, and presents engaging stories from across Canada of successful Learning Circles from which to gather inspiration.







# FARM TO SCHOOL

## Farm to Cafeteria Canada

**ESTABLISHED IN 2011**, Farm to Cafeteria Canada (F2CC) is a national organization that hosts a network of partners across the country to educate, build capacity, strengthen partnerships, and influence policy to bring local, healthy, and sustainable foods into all public institutions. Farm to School, Farm to Campus, and Farm to Healthcare are all a part of the national farm to cafeteria dialogue. Since its inception, F2CC has established itself a national leader in the Farm to School approach in Canada, and is proud to grow this movement which aims to get more healthy, local and sustainable food on the minds and plates of students – from preschool to campus. F2CC does this by implementing, evaluating, and linking best practices in Farm to School, from coast-to-coast-to-coast.

Check out Farm to Cafeteria Canada for more information, resources, and important contacts: [www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca](http://www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca)

There are many ways to begin F2S. Some schools may choose to start with activities related to food literacy, procurement of local food, or making community connections. Other schools may begin their journey by growing food through starting a school garden. Once students express enthusiasm for fresh, local foods, then garden activities often progress to cooking and tasting activities.



## The Farm to School Approach

### What is Farm to School

F2S 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.

**F2S 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.**

### F2S 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 MODELS

While F2S programs share a common goal and common set of objectives, the way the programs are operationalized can be as varied as plants in a garden. Many different models exist - each arguably a promising practice. Typically, models vary in the way food is distributed and the way the food is served at the school. For more information on the models of F2S, visit [www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca](http://www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca)

## BENEFITS OF FARM TO SCHOOL

### Public Health

F2S improves student nutrition by providing easy access to healthy, local food, especially vegetables and fruits.

### Education and Learning

F2S supports cross-curricular, place-based, and experiential learning.

### Environmental Outcomes

F2S fosters environmental stewardship amongst students and the school community, and contributes to more sustainable ecosystems.

### Community Connectedness

F2S fosters strong relationships between schools and a wide range of partners including growers, community members and support organizations.

### Economic

F2S supports the sustainability of the regional food system: buying from local producers and processors helps stimulate the local economy.



Looking for more information about the benefits of F2S in Canada? Check out our [resource sheet](#) or visit us at [www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca](http://www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca).



## CHAPTER 1:

# Farm to School Learning Circles

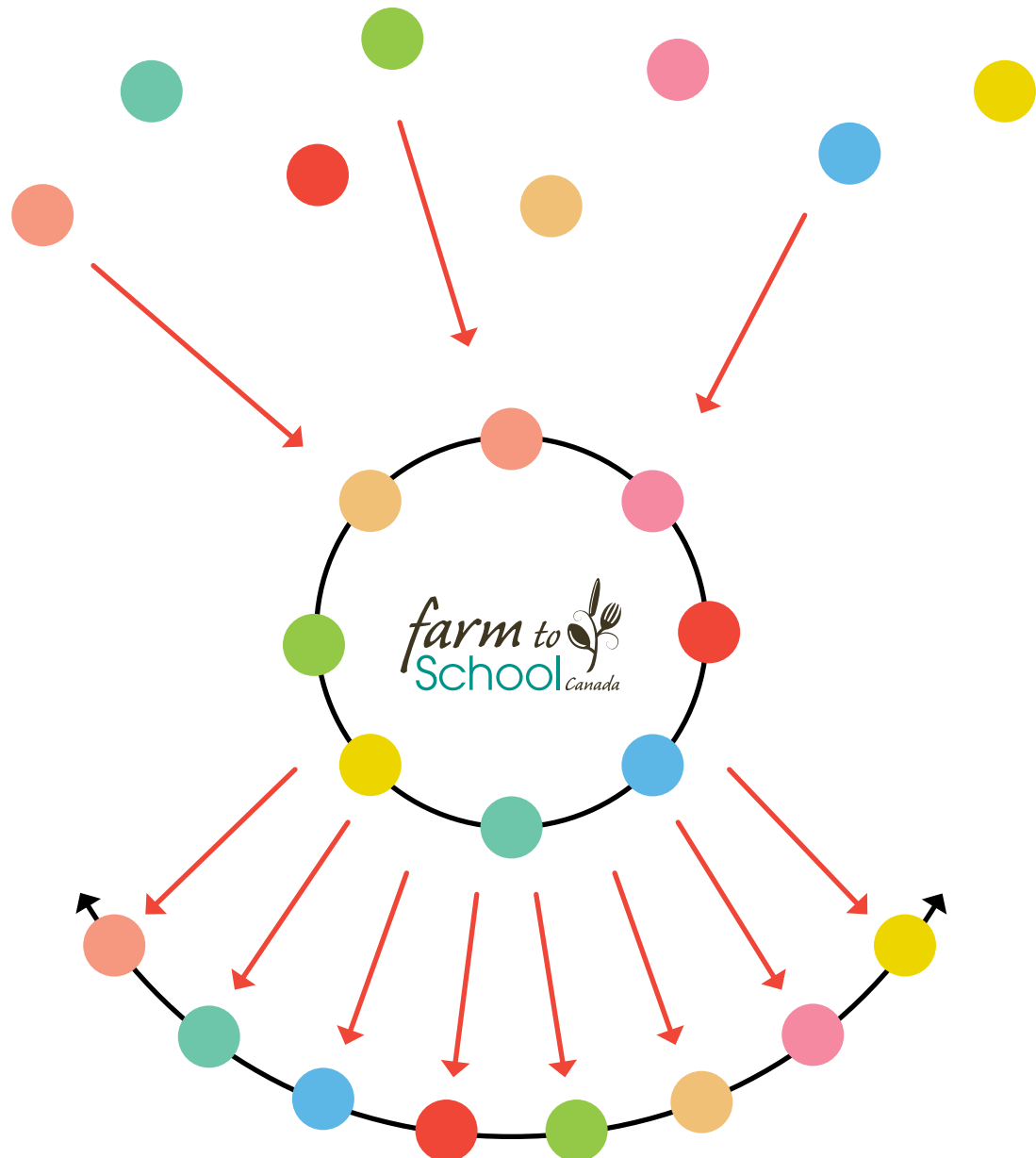
### What is a Farm to School Learning Circle?

