

Ottawa School Food Forum



WordItOut

October 26th, 2016

The Ottawa School Food Network was formed in early 2016 by a group of organizations working towards good food in Ottawa schools. The idea for creating this group came out of a conversation at Canada's First National School Food Conference - Changing the Menu - in Montreal in November 2015. With strong support from Sustain Ontario's [Edible Education Network](#) and the [Nourishing School Communities](#) project, as well as inspiration from [Hamilton's Edible Education Network and Guide](#), this Ottawa Network has taken shape. And now, through this report of our first public event, we hope to inspire others.

For updates and more information please join the Ottawa School Food Network Facebook group: www.facebook.com/groups/Ottawaschoolfood/

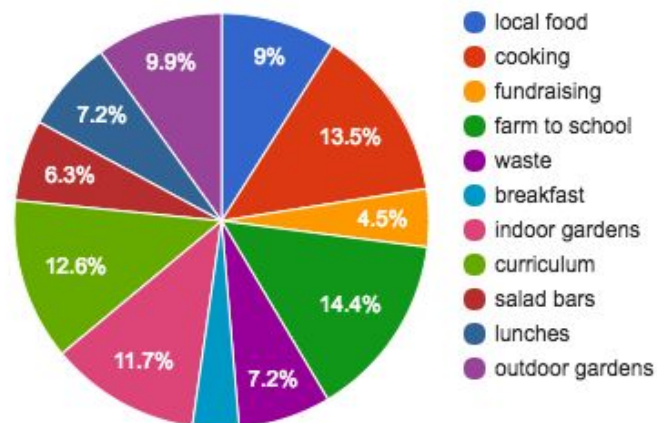
Or contact Allegra Newman, Ottawa School Food Network, for more information: schoolfood@justfood.ca



Thirty-eight participants gathered in the cafeteria at Immaculata High School on October 26th, 2016 to talk about school food in Ottawa. There were 8 teachers, 7 community partners, 6 food advocates, 5 parents, 3 farmers, 3 chefs, 2 public health professionals and 2 students.

When asked **what school food subjects interested them the most**, the top three answers were: (1) **farm to school**; (2) **cooking / food skills** and (3) **linking food education to the curriculum**. **Indoor gardens**, and **local food procurement** were also areas with high levels of interest.

key areas of interest



The evening began with a series of **presentations** from local food organizations including:

- [Growing up Organic](#)
- [Whole Foods](#)
- [Ottawa Food Policy Council](#)
- [Ottawa Public Health](#)
- [Ottawa Network for Education](#)
 - [Ottawa School Breakfast Program](#)
 - Classroom Gardens Program
- Sustain Ontario's [Edible Education Network](#)
- [Just Food](#)
- [Nourishing School Communities](#).

The **participants then interviewed each other** at their tables and talked about their own experiences working with food in schools and what supports they would like to see to help get good healthy food into schools. These interviews, along with each person's contact information, were posted on the venue wall for other participants to peruse.

The next exercise involved participants gathering in small groups to discuss what **challenges and opportunities they see related to school food in Ottawa**. The following is an overview of the two small group exercises.

Challenges

When the participants were asked about challenges they see related to school food in Ottawa the most common answer was related to the theme: **Lack of access to good food in schools**. Under this theme, participants highlighted: the use of 'junk food' in school fundraising; the proximity of easily accessed fast food to high schools and lack of time and knowledge about cooking healthy food. Related to this was the lack of adequate kitchen facilities in many schools.

Lack of capacity was another theme that emerged. Participants talked about not having enough time to apply for grants, volunteer burnout, lack of champions in schools and overwhelmed teachers. Teachers are often unaware of the networks and tools available to improve food in their schools.

Participants also articulated that **lack of training** in food literacy was a problem, both for students and teachers. Participants highlighted a lack of capacity for nutritionists to provide support; that schools have little focus on home economics and food skills and the lack of capacity training to allow schools to improve their food programs as major challenges.

Opportunities

It isn't surprising that when we began discussing what opportunities participants saw for improving school food in Ottawa **skills training** was at the top of the list. Opportunities to "help shape kids' palates with healthy food" was a major theme. From teaching food skills in the junior grades to do-it-yourself breakfasts, participants discussed the benefits of increasing food literacy and helping students develop food preparation skills.

Suggestions also included bringing in outside chefs and nutritionists to work with students and connecting elementary school gardens with high school food classes for skill exchanging. Parent and food skill training was also discussed with the focus on reaching parents through their kids. Teacher training opportunities were focused on areas of capacity building and learning about social enterprise possibilities.

Another hot topic where participants saw opportunities was **school gardens**. There was a focus within the discussions on using current upward momentum in Ottawa to build more school gardens. Suggestions were also put forward about how to connect with the local community to help maintain outdoor gardens. There was also excitement around the possibilities of indoor tower gardens to engage more students throughout the school year.

