

# Farm To School Sprouts in British Columbia!

A Final Report Of The Farm To School Salad Bar Initiative

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Prepared For

**The British Columbia Healthy Living Alliance**



Prepared By  
Joanne Bays, MSc  
BaysGroup Consulting  
1265 East 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Vancouver, BC V5V 1L2  
[Joannebays@gmail.com](mailto:Joannebays@gmail.com)

*"There is a movement right across this country to support local food initiatives by connecting growers and consumers. The Farm to School program is one of these positive initiatives"*

Alex Atamenko. Member of Parliament , BC Southern Interior

*"Local projects like this are critical to building sustainable food systems at the community level and increasing the self reliance of communities to improve the health of its citizens"*

Ted Bruce, President, Public Health Association of British Columbia

*"It takes a farmer to sustain a community, it takes a community to sustain a farmer"*

Participant, Farm to School Salad Bar Dig In Gathering, Quesnel, British Columbia



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### ***The Vision***

The vision for the Farm to School Salad Bar Initiative is a network linking people, farms and schools in urban, rural, remote and aboriginal communities in the northern and interior regions of British Columbia. This network inspires community action towards the systems, and policy change necessary to establish and sustain farm to school programs.

### ***What is a Farm to School Salad Bar Program?***

*“The Farm to School Salad Bar concept is refreshingly simple! A relationship is developed between a school and local farms. Foods are grown, harvested, processed and served up in a salad bar twice per week in participating schools. Children have the opportunity to feast on a garden of farm fresh foods including 6 vegetables, 3 fruits, 1 protein and 1 grain. At a cost of approximately \$3.00 per child per meal, the program serves up sound nutrition at a great price. Children, parents, school staff, farmers – whole communities - benefit from a program that broadens knowledge and experiences growing, harvesting, preparing and tasting fresh local greens.”*

Joanne Bays, Project Manager, Farm to School Salad Bar

### ***One Goal***

*“To increase access to fresh, locally-grown, nutritious, safe, and culturally appropriate foods in British Columbia schools”.*

### ***Seven Objectives***

- To increase fruit and vegetable consumption amongst participating school aged children.
- To improve student knowledge about local foods, the local food system, nutrition and health.
- To enhance student skills in the areas of food production, processing and serving.
- To strengthen farm, school, health, family and aboriginal relationships.
- To strengthened local food economy.
- To develop a Farm to School Salad Bar that is self-financing.
- To develop a Farm to School Salad Bar that is eco-friendly.
- To develop a best practice model that has potential to be replicated elsewhere.

### ***Target Population***

Any child, aged 4 - 19 years, enrolled in grades K - 12, in a participating school. The program is inclusive and universal. A concerted effort is made to include children living in food insecure households.

### ***Target Schools, Communities and Regions***

Twelve F2S programs will be established in middle, secondary, public, private and/or aboriginal schools located within communities in the northern and interior health regions of British Columbia.

### ***Target Food Suppliers***

Foods will be supplied from local farmers, food distributors, and food processors - those food suppliers located as close to the participating school as possible.

## **Background**

In 2008, when the Public Health Association of BC (PHABC) set out to deliver the Farm to School Salad Bar initiative, they knew they had a winning project in hand. Farm to School was a best practice operating in communities across the continent. In the US, there were more than 8,000 Farm to School programs in more than 40 states and a national Farm to School Network had emerged. In Canada, programs linking farms to schools were sprouting in almost every province and In Toronto Ontario an extensive urban network of school salad bar programs existed. Evaluation of “Farm to School”, and “School Salad Bar” programs revealed that they were bearing fruit - improving student nutrition, and improving student knowledge and skills, while supporting local farms.

In BC, the notion of a network of Farm to School Salad Bar programs in more rural and remote areas actually began to take shape in 2006 - a full two years before the Farm to School Salad Bar Initiative was launched. In the spring of that year, Northern Health’s Healthy Eating Active Living network (HEAL) organized a food forum in Prince George British Columbia. A crowd of food security enthusiasts gathered to hear Debbie Field, CEO of Toronto Food Share, as she spoke about Salad Bar programs. A whirlwind of activity followed as representatives from east met west to create a proposal to develop a network of Farm to School Salad Bar programs. The proposal recommended the development of six programs over a three-year period in communities within the interior and northern regions of BC.

During the course of the next year, the health authority sought funding for the initiative and, with its many community partners, identified and readied 6 potential program sites. In the spring of 2007, Northern Health was able to fund 1 of the 6 pilots. Early evaluation of the pilot program at Dragon Lake Elementary School in Quesnel, BC, revealed that a majority of the 230 students were consuming a greater quantity and a greater variety of fruits and vegetables.