**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].*



# Is a Farm to School Learning Circle Right for You?

HERE ARE SOME CONSIDERATIONS WHEN ASSESSING WHETHER A FARM TO SCHOOL (F2S) LEARNING CIRCLE IS RIGHT FOR YOUR COMMUNITY:

## Food Culture

F2S Learning Circles are most successful when food is valued as essential to the health of people, culture, community, environment and the economy. They work best in communities that are already engaged in activities to bring more healthy local food into the minds and onto the plates of students – especially in communities with a strong food culture that is engaged in and values local food. F2S Learning Circles can help to strengthen and expand existing work.

### CONSIDER:

- ☐ Is food already valued within the community?
- ☐ Has the school and community experienced success with a project or program designed to:
  - ☐ Enhance skills and knowledge about healthy local foods;
  - ☐ Put more local healthy foods onto the plates of students;
  - ☐ Support local farmers and/or the local food economy;
  - ☐ Promote environmental stewardship; and/or,
  - ☐ Develop and implement policy to support more healthy, local foods on students' plates?

## Commitment

F2S Learning Circles are most successful where there is:

- ➔ a high level of commitment among the various players
- ➔ over an extended period of time and
- ➔ at various levels of decision-making.

### CONSIDER:

- ☐ Are there organizations willing to commit resources to planning and facilitating the F2S Learning Circle with support from their senior staff?
- ☐ Have at least two champions been identified to coordinate the details of the process? Are they committed to supporting the initiative over two or more years?
- ☐ Are potential participants willing to attend F2S Learning Circle sessions every six months and follow up on collective actions?
- ☐ Is there agreement to share information, progress and best practices among participants and their networks?
- ☐ Are alternate participants available within an organization if someone can't attend, so that representation is maintained?

## Common understanding of purpose and goals

F2S Learning Circles are most effective when everybody involved is willing to work together towards a shared vision and common goals. To support that process, it is helpful for groups to agree upon how they will define key terms so that they are all speaking a common language (e.g. what is meant in their community by local food, sustainable food, healthy food, and school food community).

### CONSIDER:

- ☐ Are potential participants of the F2S Learning Circle willing and able to work collectively in order to achieve common goals?
- ☐ Are participants willing and able to infuse collective goals and actions with feedback from their own network and the experiences of people who will be most impacted?
- ☐ Will the F2S Learning Circle support participants to take action on issues that they are passionate about and that they see as critical?

## Range of participants

A F2S Learning Circle's strength is its participants and their collective networks. Participants should represent a range of perspectives and experiences and be willing and open to incorporate new information and experiences into their work. See Chapter 4 (page 15) for a comprehensive list of potential participants to invite to a F2S Learning Circle.

### CONSIDER:

- ☐ Is there a diverse group of eager and available potential participants who can successfully coordinate food related actions?
- ☐ Do potential participants represent diverse parts of the food system?
- ☐ Is adequate time for recruitment and participant support factored into the planning process?



## DEVELOPING A BUDGET FOR A LEARNING CIRCLE

A typical Learning Circle will require the services of at least one coordinator over a 24+ month period. It will also include at least four gatherings over a 24+ month period.

It can be a great idea to reach out to your local [F2S Regional Lead](#) to get support to create your budget.

Some things to consider in developing a budget include:

### Staff Time

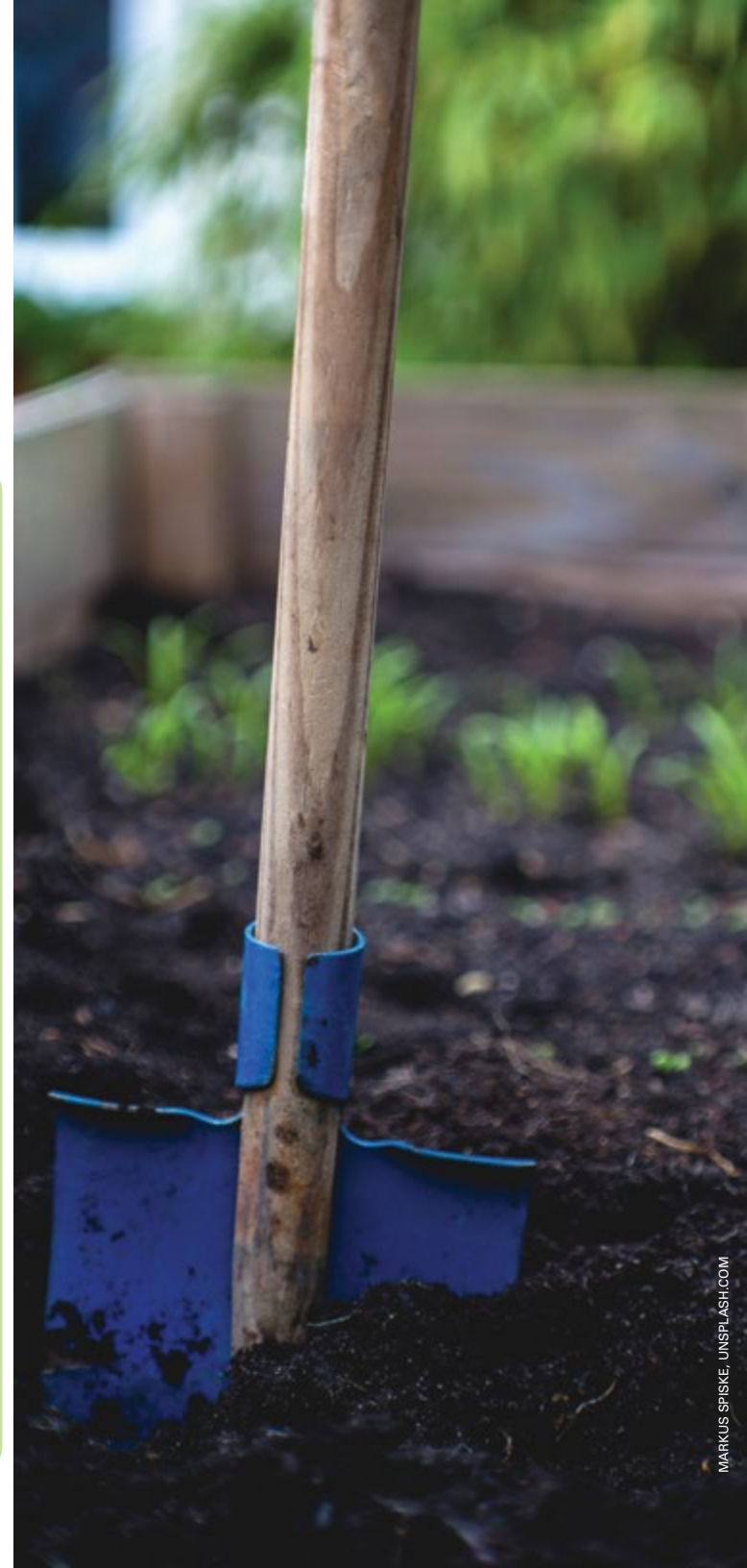
- Planning / Coordination (e.g., to develop agendas, recruit and communicate with participants, promote activities, etc.)
- Meeting facilitation (e.g., to develop handouts, presentations, meeting notes, etc.)
- Administration (e.g., to maintain a contact list, circulate invitations and information, respond to requests, etc.)

