The Caf Goes Local!

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Responses

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Introduction

In recognition of the strong link between learning and good health, the Ontario Ministry of Education has issued a new *School Food and Beverage Policy* with the goal of encouraging school cafeterias to lay the foundation for lifelong healthy eating habits. Slated for full implementation in September of 2011, the policy will revolutionize the food marketing practices in schools across the province, with a mandate of providing healthier food choices. The elimination of deep fried food, soft drinks and candy, among the many foods that students consume on a regular basis, will create significant changes in student eating patterns. Bold action from school communities will be required to maintain student engagement if this policy is going to have any real impact on their health.

EcoSource has been working extensively in the Peel District School Board to catalyze systemic change around food made available in school communities. The Youth and Local Food Program is working to see more local food options in schools, as well as better student understanding of the environmental, economic and social benefits associated with supporting local food systems. We believe that school boards have an exciting opportunity to use a commitment to local sustainable food to better educate students about impacts of their food choices, while simultaneously complying with new policy guidelines and modeling good nutrition.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate that a board wide local sustainable food procurement policy can not only harmonize with the new *School Food and Beverage Policy* but is an ideal way to put it into practice.

Local Sustainable Food Often Means Less Processed Food

With the new *School Food and Beverage Policy* permitting fewer foods high in sugar, fat and preservatives, cafeterias must shift to minimally processed and whole foods. Highly processed foods are frequently manufactured by large multinational companies who source ingredients from all over the globe and produce food of low nutritional value. Local sustainable foods provide natural choices for cafeterias, as they tend towards less processed whole foods such as fresh fruits, vegetables and dairy products, often falling under the '*Serve Most Often'* category in the *School Food and Beverage Policy* as the healthiest food options for students**.** A local sustainable food procurement policy will assist schools in achieving their target of 80% of the food and beverages served falling under the healthiest options category.

Local Sustainable Food May Have Higher Nutritional Quality

Local foods tend to taste better and have higher nutritional quality than their long-distance counterparts, due to the shorter time between harvest and consumption. It is well recognized that fruits and vegetables lose their nutrients after harvest and should be consumed or processed quickly[1]. Sustainable farming practices can also contribute to higher levels of vitamins, minerals and natural sugars through the minimal use of pesticides and other chemicals[2]. For example, a review of studies examining meat and dairy from grass-fed cattle versus conventionally raised cattle found there were significantly higher amounts of beneficial fatty acids and less saturated fat from grass-fed cattle[3].

Adding weight to the argument, Public Health agencies and nutrition practitioners are also acknowledging the impact of local food on diet. The American Medical Association, in its new Sustainable Food Policy, recognizes that *"ecologically sustainable food systems…provide food and beverages of naturally high nutritional quality*[4]*."* As well, The Dietitians of Canada have chosen as the focus for their 2010 Nutrition Month 'Celebrate Food from Field to Table', recognizing that a healthier diet involves eating locally and seasonally. Many public health departments, including those in Halton and Peel Regions and in the city of Toronto, are involved in farm-to-table programming.

Local Sustainable Food Consumption Can Lead to Positive Changes in Dietary Behaviours

The Ontario Ministry of Education recognizes that "*the school environment profoundly influences students' attitudes, preferences and behaviours*[5]*."* A literature review on the impact of farm-to-school programs shows that consumption of fresh local produce leads to a positive change in dietary and lifestyle behaviours, including more fruits and vegetables consumed at school, home and outside.[6] Ongoing education efforts assist with these positive changes and are a key companion to any local sustainable food policy adopted by school boards. Local sustainable food procurement along with local sustainable food education are excellent ways of *"teaching students the skills to make healthy choices and reinforces those lessons through school practices*[6]*."*

Schools are concerned that students will opt to eat outside of the school cafeteria. Despite efforts to include healthier food options for students, there are many all-too-conveniently-located fast food restaurants surrounding urban and suburban secondary schools. Education can help to address this issue. EcoSource has been providing local food workshops and farm field trips to PDSB students for the past three years to raise awareness of our food system. We have subsequently seen an increased demand for and consumption of local healthy food in school cafeterias. When students better understand the immense power food choice has on our food distribution systems, they are empowered to think critically about the choices they are making.