Thus, in the fall of 2007, when PHABC sought to support a program that utilized a health promotion approach to increase access to fresh vegetables and fruit for food insecure families Farm to School Salad Bar was a clear choice.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Work Plan**

The initial plan was to establish and evaluate 12 Farm to School Salad Bar (F2S) programs during an 18-month period commencing December 1, 2007 and ending June 30, 2009. Programs were to be implemented in a staggered fashion - 6 in the 2007/08 school year and 6 in the 2008/09 school year. By the end of the 2008/09 school year all 12 programs were to be fully operational and self-sustaining. In addition, in the first 6 months, a Farm to School Advisory Committee and a Farm to School Network were to be established, an evaluation plan and tools were to be developed, the evaluation process was to commence, promotional materials were to be developed and disseminated, and a Farm to School website was to be developed and launched. Activities in the final 12 months were to focus on strengthening capacity at community and provincial levels, the development and dissemination of a comprehensive Farm to School Salad Bar Guide, and completion of the evaluation and final reports.

## **Key Changes to The Work Plan**

**Start Date Delayed.** The initiative commenced in February 2008, two months later than originally planned. PHABC was undergoing a substantial change of administration in the late winter of 2008 (a new President, a new Board, and a new Executive Director were put into place). Funds were not transferred to the PHABC account in February 2008. The later start date, contributed in part to a delay of other aspects of the program - from communications to evaluation.

**Additional Programs Funded.** PHABC funded the implementation of 16 F2S programs, rather than 12 as originally planned. Three factors were key in the decision to fund a greater number of programs; 1) Demand (despite the fact that applicants had a mere 9 weeks to submit a proposal more than 30 proposals were received), 2) Community collaboration (in more than one instance, representatives from more than one school come together to jointly submit a proposal for funds rather than competing with one another), and 3) Evidence of strong local networks of support.

**Launch of Programs Delayed.** In the original plan, 6 F2S programs were to commence in the 2007/08 school year and 6 were to commence in the 2008/09 school year. However, only 2 of the 6 sites thought to be ready for a program in the 2007/08 were actually ready! Both submitted a proposal for funding, but only 1 met the criteria for participation. This program was launched within 9 weeks and was fully operational by the end of the 2007/08 school year. An additional 15 (rather than 6) brand new sites were identified and selected to participate. All 15 required more planning time and more time to make the structural, policy and practice changes necessary to implement the program. All 15 programs were implemented in the 2008/09 school year.

**Revised Evaluation Plan and Process.** A finite amount of evaluation resources were earmarked for the initiative - enough to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of up to 12 programs operating twice per week over a 26-week period. However, because a larger than anticipated number of programs were included in the initiative, and because the implementation of these programs was longer than anticipated, the evaluation plan, and the timeline were modified. All 16 schools were sent evaluation tools and encouraged to send in data. However, only 12 of the 16 schools participated in a comprehensive evaluation including phone interviews, and site visits (where observational assessment, focus group and personal interviews were conducted).

**More Attention to Community Capacity Building.** The demand for technical expertise and resources to support the development of the 16 programs funded by PHABC was greater than anticipated. Moreover there was a demand for information and resources to implement additional programs (beyond the 16 funded) that was not anticipated. Thus the Provincial Manager devoted more time to community capacity building time than was originally planned. Support included additional correspondence, teleconferences, site visits, face to face meetings, resource sourcing, sharing and development, website development, and so forth.

**More Attention to Program Sustainability.** Additional activities to garner support to sustain and grow the program were added to the work plan - including the development of a 3-year funding proposal, and correspondence, calls, meetings with potential funding sources.

**Project Extension.** In August of 2009 PHABC received additional funding from the BC Healthy Living Alliance (BCHLA) to extend the Farm to School Salad Bar Initiative to December 31, 2010. The funds were used to coordinate and implement *Farm to School: Growing the Next Generation* - the first provincial Farm to School conference in Canada. The funds were also used to support a series of workshops/presentations across the province to key stakeholders in health, education, and community food security sectors.

### **Key Implementation Activities**

**Farm To School Advisory Committee.** A 15 member F2S Advisory Committee was established early on including representatives from: the PHABC/BCHLA, the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport, BC Healthy Communities/the BC Cancer Agency, Northern Health, Interior Health, the BC Farmers Market Association, School District 28 and others. Advisory committee meetings were held monthly. The meetings served to guide the overall planning, implementation and evaluation of the initiative. Advisory committee members also contributed to working groups that emerged around key tasks or issue areas

**Farm To School Network.** A F2S Network was also established early on and grew as the initiative progressed. Initially the network was comprised of approximately 60 leads supporting the 16 programs funded by PHABC. Members included principals, teachers, F2S program coordinators, parents, elders, farmers, gardeners, food distributors, community nutritionists, environmental health officers, and community developers. The Provincial Manager coordinated monthly F2S Network teleconferences - a forum that enabled the sharing of ideas, information and resources, problem solving, and strategic planning. The teleconferences, coupled with communications through the website, newsletters, ebrieffs, personal calls, emails, and face-to-face meetings served to strengthen the network and to develop a sense of “family” within the group. Today more than 200 F2S enthusiasts from across BC and beyond provincial borders are part of the F2S Network.