### Meeting Support

- Facility Rental (e.g. accessible venue, audio/visual equipment, etc.)
- Food and Refreshments (healthy, local, and sustainable options)
- Miscellaneous hosting costs (e.g., printing, name tags, markers, chart paper, post-it notes, etc.)
- A skilled graphic artist and a minute taker can both be very beneficial for documenting the important points and the 'spirit of the conversation'
- Appropriate language services and support for elders to participate (e.g. covering the cost of accompaniment by a family member or friend)
- Translation services and equipment to allow all participants to participate, regardless of language differences or abilities
- Honoraria for people sharing their expertise and lived experience or volunteering considerable time
- Other accessibility supports (e.g. alternate format materials, payment for teachers' substitute time, transportation, parking, child care, etc.)

### Support Between Meetings

- Workshops and strategic meetings (e.g. to share knowledge, build skills, cultivate relationships, support policy development, etc.)
- Development and distribution of resource materials to support and inspire action among participants
- Fundraising to support actions of the F2S Learning Circle
- Communications to promote the F2S Learning Circle to the public and potential partners (e.g. website, newsletter, social media, press releases, etc.)



## CHAPTER 3:

# The Role of a Coordinator

**INTEGRAL TO THE FARM TO SCHOOL (F2S) LEARNING CIRCLE PROCESS IS THE COORDINATOR.** This individual will take a leadership role in building trust amongst the group, facilitating decision making, and articulating actions and responsibilities. In some cases, a representative of the lead organization(s) has knowledge, skills, networks and time to undertake this important role. In other cases, an outside coordinator can be contracted to best support the group.

Some things to consider when selecting a coordinator include:

### Valuing and Prioritizing Food Knowledge

- ☐ Does the person have an understanding of group processes and development?
- ☐ Are they familiar with the cultural context and community's values around food?
- ☐ Are they aware of the strengths and challenges of the local food system?
- ☐ Do they understand and support the values of F2S?
- ☐ Are they familiar with resources and contacts that can aid the F2S Learning Circle?
- ☐ Are they familiar with the key players and issues involved in existing F2S efforts in the community?

### Skills

- Does the coordinator possess many of the following attributes or potential for them?
- ☐ Strong and inspiring leadership;
  - ☐ Welcoming nature;
  - ☐ Skilled at consensus building;
  - ☐ Good listener;
  - ☐ Able to take a neutral approach to group issues;
  - ☐ Able to encourage different viewpoints;
  - ☐ Passionate about F2S;
  - ☐ Eager to learn and open-minded;
  - ☐ Able to work with a variety of personalities while keeping everyone focused on the goals at hand;
  - ☐ Knowledgeable about how to foster conflict resolution;
  - ☐ Engaging facilitation style; and
  - ☐ Strong attention to detail and organized.



### Protected Time and Resources

- ☐ Are they able to take responsibility for many logistical details with deadlines?
- ☐ Do they have mentorship and capacity support from a "backbone" organization or are they willing to enter into that kind of relationship?







## CHAPTER 4:

# Inviting People to the Circle



### SEVERAL IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS NEED TO BE MADE

at this stage of the process. It is important to ensure representation from the widest range of experience and viewpoints as possible that play a role in school food. At the same time, you want to form a group that is modest in size to ensure rich conversation and manageable logistics. All participants should be primarily committed to bringing local, healthy, and sustainable food into schools. That's a broad aim so contrasting goals may arise, and are best addressed in an atmosphere where all participants come to the table willing to reflect and open to hearing others' viewpoints.

Some things to consider when developing your participation list:

#### Understanding local organizations and services

- ☐ Develop a map of organizations, services, individuals and stakeholder groups impacted by and/or working to address school food issues in your community
- ☐ Does your map include a range of sectors (e.g. business, government, school, health, community, Indigenous groups)?
- ☐ Does your map include sectors that you may not have strong relationships with?
- ☐ Use the map to develop an initial invitation list.

#### Orientation to the issue and background

- ☐ Are frontline practitioners as well as managers included?