Examples

The number of examples of public institutions adopting local sustainable food purchasing policies and initiatives as ways of having healthier cafeterias and workplaces is growing:

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[1] Rickman, J.C., Barrett, D.M., and Bruhn, C.M. 2007. Nutritional comparison of fresh, frozen and canned fruits and vegetables. *Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture,* 87:930-944

[2] Kulick, M. 2005. *Healthy Food, Healthy Hospitals, Healthy Communities*. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

[3] Clancy, K. 2006. Greener Pastures: *How Grass-fed Beef and Milk Contribute to Healthy Eating*. Cambridge Union of Concerned Scientists

[4] American Medical Association (AMA). 2009. Sustainable Food (Resolution 405, A-08)

[5] Ministry of Education. 2009. *School Food and Beverage Policy*

[6] Joshi, A., Azuma, A.M., and Feenstra, G. 2008. Do Farm-to-School Programs Make a Difference? Findings and Future Research Needs. *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition*, 3(2/3).

- Screaming Avocado Café is a popular, student-run restaurant at Stratford Northwestern Secondary School in Stratford, Ontario, which serves 200 meals a day, five days a week and operates alongside the regular school cafeteria. The menu is focused on local and sustainable, with many of the ingredients coming from the organic garden on the property.
- Dunbarton High School in Pickering, Ontario launched a farmers' market at their high school in 2009, the success of which sparked interest in rolling out the initiative in all Durham Region high schools.
- University of Toronto, the largest university in Canada, implemented the most comprehensive local sustainable food procurement policy in North America in 2006, joining 200 campuses across North America that have established farm-to-college programs.
- The Town of Markham became the first municipality in North America to commit to purchasing a minimum of 10% of local sustainable food, with 5% increases each year.
- The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto and the Royal Victoria Hospital in Barrie both initiated farmers' markets at their institutions as part of workplace wellness projects, recognizing that making local food more readily available means healthier food is purchased and consumed.
- The Go Ontario! Granola Bar, developed in Peel by EcoSource, is an example of a wholly locally grown and produced snack that, in keeping with their local mission, used honey rather than sugar and therefore produced a healthier product.
- Toronto District School Board's "Go Green" Climate Change Action Plan responds to climate change by focusing its planning and decision making on mitigation, adaptation and education. Action 6b is to develop school ground market gardens through community partnerships.

With the general public realizing the importance of local sustainable food systems and bringing healthier meals into school cafeterias, food service providers are becoming adept at incorporating local food into their food procurement process.

Institutional Support for a Local Food Policy

There are many provincial policies, school board expectations and regional initiatives to support the adoption of a local sustainable food procurement policy.

School Food and Beverage Policy

The Ministry of Education's *School Food and Beverage Policy,* recognizes the role local food plays in healthy eating as it recommends offering *"Ontario grown, produced, and/or manufactured food and beverages when available and practical…."*[5] . As well, the recommendation to *"be environmentally conscientious"*[5] can be applied to the purchase and consumption of local sustainable foods, which are grown using environmentally and socially responsible practices.

Board-wide Environmental Policy

Incorporating local sustainable food into schools is in line the Ministry of Education's most progressive environmental policy document to date, "Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow." Included in this document is the mandate for all school boards in the province to create board-wide environmental policies and guiding principles.

When the PDSB created its Environmental Policy framework, it enshrined a commitment to local food with a Guiding Principle that "*it is expected that staff, students and Board departments will demonstrate a commitment to purchasing locally grown food for use and sale in schools and other Board facilities…"*[6] Other relevant Guiding Principles include "*establishing and maintaining relationships with vendors that share the Peel Board's commitment to environmental*

and social responsibility, and reviewing and revising, if necessary, existing purchasing polices/practices to ensure policy compliance" and *"integrating environmental and social responsibility in all areas of curriculum taught in Peel Board schools*[7]*."* The PDSB is fully realizing these Guiding Principles through its work with EcoSource in the Youth and Local Food Program, offering education experiences to staff and teachers about local food systems and working to incorporate more local food options into cafeterias and formal food contracts.