**Farm to School Salad Bar Programs.** During the course of this initiative 20 F2S Programs were established. This was a highly complex process involving local, regional, and provincial support. At local levels F2S enthusiasts formed teams, created a vision and a plan, secured resources, marketed and promoted the initiative, redesigned school food systems, redesigned local food production and distribution systems, modified school and farm environments, implemented the F2S Salad Bar Service, developed classroom, farm and community food and nutrition educational experiences, administered funds, and supported evaluation processes. (Details about the support provided at provincial and regional levels may be found in the Key Partners section below).

**Farm to School Salad Bar Website.** - [www.phabc.org/farmtoschool](http://www.phabc.org/farmtoschool)

A website was developed to support existing F2S programs and to inspire new programs. The site is populated with current news articles, announcements, tools/resources, links, and a blog page. Since its launch on November 9, 2008 the website has had 116,615 “hits”.

**Farm to School Salad Bar Promotional Package.** A package including a F2S brochure, rack card, seed packets and bookmarks was developed and disseminated. To date approximately 5000 packages have been distributed to champions at provincial levels, local F2S leads, and to the general public.



### **A Fresh Crunch in School Lunch: BC's Farm to School Salad Bar Guide.**

A F2S guide was developed and disseminated. This resource provides step-by-step information about how to set up and/or maintain a F2S program. An e-version is available for download from the F2S website. To date 500 hard copies have been distributed through presentations, meetings and/or mail.

**Farm to School Salad Bar: Dig In!** An information and training session for F2S leads new to the F2S program was held in Quesnel, BC in June 2008. 40 people attended the event from the northern and interior regions of BC. Conference proceedings were outlined in a report *Farm to School Salad Bar Dig!* The report was developed and disseminated to all participants. An e-version is available for download from the F2S website.

**Farm To School: Growing The Next Generation.** The first provincial F2S conference in Canada was held in Richmond BC in November 2008. This event drew a total of 125 people to the lower mainland from communities across BC.

**Growing The Next Generation: Building the Farm to School Movement in British Columbia.** A sustainability proposal was developed outlining the priorities and the resources required to sustain and grow BC's Farm to School movement.

**Farm to School Presentations.** Over the course of the initiative, PHABC's Project Manager made approximately 40 presentations to an estimated audience of 1,200 people in various locales throughout the province. Presentations were made to local F2S teams during site visits in order to help establish funded programs. Presentations were also made to policy makers in population or public health, municipalities, and school districts. The aim of the presentations was to inspire new programs and/or to garner support for existing programs.

### **Key Partners and Their Roles**

It is difficult to tease out the key partners, when so many people contributed so much. From the mother who brought her children to the farm to play amongst the corn so that she could help harvest salad bar greens, to the manager within the health authority who penned Farm to School into their food security plan - everyone made a difference. In this initiative it was the collective that was truly key.

Within the collective however there were a few groups/organizations whose support was absolutely essential for the implementation and the continued success of the initiative - schools/school districts, Indian bands, farmers/food suppliers, health authorities, PHABC and BCHLA.

**Schools/School Districts.** The support of schools, and more recently school districts cannot be overstated. Principals, Teachers, School Meal Coordinators and many others within the school community took on the mammoth task of leading/overseeing activities within their schools to establish a F2S program. School champions continue to be involved in promoting and linking the program within and beyond the school community. Links have been made to the local farming community, to local food security groups, and to provincial colleagues. Many have undertaken proposal writing and advocacy efforts in order to further F2s activity within their schools and/or to inspire implementation of new F2S programs in other schools.

**Indian Bands.** Five different Indian bands implemented a F2S program. Together they brought forward the importance of celebrating and preserving traditional foods and traditional food ways. Each band developed a unique F2S program model - yet there were many common denominators. Ensuring *all* children had access to the program topped the list. In each case, the band paid for the child's lunch rather than the family. In each case, the program was fully integrated into existing meal/feeding programs. In each case the ability to grow, harvest, prepare food was considered as important as the fact that the child was consuming those foods.

**Farms and Food Suppliers.** Farmers provided food to the programs and in the process food production and food delivery methods were often redesigned to better meet the school's needs. (Likewise food purchasing and preparation processes at the school were often redesigned to better meet the farmer's needs). More foods and a greater variety of foods were planted. New greenhouses were constructed to extend the growing season. New mobile food processing facilities were explored. Food cooperatives emerged and/or were strengthened. New delivery systems were developed.

**Health Authorities.** Northern Health and Interior Health played an instrumental role in the development, implementation of this initiative and are taking a leadership role in sustaining it over the long term. In addition to substantial developmental activity prior to the launch of the initiative, these health authorities provided a wide spectrum of staff to support the initiative at provincial levels, at the advisory committee level and at the community level. Staff offered direction and technical expertise in community, program, resource, evaluation, and policy developments. Moreover both health authorities provided Community Food Action Initiative funds to further farm to school activity. Recently school gardens, school kitchen equipment, and the services of a F2S coordinator have been funded. Importantly both health authorities have indicated that they intend to continue to provide those human and material resources, while exploring ways to further integrate the program into their internal planning.