- ☐ Is there a balance of participants from different sectors and professional backgrounds?
- ☐ Are there sectors of the food system that are under-represented?
- ☐ Are Indigenous representatives from the area consulted to learn about their potential involvement, and role, as well as protocols around their participation?
- ☐ Are students able to participate in a way that is meaningful and empowering to them?
- ☐ Are supports in place to ensure that people who may be vulnerable in a group setting talking about food issues that have directly impacted them, feel welcome and able to participate? (i.e. inviting them to attend with an ally, covering the costs associated with attending)

### **Organizational commitment**

If you plan to invite people to attend that are acting as representatives of organizations or agencies, and not just as individuals, then consider the following:

- ☐ Develop an invitation letter that clearly articulates the benefits of participation, expectations of participants in terms of time and resources, and how information will be shared.
- ☐ Ask potential participants to use the letter to ensure they have support from their supervisors to participate fully.
- ☐ Within organizations, seek or request representatives that have a genuine interest and passion for F2S and the ability to make decisions that can create positive change.

## **CONSIDER A RANGE OF POTENTIAL LEARNING CIRCLE PARTICIPANTS**

### **FOOD SYSTEM**

- ☐ Farmers
- ☐ School and community gardens
- ☐ Food gatherers and foragers
- ☐ Hunters
- ☐ Fishers
- ☐ Agriculture and food industry groups and associations
- ☐ Food processing companies
- ☐ People who teach food skills using farmed and traditional/wild foods
- ☐ Wholesalers
- ☐ Local distribution networks (e.g. food hubs, Community Supported Agriculture)
- ☐ Farmers' Markets
- ☐ Chefs and cooks
- ☐ Elders and community volunteers
- ☐ Home economics and culinary arts educators
- ☐ Local businesses
- ☐ School staff or volunteers that assist with food preparation, retail and meal time supervision
- ☐ Other food programs within the schools (e.g. breakfast and snack clubs)
- ☐ Composting coordinators or contracted businesses
- ☐ Suppliers of serving and packaging materials

### **GOVERNMENT**

- ☐ Representatives of Indigenous government and leadership
- ☐ Representatives of relevant departments in municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal government
- ☐ Health Inspectors/Environmental Health Officers

### **SCHOOLS**

- ☐ Interested teachers, school administration and other staff
- ☐ Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) or parent volunteers
- ☐ Student organizations and/or student representatives
- ☐ School Board Members
- ☐ School Board Purchasing Manager
- ☐ School District Sustainability Staff
- ☐ School District Maintenance Staff

### **HEALTH**

- ☐ Dietitians
- ☐ Health educators such as school and Community Public Health Nurses
- ☐ Other health professionals

### **COMMUNITY & ADDITIONAL**

- ☐ Elders and knowledge keepers in the community
- ☐ Community groups addressing food security, poverty reduction, environmental sustainability and other related issues
- ☐ Emergency food service providers (e.g. food banks/community freezers/pantries) that serve the participating school communities
- ☐ Others with knowledge of local and traditional wisdom and practices
- ☐ Spiritual and religious communities addressing food issues
- ☐ Special guest educators and facilitators with relevant knowledge to share to build capacity among participants
- ☐ Evaluation professionals
- ☐ Artists and communications professionals

# Organizing the First Meeting

**THIS FIRST GATHERING IS THE INTRODUCTION FOR PARTICIPANTS** to the Farm to School (F2S) Learning Circle process, therefore it should serve as a concrete example of the strengths to be gained through working together.

Some key questions to help the planning process include:

1. **Who is going to be there?** It is important to be specific about who is being invited and why. Examine the list as a whole to ensure balance among participants and chat with each participant in advance to ensure that they have a clear understanding of the F2S Learning Circle and feel they will be able to both contribute to, and get what they need out of it.
2. **What is motivating people to participate?** What are the key questions, conversations and learning outcomes that will lead people to conclude the process has been a good use of their time?
3. **Meeting Purpose?** What specific outcomes do you expect to see at the end of the first gathering (e.g. establishment of the F2S Learning Circle timeline and goals, commitment to specific activities, etc.)?

In crafting the agenda, consider including the following items:

- ☐ An enjoyable icebreaker activity to introduce participants and build rapport.
- ☐ Discussion to come to a shared understanding of key terms that will be used throughout the Learning Circle (i.e., local, healthy, sustainable food).
- ☐ Discussion to establish group norms for participating in the F2S Learning Circle. You may choose to establish terms of reference to formalize things like confidentiality, decision making processes, communication between meetings, and responsibilities of participants.
- ☐ Activities to work towards crafting a vision and up to five goals for the F2S Learning Circle. These will be fluid and further developed over time, but at the first meeting it is helpful to come to a broad consensus on direction.
- ☐ Formal and informal strategies for building relationships among participants (e.g., networking time over lunch and other breaks, hands-on group activities, etc.)

Share a delicious meal together during your meetings to connect people with the topic at hand, with each other, and with the food that's available locally. It provides a wonderful opportunity to celebrate achievements.

Some logistical considerations for hosting a successful F2S Learning Circle gathering include:

## Meeting Date and Time

- ☐ A schedule for future meetings is decided upon collectively and clearly communicated.
- ☐ Reminders are sent prior to each meeting.
- ☐ Agendas are circulated with adequate (agreed upon) time before each meeting.

## Meeting Location

- ☐ The venue is easily accessible by public transit and has parking.
- ☐ The venue and catering align with the vision of healthy, local, sustainable food and offer a relaxing, welcoming setting.
- ☐ The building is accessible for people with varying abilities.



## KEY QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION DURING YOUR INITIAL F2S LEARNING CIRCLE GATHERING

- ★ What is healthy food? Why is it important?
- ★ What is local food? Why is it important?
- ★ What is sustainable food? How is it measured? Why is it important?
- ★ If money was not an object, how would we use healthy, local, sustainable food in our schools?
- ★ Why is healthy, local, sustainable food important to you?
- ★ What do you believe you bring to the F2S Learning Circle that can help bring its vision to life?
- ★ What are potential goals and actions to improve access to healthy, local and sustainable food?
- ★ If everything we work on as a F2S Learning Circle is wildly successful, what will the school food environment look like in two years? Five years? 10 years?
- ★ How will successes be measured and celebrated throughout the F2S Learning Circle?
- ★ Who is here today, and why? Who isn't here that should be? How might missing voices be included?