Foundations for a Healthy School

Incorporating local sustainable food choices and education would also contribute to achieving objectives laid out in the Ontario government's *Foundations for a Healthy School*. This provincial document recommends as part of promoting healthy eating, starting a school fruit and vegetable garden[8]. Studies show that children who participated in after school gardening activities were more likely to increase their food literacy and consumption of fruits and vegetables, practices that contribute to a foundation for a healthy adulthood[9].

Ontario Curriculum

Local sustainable food education can be linked to the Ontario school curriculum in various ways. It can be applied to Grade 9 & 10 Science, Geography and Civics classes around topics such as Sustainable Ecosystems and Human Activities; Climate Change; Global Connections; and Human Environment Interactions. Grade 10 & 12 Food and Nutrition classes examine food supply and global food issues, as well as the economic, social and political factors that affect food production. These are powerful opportunities to discuss the health, environmental and economic benefits of eating locally and sustainably.

Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow

The Ministry of Education's policy framework for environmental education in Ontario sets out goals for implementing environmental education. One of the goals, *Environmental Leadership*, emphasizes the importance of establishing and promoting responsible environmental practices throughout the education system.[10] To achieve this goal, school boards are encouraged to "*develop environmentally responsible purchasing practices, while considering quality, price and service*[10]." Implementing a local sustainable food procurement policy within the PDSB would be a significant step in displaying environmental leadership and modeling the recommended approach of education, paired with action that reinforces the formal curriculum.

Environmental and social responsibilities form the cornerstones of local sustainable food production. Through this method of production, foods are produced in Ontario in a manner that benefits the environment, the social sphere and our regional economies.

System Change

This kind of seismic shift demands a coalition. It requires the involvement of every stakeholder in the education and food distribution systems – from Ministry and board representatives, food service providers, farmers, teachers, students, parents and NGOs.

It requires a change in the food contracts and request for proposals (RFP) to see local sustainable food language and targets incorporated into contracts, as well as education opportunities that see students connecting to the local food system and understanding their impact on these systems.

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[7] Peel District School Board. Policies and Regulation #74 *Environmental Policy*.

[8] See Foundations for a Healthy School, www.ontario.ca/healthyschools

[9] Hermann, J.R., Parker, S.P., Brown, B.J., Siewe, Y.J., Denney, B.A., and Walker, S.J. 2006. After-School Gardening Improves Children's Reported Vegetable Intake and Physical Activity. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour*, 38, 201-202.

[10] Ministry of Education. 2009. *Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow*.

Non-profit environmental education organizations can have a profound impact on a school board's capacity to undertake any kind of initiative. Many NGOs who provide food and nutrition education programming, can assist in curriculum reviews and build professional development opportunities for in-service teachers to incorporate new food related curriculum into their lesson plans.

Many NGO's have relationships with farmers and school board representatives and can do the leg work in demonstrating how other districts are implementing change.

The Ministry of Education recognizes that school boards will have various approaches toward the implementation of the *School Food and Beverage Policy,* and each community has its own unique supports and interests.

EcoSource has worked with the Peel District School Board for over three years in the Youth and Local Food Program and have been approached by other school boards to assist in the transition of food and food literacy in their schools.

We have learned along the way to:

- Encourage school boards to define for themselves what is local and what is sustainable in their context, and assist them in setting realistic targets, revisiting them often to maintain momentum and progression.
- Celebrate how school boards make a difference to the local agricultural economy. Using real numbers in the school food budget, it is possible to see how much money is directed towards supporting locally grown food and celebrate this support through media, farmer relations and the Ministries of Agriculture and Education.
- Ensure that farmers are present in the discussions and that the experience is a good one for all stakeholders involved.
- Work with students engagement groups. Having a strong student voice in what they want to see in their schools ensures that the change is not only top down.
- Dream big, but start small.

For more information on the EcoSource Youth and Local Food Program, please contact Soni Craik, Acting Executive Director, EcoSource.

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