**The Public Health Association of British Columbia.** British Columbia's F2S Initiative would not have been possible without the leadership and support of the PHABC, a member of the BCHLA. The PHABC hired a Project Manager who supported regional, local and provincial F2S activity. The Project Manager was engaged in seven key activities: 1) establishing and strengthening the F2S network; 2) developing and managing the grant process; 3) providing technical expertise and resources to local leads through calls, email, and during site visits; 4) coordinating forums where local champions could meet face to face; 5) supporting the development of the F2S website; 6) developing and disseminating the F2S guide and other promotional tools; 7) supporting the development of the evaluation plan, tools and process; and 8) developing a sustainability plan/proposal as well as exploring partners and resources to sustain the program. PHABC also provided considerable administrative support to facilitate the grant process, communications, and resource development/dissemination. The organization continues to explore ways to strengthen and sustain F2S.

**The BC Healthy Living Alliance.** Like PHABC, BCHLA provided critically important supports to the F2S Initiative. The alliance identified F2S as a best practice worthy of funding. They identified PHABC as the lead organization to roll out a F2S Initiative in BC and they transferred a significant amount of funds to PHABC for this purpose. BCHLA's Healthy Eating Strategy (HES) Collaborative also contributed (in part) to the success of



the F2S initiative. This group of project managers, each responsible for the roll out of a Healthy Eating Strategy funded by BCHLA, met quarterly to exchange ideas and resources and to coordinate and streamline overlapping activities. The quarterly meetings resulted in a number of positive outcomes - such as the production of promotional materials, the clarification of communication guidelines, and the provision of educational workshops for project managers. This group played an important role in communicating the collaborative efforts of all HES strategies to policy makers, practitioners and potential funders at the provincial level.

## Results

### Overview

While the final evaluation report has yet to be released, it is clear that the F2S Initiative has been a tremendous success on many fronts. The vision of a network linking people, farms, and schools, across the northern and interior of British Columbia has come to fruition. An expansive, diverse and active F2S network exists. This network boasts more than 200 members including F2S enthusiasts from across the province and beyond its borders. Farmers, gardeners, food processors, teachers, principals, city councilors, school board trustees, elders, students, parents, community nutritionists, and many others are working together to address the factors that lie beneath poor food choices. Together they are redesigning food systems and food policy and creating programs that deliver the highest quality foods possible to schoolchildren.

The goal, targets and most objectives appear to have been met and/or exceeded. Since the launch of this initiative, with the support of PHABC and their many partners, more than 20 F2S programs have been established in the Northern and Interior regions. Programs are offered elementary, middle and secondary schools in urban, rural and remote settings. Five of the 20 programs are offered in aboriginal communities. Programs are supported by more than 30 food suppliers including many are small-scale local farmers or collectives of local farmers. Programs are universal and inclusive, and made accessible to the total student population. More than 7,000<sup>1</sup> school children have an opportunity to feast twice per week on a salad bar filled with fresh, local, nutritious, safe and culturally appropriate food.

And there is more good news! Plans are underway to establish additional F2S programs in the Fraser Valley, Vancouver Coastal, and Vancouver Island Health Authority regions. If resources are secured and planning stays on track, by the 2010/11 school year a least 33 programs right across the province will be serving up farm fresh foods to an estimated 10000 BC school children (See Appendix A For a Complete List of Schools).

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<sup>1</sup> The precise number of children participating in Farm to School Salad Bar programs at any given time is not yet known. We do know that 7000 school children (the total student population in the 20 schools currently offering the program) now have an opportunity to access the salad bars twice per week. We do know that schools are working hard to ensure the full student body participates. We do know that participation varies considerably by school type and that aboriginal and elementary schools consistently report the highest participation rates.

## About The Objectives

At the end of the 2008/9 school year, the 16 schools funded by PHABC were asked to comment about the extent to which they felt the objectives were being met. This is a summary they had to say about each objective:

**All schools reported children are consuming more fresh fruits and vegetable and many are consuming a greater variety of foods than before the program was implemented.**

*“Having salad bar in place 2 days per week heightened awareness of healthy eating habits and there was an increase in the demand and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables on non- salad bar days at our cafeteria.”*

Cory Killoran, Vice Principal Thornhill, Elementary School, Terrace, BC

**Most schools reported that the program improved student knowledge about local foods, the local food system, nutrition and health and most schools reported that the program enhanced student skills in the areas of food production and serving.**

*“We have had two out of eight classes that has started a garden row for next year – potatoes, carrots and beets”*

Helene Paranich, Farm To School Lead, John Field Elementary School, Hazelton, BC

*“Students from Bert Rose Elementary School received Food Safe Training and help produce the Salad bar for 4 weeks. They are now helping prepare nutritious food for their own school”.*