## 6 TIPS FOR MAKING FARM TO SCHOOL LEARNING CIRCLES ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE

**#1 Timing:** When setting the date and time for your Farm to School (F2S) Learning Circle keep in mind that participants will need to schedule around their busy lives. Try to find a compromise between those that prefer to attend during business hours as part of their day jobs, and those that prefer to attend evenings and weekends. Try to schedule within public transportation hours and factor in travel time, especially for participants in rural areas and traffic heavy urban settings.

**#2 Accessible Venue:** When picking the location of your F2S Learning Circle keep in mind accessibility of the site. For example, make sure there is accessible parking and an accessible entrance to the building, and make sure the meeting space inside the building is accessible, comfortable and functional for all participants. Clear signage on how to find the space can also be very helpful for participants. For the first gathering the Coordinator or a volunteer may wish to welcome people at the door and assist them to get situated.

**#3 Accessible Content:** When planning activities and presentations as part of your F2S Learning Circle, keep in mind that some participants may require accommodations or supports to be able to participate. Try to sensitively identify these needs ahead of the first meeting. Encourage open communication so that people feel comfortable voicing any requests. Use clear and complete visual presentation aids, use large text whenever possible, use captioning on videos and audibly explain any presentation aids, such as slides, pictures, or images. The F2S Learning Circle coordinator may consider attending professional development with an organization that advocates for accessibility, safety and inclusion, so that they can ensure they are creating an environment and content that is as accessible as possible.

**#4 Accessible Food:** One of the best parts of a F2S Learning Circle is sharing and connecting over a meal of delicious, local food, and all participants should be able to enjoy that. When planning what to serve, check with participants about food allergies and preferences and consider diversity in cultural foods representative of the local context. Be willing and prepared to provide options for vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, allergen free, Kosher, and Halal food as requested.

**#5 Child Care:** Lack of affordable childcare can be a barrier to participation for some individuals. Providing a space and a childminder with activities for kids may be greatly appreciated and a way to increase participation.

**#6 Respect Protocols of Local Indigenous Communities:** When inviting Indigenous leaders, elders, or teachers, seek advice on appropriate protocols for invitations, hosting, and reciprocating sharing of knowledge with a gift and/or honorarium. Find out if it would be appropriate to start with a prayer or offering as per tradition of the community where the F2S Learning Circle is being held. Encourage and expect a family member or a friend to accompany elders. Formally acknowledge the land upon which you are gathering.

## CHAPTER 6:

# Identifying Shared Goals and Actions

**THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE FARM TO SCHOOL (F2S) LEARNING CIRCLE** is to develop and improve access to healthy, local and sustainable food for students. The strategies and activities used to address that purpose may vary by location, reflecting the individual circumstances, strengths and capacity of the community.

Some F2S Learning Circles find it helpful to collectively craft a vision for F2S in their community to work towards. Participants then brainstorm and prioritize 3-5 initial achievable goals to work on that move forward that vision. Under each goal they articulate clear actions to take in between gatherings to make progress, and assign responsibility for those actions among participants. At each gathering, participants review their vision and goals and update on progress on actions. They share any external developments that they have learned of between gatherings that may sway their strategy, both opportunities and obstacles.

The following list shares some of the goals that have been articulated in previous F2S Learning Circles in Canada, and can be used as a starting point for discussions.

Potential F2S Learning Circle goals may include:

- **Develop awareness and understanding** – Improve awareness and understanding within the school community about the benefits of local, healthy and sustainable food. This can be done through education, programs, special events, curriculum links, etc.
- **Develop capacity to procure more and better local, healthy and sustainable food** – The F2S Learning Circle can develop strategies that encourage alignment between F2S values, purchasing policies and practices.
- **Increase consumption** – Once local, healthy and sustainable food is available within the school, a next step is to ensure that students are encouraged and able to make healthy food choices.
- **Strengthen relationships** – The F2S Learning Circle can create ongoing opportunities for relationships and shared understanding to develop among key players. Activities can include trust building exercises, networking, knowledge exchange, storytelling, and joint learning opportunities.
- **Develop sense of place** – strengthen connections to place, culture, and cultural diversity through place-based learning as part of the F2S approach.
- **Enhance knowledge** – The F2S Learning Circle can work to build knowledge about specific issues related to the local food system and school food.
- **Enhance food distribution** – The F2S Learning Circle can help generate fresh ideas, while encouraging the implementation of new (or improved) systems to distribute local, healthy and sustainable food.





## ENERGIZING YOUR AGENDA: TIPS

Engaging a diverse group of people to work together over a long period of time isn't always easy. Everyone is busy and F2S might not be everyone's top priority. Building a F2S Learning Circle is like cultivating any long-term relationship. Look for opportunities to infuse inspiration and excitement into the process to maintain momentum. Clearly communicate the value that participants bring back to their core organizations by being involved.

Here are some ideas for getting participants excited about their F2S Learning Circle and sustaining its momentum:

- Facilitate fun icebreakers to start every session.
- Build informal networking and socializing time into agendas.
- Find creative ways to facilitate activities and work on tasks (e.g. World Café, dotmocracy, storytelling, illustrated timelines).
- Serve delicious, healthy, local and sustainable meals.
- Reflect at each gathering about whose voices are missing, and continue to recruit new members to enrich your Circle.
- Host sessions at interesting venues like farms, schools or community food hubs.
- Bring in speakers and show videos that help participants find inspiration in being part of a larger, national F2S movement.
- Engage participants in all aspects of decision making so they feel a sense of ownership.
- Create opportunities for participants to represent the group to the public through presentations and media.
- Take great photos at every opportunity and share them.
- Teach food skills, to build capacity and just for fun. For example, cooking and gardening lessons can be included in each gathering. Consider having members of the group take turns leading these activities as it can help team building and provide opportunity to take ownership in the work.
- Engage youth in the process in as many meaningful ways as possible.
- Cover costs for participants to attend and provide honouraria for elders.
- Give thank you gifts or notes as appropriate in the community or when people's efforts shine.
- Brainstorm together about how to improve the F2S Learning Circle and then follow through on suggestions.
- Check in occasionally to ensure that the workload is reasonable to participants' initial commitments of time and resources.
- Publicly acknowledge the dedication of participants in all documents and when public speaking.
- Engage skilled facilitators, or seek training to improve facilitation.
- Document the process creatively with illustrated notes or video, and refer back to it frequently for inspiration and guidance.
- Provide updates via newsletters or a shared social media channel.
- Create space or a virtual platform to share stories of success.

