

Possibility Brief

School Food In Nova Scotia





The Shifting Landscape of School Food

Over the last decade, the landscape of school food in Nova Scotia has changed dramatically, illuminating great potential for the decade ahead.

For over ten years, the Province of Nova Scotia has provided annual funding for school food programs with a priority focus on breakfast. As a result, breakfast programs exist in almost all public schools in Nova Scotia and while they look different from school to school, they continue to play a vital role in helping students to thrive. In 2024, school food programs in Nova Scotia expanded significantly through a monumental investment by the Province of Nova Scotia in a universally accessible School Lunch Program. This investment is a gamechanger for school food, and brings the potential for major positive impacts for youth and the whole province.

Now more than ever, school food programs can be a catalyst for systemic change - where more students can thrive at school because they're well-nourished, where food can be a vehicle for learning about health, community, and the environment, and where school food is helping to drive a more resilient local food system

With growing uncertainty in our economic climate, rising food costs, and new momentum around school food programs, we can build a system of school food infrastructure that not only advances health and learning outcomes for students, but also builds regional food systems that are valued, and well-supported. The time to do this is now - the future of our province depends on it.



The Potential of School Food

The potential for school food to catalyze positive, long-term change in Nova Scotia cannot be underestimated. To meet this opportunity, schools must be equipped to procure, process, cook, and serve nutritious meals on a scale like never before. Most of our schools are not designed for this, and require new infrastructure and staffing to build capacity for quality food production and service that prioritizes local food. As schools work to make nutritious food a part of every student's school day, this creates new potential for students to enjoy, value, and learn about food in the school setting.

At the same time, school food can be leveraged to strengthen regional food economies by maximizing the amount of school food coming from Nova Scotia farmers, processors, producers and food service providers. **If we seize this opportunity, school food can not only achieve vital health and learning outcomes for students, but also help to propel a stronger and more resilient food system in Nova Scotia.**



Access to Nutritious Food

Research shows that universal school food programs are one of the most effective ways to ensure that all students have access to healthy and nutritious food at school - so that they are ready to learn, have more energy, and don't get distracted by hunger. It's also vital to their social and emotional well-being, affecting their ability to grow and feel connected to their peers.

The Nova Scotia school lunch program launched in October 2024 in 258 schools (targeted at elementary grades) and will expand to reach all public schools within the next three years. To build a program that is sustainable, and as inclusive as possible, we must prioritize investments that build the capacity of schools to create localized delivery models.

Pathway: Expand the on-site (or nearby) production capacity of schools to procure, prepare, cook and serve high-quality meals. This includes flexible menus that can accommodate diverse students, incorporate more local food, and engage students in school food programs.

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I think the lunch program is going really well! A lot of my friends didn't used to eat lunch, either because they didn't want to pack something or they didn't want to eat at school, but now we all order lunch and eat together
- Sophie, Eighth Grader



Food As A Vehicle For Learning

With rising health and environmental concerns, learning about the world through food is a way for the youth of today, who are the decision makers of tomorrow, to nourish themselves, build vital life skills, and care for our food systems.

Learning about food at school can take place in settings that include the garden, greenhouse, kitchen, classroom and out on the land. Whether it's enjoying a nutritious meal together, learning to grow plants, researching local systems, or serving lunch to peers - food can foster a sense of joy and pride for our youngest generations.

Pathway: A holistic approach to school food programs that increase food access and literacy for all students, through appropriate school food infrastructure. This could mean: Growing infrastructure to produce food on school grounds; Production kitchens where students can learn food skills; And, curricula that uses food to teach about health, the environment, and local economies.

“Youth are so different in a garden setting; I am not sure if it is from working so close to the earth. But I find so many children that normally struggle with behaviours or big emotions thrive when they are in a garden. I also love teaching kids to cook and prep, so being able to make a meal that you started from seed provides a sense of pride like no other.

- Schools Plus Outreach Worker



Strengthening Local Food Systems

By supporting local producers and expanding capacity for local procurement, school food programs can contribute to strengthening regional food systems and supporting our youngest generation to enjoy, value and protect our local food systems.

Schools, like other institutions, are well-positioned to help develop regional supply chains and build resiliency and self-reliance into our food system. This keeps dollars within our province and builds school food programs that are more sustainable over time.

Pathway: Leverage the potential of school food procurement with parallel investments local food infrastructure (ie. aggregation and processing of local food) that help to develop local supply chains, support local producers, and foster relationships between schools and local suppliers.

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With a fully expanded School Lunch Program, if 50% of eligible students ordered every day, food purchases could reach \$33 Million per school year. If 50% of this total came from food produced in Nova Scotia, this could equate to \$16.5 Million invested in the local food economy every year.





The Future of School Food in Nova Scotia

School food programs can be a catalyst to transform food systems in Nova Scotia and ultimately, the experiences that students have at school. Since the launch of the Nova Scotia School Lunch Program, student participation has been over 50% and in some schools, up to 100%, of students are enjoying school lunches. As the program is expanded and improved, we expect participation to grow. With increasing demand, the rising costs of food, and the need for more robust infrastructure and staffing, it will take increased support to reach the full potential of school food.

With support from local businesses, organizations, the private sector, and critical investments from the Province of Nova Scotia, we can build on current momentum to make nutritious food a part of every students' school day, and foster strong local food systems that reflect a source of joy and pride for our youngest generations.

Our Role in School Food:

Nourish Nova Scotia working with the Province of Nova Scotia to build awareness and support on-going development of school food programs, including:

- Gathering stories from students and those connected to the program to build awareness around the many impacts of school food and inform program development.
- Fostering opportunities for partnerships and fund development - ensuring that schools are well-equipped to prepare, cook, and serve regionally adapted menus that prioritize local food.
- Celebrating school food through the creation of an annual cookbook that will feature stories and most-loved recipes from the Nova Scotia School Lunch Program. Cookbook sales will be directed to school food programs in Nova Scotia.



Donate to the Nourish School Food

Fund: A dedicated fund to support school food programs in Nova Scotia. Donations will be directed to schools to support program development. Contact us for details and how your donation can make a difference: Lindsay Corbin, School Food Project Co-Lead: lindsay.corbin@nourishns.ca



Learn More About Nourish Nova

Scotia: Visit our website to learn more about our work and get in touch: www.nourishns.ca