Brian Campbell, Principal, North Peace Secondary School, Ft. St. John, BC

**Almost all schools reported improved relationships between the school and other sectors - and many pointed to stronger relationships with the farming and aboriginal sectors.**

*“Perhaps the most significant factor that indicates the success of the program for me as an administrator is the presence of our aboriginal parents. It was rare that we had this population in the school prior to the establishment of the salad bar. Initially, I think many realized that they could not pay for it, but could certainly volunteer some time. It brought them into the school, and they have continued to come. Elders as well have increased their presence in the school, and it has had a fantastic impact on all of our other programs as well. They feel welcome, wanted, appreciated, and part of the community for the first time. It has led to positive relationships with some of our most vulnerable families. Food heals in many ways.”*

Rick Miller, Principal Mountview Elementary School, Williams Lake, BC

*“The program actually challenged us to work harder to create new partnerships with local and nearby communities. We have gained new friends and allies. There has been a lot of interest in our project and we are keen to run with it again next year and share our knowledge and experiences with other”.*

Lorraine Ladan, Principal, nkmaplqs isn'ma'ma'ya'tn klsqilxwtet

**All schools reported that they were making every effort possible to serve local food.**

*“North Peace Secondary produces food for about 125 students daily. When the school started purchasing food for the salad bar from local producers, the school purchased food for our entire program (not just the Salad Bar). The school started purchasing foods from local producers whenever possible in order to reduce “food miles”.*

Brian Campbell, Principal, North Peace Secondary School, Ft St John, BC

**The responses from schools regarding the extent to which their programs were “self-financing”, “eco friendly” and/or a “best practice model that could be replicated elsewhere” were mixed. Most stated their programs were self-financing. Most felt they had put measures into place to make the program eco friendly. Few however felt their programs were a best practice.**

### **An unexpected outcome**

This initiative had such an unexpected splash and ripple effect - creating and/or contributing to practice, systems and policy change within and between health, education and farming sectors - that the effect itself may be the largest single unexpected outcome to report. The success story below illustrates the ripple and splash effect.

### **A District Wide Farm to School Program Within Arms Reach**

Understanding and appreciating the connections between farms, food, and health is deeply rooted in mind, souls, and hearts of the people of the South Okanagan. In this region many farmers are struggling to stay afloat. Money making wineries proliferate the landscape, replacing farms that once produced a diverse bounty of foods. The desire to preserve the small family farm is strong. This is the backdrop to proposals received by PHABC to fund a cluster of 5 schools wishing to establish Farm to School programs. A unique aspect of this cluster was the fact that the food supplier for all 5 schools was a cooperative of 20 farms. In a period of one year all 5 schools were up and running.

However in short time it became clear that farm to school enthusiasts had just begun. According to Oliver City Councilor and Elementary School Teacher Marji Basso “what we really want to see is a farm to school program in every school within our school district”. And she set forth with her many connections to make that happen. Marji organized sending a group of key stakeholders to PHABC’s *Farm to School Growing the Next Generation Conference* in Richmond, BC. Inspired and energies running high, the School Board Trustee, teachers, principal, community nutritionist, and the farmer returned to Oliver and crafted a proposal to fund four additional Farm to School Programs. In December 2009, Community Food Action Initiative funds were secured from Interior Health authority for this purpose. Today those funds are targeted to support the wages of a District Farm to School Consultant, to purchase of school salad bar equipment, to establish targets for local food sources within the salad bar menus through closer collaboration with local farmers and caterers, and most importantly, the development of a school district food security policy for consideration. The dream for a district wide Farm to School Initiative is within arms reach.

## Challenges

While Farm to School may boast many successes, there were stumbling blocks along the way. The predominant fast food culture, the dismal state of local food systems, the complexity, reach, and short timeline for the project, and the limitations in both human and material resources top the list.

**The existing food culture** – In today's food culture convenience and cost are predominant factors influencing food choices. The influence of the dominant food culture was particularly evident in secondary schools, where teens, accustomed to eating foods that are often processed, packaged, high fat, high calorie, and low cost, could hop into their cars and drive to the nearest fast food outlet for lunch. In their midterm progress reports, F2S leads in secondary schools estimated that on average only 2% - 33% of the total student population were consuming foods from the F2S Salad Bar.

The issue was compounded in two secondary schools where the food service was contracted out. In each case the contractor's livelihood was dependant upon making a certain profit. In each case the contractor had set up a particular system before F2S came along and that system was generating the kind of profit the contractor required to stay afloat. In each case the contractor stated they were either unable or unwilling to source, purchase and/or prepare whole fresh foods brought in from local farms. In these schools, when decisions were made about the foods to may have be purchased, convenience and cost, often took precedence over purchasing more fruit and vegetables and/or supporting local farmers.