**Always be aware of how the F2S Learning Circle can benefit individual participants and their home organizations, so that they get excited to attend, to report back and to act!**



LOCAL FOODS TO SCHOOL (LF2S) LEARNING CIRCLE, HAIDA GWAI



# Ongoing Information Sharing, Learning and Action

**A FARM TO SCHOOL (F2S) LEARNING CIRCLE** can approach issues and priorities from a variety of perspectives based on strengths and interests of participants. As a result, the shared values, goals and details will vary greatly from one F2S Learning Circle to another. However, as you move forward with your F2S Learning Circle a few basic principles can help guide you in your efforts to sustain ongoing information sharing, learning, and action.

## Action

Once goals have been identified, the group can start to identify specific actions. Some examples of typical priority action areas include:

- Ensuring availability of local food in large enough quantities to meet schools' needs.
- Determining logistics for transporting food from its source to students' plates.
- Incorporating local food procurement into fixed food service budgets and managing meal price expectations from families and students.
- Accounting for labour costs to prepare/serve foods.
- Scaling-up knowledge of food services providers about preparing local, wild and Indigenous foods.
- Determining whether to include agricultural foods and/or wild foods.
- Developing a plan for food safety and allergy considerations.
- Creating linkages between procurement efforts and food literacy efforts.
- Finding creative ways to engage youth in place-based hands-on learning.
- Creating protocols around food gathering, preparing, and sharing in Indigenous communities.
- Identifying a back-up delegate to fill in for the F2S Learning Lab coordinator if needed.







## Communications

There are a variety of ways to effectively communicate, and each group will need to determine what works best for them and their Learning Circle, both during and between their gatherings.

## Information Sharing

- Each gathering should include a strong facilitator and a separate designated note taker to make a detailed record of discussion.
- Consider using a graphic facilitator to document gatherings and accomplishments.
- Share accomplishments on social media sites, newsletters and listservs.
- Share photos, videos and other media that provide an ongoing record of the process.
- Ensure photo permission forms are made available to all participants and that permission is received to share photos and videos, especially of youth, prior to distributing them.

**Learn from projects that have been implemented in other locations or in the past in your location.**

**Appoint a “knowledge broker” who can monitor useful information from academic, government and community sources and share it with the circle.**

## CHAPTER 8:

# Addressing Challenges

**AS THE LEARNING CIRCLE PROGRESSES**, challenges to how the Learning Circle runs may emerge that could impede the process.

### Common challenges include:

- Budget constraints;
- Resistance to change;
- Unwillingness of participants or organizations to compromise on priorities or timelines;
- Restrictive food safety regulations or differing perceptions about food safety and allergies;
- Restrictive contracts with school food service providers that limit efforts to serve more healthy, local and sustainable food;
- Gaps in connections with farmers, food harvesters, hunters, fishers and foragers;
- Limited access to or availability of locally produced and processed foods;
- Inadequate food distribution systems;
- Lack of/limited infrastructure within schools to grow, prepare and/or serve local foods;
- Lack of/limited skills and knowledge within the school community to grow, prepare and/or serve local foods;
- Lack of/limited support for food service staff and teachers to provide enhanced food services or education;
- Food literacy is not considered a priority;
- Limited staff to champion and/or implement F2S activities;
- Difficulty meeting varied stakeholder needs;
- Challenges recruiting F2S Learning Circle participants who are able to stay the course for 24+ months and attend all gatherings;
- Miscommunication throughout the process;
- Changes in school staff or administration and loss of champions; and
- Changes in political will, funding or priorities.

## Addressing the Challenges

**Building partner engagement** – Despite best efforts, organizations and individuals who are seen as important partners may be reluctant to make a commitment to the F2S Learning Circle or their representation may change over time. This may result in loss of champions at the table. How groups address this challenge will vary, but the following considerations may help strengthen the process:

### Recognize and honour each participant's contributions at each gathering

- Emphasize that the process is dependent on the participation of everyone, many of whom are passionate volunteers.
- Clearly communicate the value of participation in the F2S Learning Circle to the home organizations of the participants (e.g. presentations to management, lunch and learns, resource distribution).
- Prepare facts sheets and other materials that document the purposes and accomplishments of the F2S Learning Circle and share these widely among participants and in the community.





**Building trust** – Many participants may have limited experience with the concept of Learning Circles and as such, they may be reluctant to share information on certain topics or may express concerns about confidentiality and information sharing. Actions to consider include:

- Ensure terms of reference (including explicit agreements about information sharing) are collectively agreed upon, well understood, regularly reviewed and updated.
- Understand that it may take time to develop the familiarity and trust needed to share experiences that are both positive and negative.
- Ensure the coordinator is able to model openness and honesty with regard to their experience.
- Openly acknowledge missteps and oversights and lessons learned.
- Provide opportunities for enjoyable team building, networking and socializing.

**Attendance** – Increasingly, organizations are being asked to accomplish much more with fewer resources. This could lead to stress and constraints on the ability of participants to take part in the full F2S Learning Circle process. Some strategies to mitigate this are:

- Make sure you set meeting dates early and send out reminders well in advance, as well as immediately before meetings.
- Inform participants and their supervisors at the start of the process about the exact commitment that is needed.
- Keep in contact between meetings with updates and other information.
- Ensure participants are welcomed into the meeting space.
- Regularly express appreciation for the time and energy that is being devoted to the process.
- Select an appealing meeting location that aligns with the values, vision and goals of the group and is food centred. Ensure the location is away from the normal work environments of participants, but still easily accessible.
- Ensure that the foods served align with the values, vision and goals of the group – fresh, healthy, local sustainable, and culturally appropriate foods! Understand that food and refreshments are an incentive to attend.
- If non-attendance is a persistent problem, it may be time to have a one-on-one conversation with participants to understand the barriers.
- Rotating or replacing a participant (by alternating members of an organization) is not encouraged as it can affect group cohesion and the completion of work. However, in some cases participants may need to have alternates available to attend, and should commit to keeping those people updated.

**Dealing with difference and conflict** – Healthy conflict can be an important part of group development and a driver of systems change. What is important is that the group feels supported moving through the conflict in order to reach a deeper level of agreement and understanding. Over time, many participants come to understand that encountering differing viewpoints and perspectives is a valuable part of the process. Suggested actions include:

- Encourage a group culture that recognizes that participants are not attending as formal agency representatives, but as professionals with unique insights and knowledge.
- Reiterate the vision of the F2S Learning Circle and the agreed upon terms of reference at frequent intervals.
- If a conflict becomes irreconcilable or begins to impede the progress of the group, it may be necessary to deal with the issues outside of the gatherings.
- Look at conflicts as opportunities to broaden the conversation. What does the conflict illustrate about the larger disconnects within the food system that are impeding F2S? How can improved relationships at the F2S Learning Circle level be mirrored in actions to better connect food systems stakeholders? Conflicts may highlight opportunities for additional knowledge sharing and development.

# Celebration, Evaluation and Supporting Transition



**Groups have a natural lifecycle.** During the lifetime of the Farm to School (F2S) Learning Circle, it is important to revisit the vision of the group. In some cases, the F2S Learning Circle will end after having accomplished some of the goals identified early in the process. In other cases, the group may decide to continue meeting and evolve to tackle new challenges and opportunities.

Although celebrating accomplishments and supporting transition is listed as the final step, in fact successful F2S Learning Circles include celebration at every step.

Some points to consider as efforts progress include:

- **Celebration** – It is important to decide as a group how to develop events and traditions that honour the work of the Circle. Celebrations can mark important transitions (welcoming people into the group and acknowledging those who are leaving) as well as accomplishments (actions completed, problems solved, etc.)
- **Evaluation** – Commitment to consistent evaluation will ensure that the process always echoes back with the vision, that actions are meaningful, and that improvements are made along the way. Online surveys, meeting evaluation forms and one-on-one conversation are commonly helpful evaluation tools to use.
- **Transitions** – Coordinators can support the ongoing development of the group by:
  - ☐ Reviewing the shared vision and goals on a regular basis.
  - ☐ Refreshing membership through ongoing reflection and recruitment.
  - ☐ Introducing learning opportunities that support the work of the group and inspire participants (e.g., bringing in speakers, site visits, shared training, hands-on activities, etc.)
- **Endings** – When the F2S Learning Circle concludes, the ending should be acknowledged. Recognize the achievements of the group, the relationships that have been formed, and the vision that has been advanced. Share lessons learned. Showcase how the F2S Learning Circle may be inspiring future plans and actions beyond its scope. This is an important legacy of the F2S Learning Circle work, that it can be used as a blueprint for future initiatives.



## CHAPTER 10:

# Farm to School Learning Lab/and Local Food to School Learning Circle Stories From Across Canada



The following excerpts explore three unique stories from across the

country: two Farm to School (F2S) Learning Labs conducted in St. John's, NL and Vancouver, B.C. and a Local Food to School (LF2S) Learning Circle that is still ongoing in Haida Gwaii, B.C.

As these stories illustrate, F2S Learning Circles can differ significantly by community, as each group approaches local issues from a variety of perspectives based on the needs and priorities of those involved.

While these three stories are unique, there are connections and parallels between them. Through these Learning Circles, these groups have supported the expansion of existing local food programs at the school level (e.g. school gardens and direct purchasing from farms and food harvesters) by helping procurement and food service staff buy more local, sustainable food from their major distributors and suppliers. As a result, locally farmed and wild foods are being recognized as important parts of healthy and culturally appropriate diets and a robust local economy; communities are connecting to the land on which they live and the food around them; and students are engaging with their food and the people and processes that help get it to their plate.

Once again, a sincere thank you to the many people who took time to share their F2S Learning Circle experiences which have helped shape the development of this guide.



# Farm to School BC's Vancouver Area Regional Hub Learning Lab

## About the Vancouver Area Regional Hub

From 2013 to 2015, Farm to School BC's Vancouver Area Regional Hub initiated and conducted Canada's first Learning Lab to work with key individuals throughout the Vancouver Board of Education to help change the way food was purchased for cafeterias and food programs.

The Vancouver Board of Education has a large, urban, and multicultural enrollment of over 56,000 children and youth from kindergarten to grade 12, including some of the highest and lowest income urban neighbourhoods in the country. Engaging children in hands-on food system education and food literacy increases the amount of healthy, local and sustainable food that children and youth get to see, eat, touch and work with and is a critical component of engaging the next generation of British Columbians to value local agriculture and the local food system.

According to a national survey conducted by Farm to Cafeteria Canada in 2013, Farm to School programs have shown great success in improving local food economies and local food environments, enhancing health and nutrition of students and revitalizing communities through the support of local and sustainable agriculture and the resulting protection of farmland.

## Goals of the Learning Lab

The Learning Lab began with a shared vision to help key staff develop goals that increased the purchasing of local, sustainable and healthy food and create realistic and practical avenues to achieve success. By working at the procurement level, the Learning Lab aimed to create positive change in systemic and school level purchasing.