Farm to School leads were quick to acknowledge that the existing food culture was not conducive to the program. However they were also quick to point out that food culture could not be changed overnight. They proceeded to address the concern in a variety of small bite sized steps.

First the expectations around participation rates in secondary schools were lowered. (While participation rates in elementary schools often reached 100%, elementary school aged children are a captive audience. It was unrealistic to expect 100% participation in the salad bar service in secondary schools, when at best only 30% of the student population normally ate in the cafeteria).

Second F2S leads sought ways to meaningfully engage as many people as possible in the process. In secondary schools, the most successful programs were those managed by teachers whose mandate was to improve student skills around food and nutrition. The most successful programs were also those that had high degree of student staff and community participation. Successful models involved a secondary school pairing up with one or more elementary schools. Foods were prepared by at the secondary school by students and then transported to elementary schools where they were available to students in a salad bar service.

Third, education became a thrust (promoting healthy eating and buying local foods in the hallways, cafeteria and parent newsletters, integrating healthy eating and food localism concepts in the classroom, engaging students in growing, preparing, serving, and composting the foods on the farm or at the school).

Fourth, a number of schools/school districts are in processes to develop and/or adopt local food purchasing policy.

**Food Systems.** As is the case around the globe, local food systems in Northern and Interior Regions of British Columbia are in a dismal state. Local farms, farmers, food processing facilities, and food distribution systems have all but disappeared. In several cases the nearest farm was almost 100 km away from the school. Fresh, local food was scarce, and during winter months was limited to root vegetables, meat, and eggs. At the same time fast food outlets could be found everywhere and they were often located adjacent to school premises.

Within schools, the food system had adapted over time to reflect the fast and cheap food culture. In most elementary schools the food preparation area was very limited. At times it was no larger than a broom closet. Equipment was often limited to a, a stove and a microwave. A freezer and a dishwasher were luxury items. In almost every case, students did not have a communal area where they could eat together. The average time that children had to eat was 15 - 20 minutes. Children were expected to wash their hands, eat, and tidy their desks in that time and then to proceed to the playground for a 20 -30 minute play period. The space, equipment, and time for meal service in part dictated the types of foods served - hotdogs topped the list. Vending machines were available in many schools offering quick, packaged snacks that could be eaten on the playground.

The situation in secondary schools was slightly better, as most had cafeterias and a large communal eating area. High school students had up to an hour to eat inside or to wander outside. However as noted above, by the time students had arrived in high school they had many years of adapting to a fast cheap food culture. While a cafeteria was now available and able to provide a spectrum of higher quality health promoting foods, students now had the freedom to leave the premises to find the foods they were accustomed to elsewhere.

A key component of the F2S initiative that contributed significantly to addressing food system issues was the provision of funds enabling schools to modify their food service areas. Kitchens were redesigned, equipment was installed, and common eating areas were created. The new F2S salad bar service necessitated change throughout the food system - from food purchase, preparation, and service practices -to food waste disposal practices. School gardens were created, local food purchasing practice and policies were put in place, children and staff were food safe trained, lunch hours were extended to accommodate the salad bar service, and composting programs were put in place.

The redesign of school food systems had a profound effect on students - one that went well beyond improving student eating behaviours. This effect is captured in part by Principal Warren Kluss, lake Kathlyn Elementary School, Smithers BC.

*“The program has enriched our life skills program and leadership groups, and has provided a place which has enhanced the self esteem of many of our kids. It has become a social gathering place as well. I often comment that they are “having way too much fun in there” as I walk past hearing the laughter and animated conversations. Students prepare food, serve it, monitor the distribution, and clean up afterwards. “*

The impact of the program on local food system issues was less apparent, however some positive steps were noted including - strengthened relationships with farmers, an

appreciation and appetite for local foods, a diversified market for farmers, and the strengthening of farm cooperatives.

School staff and farmers continue to explore ways they can further work together to address local food system issues. In the early planning stages are: campaigns to celebrate the local foods available all year long (rather than lament about what isn't available); skill building workshops about food safety, storing, smoking, canning, freezing, and dehydrating local foods; workshops about composting, bee keeping, building a green houses, root cellars, herb gardens, school gardens, and more.

**Seasonality.** While “seasonality” might be lumped into “food systems” above, it had such a strong influence on this initiative and its evaluation that it warrants identification as a stand-alone challenge. Farms operate by season. With few exceptions they plan in the winter, plant in the early spring, and harvest from late spring until late fall. Most fresh local produce is available from May - November. Schools operate by season. They plan their meal programs at the end of August/beginning of September, and they require foods for those programs from mid September to- the end of June.

The 15 schools that launched their programs in the fall of 2008 were hard pressed to find fresh local produce. Schools developed agreements with farmers in the winter of 2008, and farmers began to plant for schools in the spring of 2009. Fresh local food did not appear in the school salad bar in a significant way until the fall of 2009, when the evaluation component of the initiative was near completion.