Together, the Learning Lab group committed to six goals and completed a variety of activities in their pursuit:

1. Increase procurement of local and/or sustainable food:
  - a. Established baseline for local product purchasing
  - b. Identified areas for increasing purchasing of local, sustainable produce
2. Procure foods that model sound nutritional practice for students:
  - a. Developed key recommendations for shifting the purchasing system including:
    - i. Worked with major supplier to ensure purchasers could more readily identify local food in catalogue and online;





- ii. Explored the development of contracts/ purchasing orders with local farms.
3. Create a knowledgeable and engaged school community for local, healthy and sustainable food:
  - a. Hosted three workshops for parents, students, staff and cooks to help them meet provincial food safety requirements; and
  - b. Developed a Farm to School Guide illustrating the value and instructions on how to meet the Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools, produce food on school sites and use seasonally aligned menus that source locally available food throughout the school year.
4. Provide training and support to develop capacity to procure local and sustainable food:
  - a. Hosted two test kitchens with school staff to develop 12 recipes (six entrees and six sandwiches) that:
    - i. Use seasonal ingredients;
    - ii. Are costed for cafeteria service; and
    - iii. Meet provincial guidelines.
  - b. Promoted seasonally based, local food centred recipes for use in Local, Seasonal Celebrations, Farm to School Guide, and special events like Farm to School Gathering;
  - c. Created Farm to School video;
  - d. Engaged three schools to begin local, seasonal celebrations including:
    - i. Serving seasonal recipes once a week;
    - ii. Development of marketing materials (e.g., table tent cards, shelf talkers, posters, media releases, etc.);
    - iii. Hosting of taste tests for students; and
    - iv. Promotion of local food within curriculum (through cafeteria classes) and extra-curricular routes (including lunch time events).

### Who Was Involved and Consulted?

- Educators
- School support staff (including cooks)
- A major food distributor
- Community Organizations:
  - Farm to Cafeteria Canada (Sponsor)
  - Farm Folk City Folk
  - Farm to School BC
  - Fresh Roots Urban Farm Society
  - Social Planning and Research Council of BC (Sponsor)
  - Vancouver Board of Education
- Vancouver Coastal Health

### Successes of the Learning Lab

The Learning Lab left the Vancouver Board of Education in a strong position to become a leader in local food procurement in Canada. It focused on providing tools to change buying practices through large-scale contracted suppliers, while also engaging and supporting schools to buy directly from local urban farms, such as Fresh Roots Urban Farm and the Edible Garden Project. It was the first Farm to School Learning Lab in Canada and influenced institutional supply chains across Metro Vancouver.

The key outcomes of the work were:

- Establishment of a baseline of products purchased from within the region and province that identified tools and showcased opportunities for increased local purchasing;
- Development of a Test Kitchen Model to support schools to meet provincial guidelines;
- Hosting of several successful Test Kitchens and the creation and promotion of seasonally aligned, cost-appropriate recipes for schools;
- Supported the establishment of Schoolyard Market Gardens at Vancouver Technical Secondary and David Thompson Secondary. These are commercially productive educational farms on school grounds; and
- Supported education and support staff within the Vancouver Board of Education to create internal models of purchasing and food service that increase the supply of local food into the school system.

### Looking to the Future

Over time the Vancouver Learning Lab saw a shift in priorities towards advancing support specifically in the food literacy/curriculum aspects of Farm to School in the region. In these efforts, Farm to School BC's Vancouver Area Hub Animator continues to play a central convening role and many of the original partners continue to collaborate on these efforts.

As a direct result of the work sparked by the Farm to School Vancouver Area Regional Hub Learning Lab, UBC Farm began its own two Learning Labs to increase local food procurement by healthcare institutions.



SIR CHARLES TUPPER SCHOOL BC



# 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?

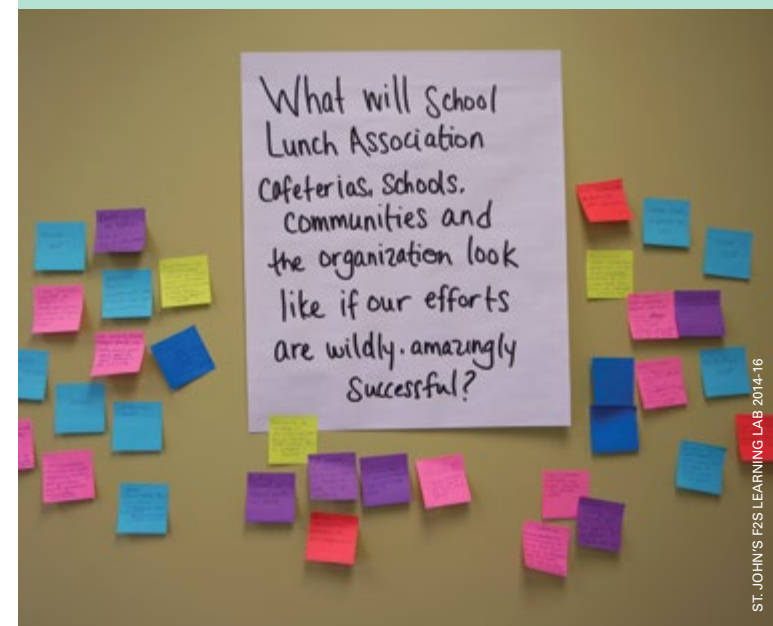
- Food First NL
- School Lunch Association
- Eastern Health- Regional Nutritionists
- NL English School District- School Health Promotion Liaison Consultants
- Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (various departments related to environmental health, public health and education)
- Students
- Teachers
- 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.



# 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.



KIKU DHANWANT, SHELLY CRACK, GEOFF HORNER, HAIDA GWAI, BC

## 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.



# Concluding Remarks

We would like to thank our many contributors and the many people who took time to share their F2S Learning Circle experiences which helped shape the development of this guide.

For further information on F2S please check out:

**[www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca](http://www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca)**

For helpful F2S Learning Circle templates please check out the Resources on the F2CC website which can be found at:

**[www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca/resources/featured-resources](http://www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca/resources/featured-resources)**









PATRICK FORE, UNSPLASH.COM



*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.



Public Health  
Agency of Canada

Agence de la santé  
publique du Canada