**Human resources** – While F2S programs at local levels can (and most often do) operate within schools with the support of numerous volunteers, the sustainability of the program is significantly enhanced when schools are able to secure a paid coordinator. Likewise, the sustainability of the farming component is greatly enhanced with the services of a paid food animator – someone to organize local farmers, farming agreements, food distribution systems; someone to promote, and market local foods. In two different areas the school district, the health authority and/or the municipality have offered resources to support the services of a local Farm to School Coordinator. In other areas Community Nutritionists, School Meal Coordinators, Farmers and other volunteers are taking on these tasks.

**Material Resources** – The 20 F2S programs were the first of their kind in BC. Tools such as food safety plans, farmer's agreements, menus, recipes, and promotional items were scarce. PHABC has developed and disseminated a number of resources including *A Fresh Crunch in School Lunch: BC's Farm to School Guide*.

**Evaluation.** Data collection commenced in the fall of 2008 and was completed by December 31, 2009. Yet most schools did not serve their first meal until November of 2008- and two were not operational until the first months of 2009. Further most F2S programs required a couple of months of meal service under their belt before they had actually stabilized their service to a point at which they could participate in evaluation. Finally, the amount of local foods available in the salad bar programs during the period of the evaluation was minimal. Thus, the timing of the evaluation as well as the short timeline for the evaluation will limit the findings.

**Complexity, Reach and Timelines.** The F2S Initiative had an expansive reach and involved the redesign of school food systems and community food systems. It was innovative well-supported initiative, but was also complex, and varied from community to



community. Because of these factors, the establishment and sustainability of these programs is highly dependant on process and time is needed to build relationships and capacity of community to carry it forward. An initiative of this depth and breadth requires a minimum of 3 years to reach a place of sustainability.

## **Top Three Lessons Learned**

### **1) Build A Kitchen And They Will Come**

British Columbia's school food systems are in dire need of redesign. School children do not have access to fresh, local, nutritious, safe and/or culturally appropriate foods because schools do not have adequate space or equipment grow, store, prepare, or serve these foods. Children do not have a common dining area nor do they have sufficient time to eat their meals. And most schools do not have a composting system in place to dispose of food wastes. This initiative has shown that a well equipped kitchen with adequate space to prepare and serve foods has profound effect on school children - improving their eating habits, while contributing to leadership, new skills, enhanced self esteem, decreased bullying, and more. Kitchen development has also had significant impact on the school community - often inspiring the redesign of other components of the school food system (a communal eating area, school gardens, school greenhouses, root cellars, and composting programs have been developed). Importantly, the presence of a kitchen where full meals can be prepared and offered has helped to establish more appropriate meal times (participating schools allowed children a minimum of 30 minutes to eat lunch). The possibility of obtaining kitchen was a huge drawing card to engage schools in this venture. This is an important observation, because for as little as \$2,500.00 a school can purchase a salad bar, a first step in the redesign of their food system.

### **2) Reestablish Local Food Systems: One Bite at A Time**

Local food systems in British Columbia do not have the capacity to feed our school children. Local farms, food processors, food distribution systems have all but disappeared. Local food is scarce! There are only a handful of local foods available year round in any community in British Columbia. Thus the vision a "model" F2S program - as one that linked one school with one farm providing all the foods required to fill a salad bar was quickly found to be unrealistic. Many different F2S models emerged, and the most successful were those where clusters of schools were linked to clusters of local farms. Expectations about the amount of local food in the salad bar were lowered to fit with the local food system context. While 100% local foods in the salad bar is still a long-term goal, in the short term schools are using whatever local items were available. They are supplementing BC products as local foods become unavailable and then adding foods from outside of BC as BC products are exhausted. Model F2S programs are buying into local one bite at a time, and redesigning the food system in the process.

### **3) It Takes a Community**

During the first F2S gathering in Quesnay, BC the slogan "*it takes a community to sustain a farm, it takes a farm to sustain a community*" was coined. Thus, right from the start one of the most import lessons of this initiative was identified - community engagement is key and farmers must be at the table. The depth and expansiveness of community engagement with the F2S initiative went beyond all expectations. The program drew (and continues to draw) support from multiple diverse sectors from local to international levels. Within several communities the program has captured the imagination of enough sectors and has found enough support that it has taken on a life of its own. In other communities the will is there but the resources are not. The F2S

network is the glue that holds the strong and the aspiring together. The network is a vehicle that serves to channel ideas and information and resources between communities, school districts, regions, ministries and beyond. Maintaining the F2S network is key to strengthening and sustaining and growing the F2S movement in British Columbia.

### **Top Four Recommendations To Further Farm to School In British Columbia**

**1) Sustain the provincial leadership provided by the Public Health Association of British Columbia.** Continuity of provincial leadership is necessary to sustain and grow the farm to school network. Such leadership is vital to strengthen linkages and to broker knowledge and resources between the school, farming, health, and aboriginal sectors – at district, regional, provincial and national levels. A provincial voice is essential to consolidate and guide the various policies, programs and practices necessary to expand and institutionalize farm to school across the province

**2) Build capacity to establish new programs and to enhance existing programs.** A marketing and promotions strategy is needed to support existing activity and to inspire new programs. School districts, health authorities, municipalities and first nations groups/councils are key targets for this promotional strategy. Seed grants are also required to sustain and grow the initiative. Funds are required to enable more schools to build kitchens and common dining areas and/or to purchase equipment for such areas. More farms require funds to purchase equipment and/or modify structures in provide local foods to schools.

**3) Develop policy to support access to fresh, nutritious, safe, local, and culturally appropriate foods on school premises.** A comprehensive list of policy and practice recommendations to enhance F2S activity may be found in Appendix B.

**4) Extend and expand the evaluation of the program.** Extend the evaluation of the program for at least 2 more years in order to more fully assess the extent to which program objectives have been met. Expand the evaluation component of the program to more closely explore: the impact of *local* and *traditional* foods in the salad bar on student eating behaviours; the impact of the program on participating farms and the local food economy; and the unique Farm to School Salad Bar models that are emerging in aboriginal, rural, and remote settings.

### **Towards Sustainability**

PHABC continues to support F2S through the website and dissemination of the F2S guide. As well the organization has developed a funding proposal and is exploring partners and potential avenues of funding to sustain and grow the initiative.

## Appendix A

### Farm to School Salad Bar Program Development in British Columbia - February 1, 2008 - December 31, 2010

#### 16 Farm to School Salad Bar programs funded by BCHLA/PHABC

- ✓ Crawford Bay Elementary and Secondary, Crawford Bay, BC
- ✓ Chetwynd Secondary, Chetwynd, BC
- ✓ Fernie Academy, Fernie, BC
- ✓ Mountview Elementary, Williams Lake, BC
- ✓ John Field Elementary, Hazelton, BC
- ✓ Lake Kathlyn Intermediate School, Smithers, BC
- ✓ Kamloops Secondary School, Kamloops, BC
- ✓ Nkm'apl'qs'isn'ma'ma'ya.tn klsqilxwtet, Vernon, BC
- ✓ North Peace Secondary, Ft. St. John, BC
- ✓ Ntamtqen snm'a?aya?tn, Cawston, BC
- ✓ Oliver Elementary, Oliver, BC
- ✓ Outma School, Squiz'w Cultural School, Penticton, BC
- ✓ SenPokChin School, Oliver, BC
- ✓ South Okanagan Secondary, Oliver, BC
- ✓ Thornhill Elementary School, Terrace, BC
- ✓ Vernon Secondary School, Vernon, BC

#### 4 New Farm to School Salad Bar programs funded by Interior Health

- ✓ Cawston Elementary School, Cawston, BC
- ✓ Osoyoos Elementary School, Osoyoos, BC
- ✓ Okanagan Falls Elementary School, Okanagan Falls, BC
- ✓ Tuc El Nuit School, Oliver, BC

#### 13 new programs are in various stages of development

- ✓ Vancouver (6 schools)
- ✓ Nanaimo (4 schools)
- ✓ Richmond (1 schools)
- ✓ Victoria (1 school)

## Appendix B

### Furthering Farm to School: Policy and Practice Recommendations

- ✓ That schools and school districts adopt local food purchasing policies.
- ✓ That schools and school districts adopt school building design policies that require schools to include adequate space and equipment for growing, preparing, serving and consuming food as well as composting food wastes in their building design plans.
- ✓ That schools and school districts adopt policy to ensure children have adequate time to eat.
- ✓ That schools and school districts adopt policy to ensure all children have access to lunch regardless of means.
- ✓ That schools and school districts provide staff to coordinate Farm to School activity.
- ✓ That the Ministry of Education adopts policies to support the school district policies and practices outlined above.
- ✓ That the Ministry of Education directs adequate resources (human and material) to support the school district policies and practices outlined above.
- ✓ That municipalities, regional districts, and/or bands establish food security and/or agricultural committees.
- ✓ That municipalities, regional districts, and/or bands ensure their plans and policy support F2S and the viability of the local food system.
- ✓ That the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands develops and implements a buy local campaign.
- ✓ That the Ministry of Agriculture and Land supports the farm to school program by supporting the development of infrastructure and systems and policy to enhance the production, processing and/or distribution local foods.
- ✓ That health authorities include the support of farm to school activity in their food security plans as a best practice to achieve food security.
- ✓ That health authorities support environmental health policy and practice that enables the use of local foods, including traditional foods in schools.
- ✓ That health authorities designate staff and funding where possible to support F2S programs as part of their healthy living, food security and healthy community plans.
- ✓ That the Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport supports the inclusion of local foods in the next iteration of the school food and beverage guidelines and in the development of future food and nutrition policy.
- ✓ That the Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport endorses F2S as a best practice.
- ✓ That the Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport, The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Agriculture and Land jointly provide the resources necessary in order to maintain provincial leadership of the initiative.