Building leadership capacity was another theme captured from the group discussions. Engaging students to lead school food efforts particularly at the high school level; having parent volunteers instead of teachers write grants and finding out more about what teachers want or need were some of the opportunities discussed.

Participants also discussed **local food procurement opportunities** including: on-site food generation; involving food classes in food procurement; connecting with local businesses for fundraising opportunities; using local producers for snacks; and starting collective efforts to encourage local grocers to donate unsellable, but still nutritious, food to schools.

Support

The final topic discussed was how agencies could further support school food work. The top theme that emerged was **sharing and networking**. Participants were adamant about wanting more opportunities to network and connect as well as share information and resources. Help collaborating with the local community, school boards, local food banks and local suppliers was another opportunity for further support captured by participants.

Many participants spoke about wanting more support to **develop skills** around food and nutrition as well as capacity building. Some participants would like to see nutritionists regularly in schools to help with curriculum coaching for nutrition and food education. Also requested was skill

development in fundraising to help schools increase their capacity to bring programs into their school. Some participants felt that food skills courses should be mandatory for high school students while others want more promotion of existing food skills courses to increase enrolment.

Feedback

An online feedback form was distributed to the participants after the event. From the 16 participants who provided their feedback, the responses were mostly positive. Participants commented on **how great it was to connect with other people** interested in similar ideas and how inspired they were to see so “so many amazing things happening” in Ottawa. They were “excited to make great connections within the community to support each other's goals.”

Many participants were **surprised at the number of services that already exist** in Ottawa around school and food. One participant commented that “lots of organisations (are) trying to improve food but (there are) no common visions or plans.” Another participant commented that “there are many groups/organisations in the Ottawa area working on food related issues. Are we duplicating services? Could we be more efficient, and therefore widespread, in our work?” Many participants shared again how they are **interested in learning about and sharing best practices and successes** in different areas of school food.

For **future events** participants want to see longer, larger events where there is more time to connect and plan together how to best use the available resources. The topics that participants were interested in for future workshops include:

- proposal writing
- tool sharing
- how to combine ideas such as gardens and hot lunches
- how to work with the various groups/organizations
- learning about how to share resources
- more in-depth networking

Participants wanted to learn about “Concrete ways that we can help each other eg: centralised buying and distribution of food.” They also want to bring “more teachers to the table, so they then bring food education to their

students.” Some participants felt it would be useful to have further discussions about food and policies that are currently in place in Ottawa and education around who is responsible for changing and improving these policies.

Recommendations / Suggested Next Steps

In summary, the 2016 Ottawa School Food Forum communicated many opportunities for organizations to work with school, teachers, advocates, public health providers, chefs and farmers to improve school food in Ottawa. The following are a summary of recommendations gleaned from the forum. They are offered as next steps for the Ottawa School Food Network.

1. Provide a platform for schools and organizations in Ottawa to share resources and connect with one another.
2. Hold larger information sharing and networking events that bring more teachers into the discussion and offer opportunities for participants to connect and work towards actions.
3. Establish Terms of Reference for the Ottawa School Food Network to establish a direction and vision on how the group can work together to best improve school food in Ottawa.
4. Establish a database of resources that focus on the categories of: farm to school; cooking / food skills; linking food education to the curriculum; indoor gardens, and local food procurement.
5. Look at opportunities to encourage healthy fundraising and lunch programs in Ottawa schools.
6. Provide training opportunities around fundraising, capacity building and social enterprise training to schools, teachers and parent advocates.
7. Help connect schools with community support and resources such as chefs and nutritionists.

Actions

- The Ottawa School Food Network has recently launched a [Facebook group](#) where members can share their ideas and resources. Please click on the link above to join the group and post news, ideas and resources about School Food in Ottawa.
- The Ottawa School Food Network is developing a short information document with links to resources and programs available in Ottawa around creating healthy school food environments. This will be available for download at the beginning of 2017 through the Ottawa School Food Network [Facebook group](#) and on the upcoming OSFN webpage www.ottawaschoolfood.ca. The Ottawa School Food Network will explore developing a Guide similar to Hamilton's Edible Education Guide to expand on the availability of programs in the region.
- The Ottawa School Food Network will develop a set of terms of reference to help guide the direction and vision of the network.
- The Ottawa School Food Network will invite school food champions to self-identify to the OSFN through a link available on the OSFN webpage available in early 2017. OSFN champions will help disseminate information and resources throughout Ottawa schools.
- The [Ontario Fresh from the Farm Healthy School Fundraising Program](#) will hopefully roll out across the province in the 2017/2018 school year.
- Ottawa School Food Network partners are exploring models to help schools connect with chefs. More information will be available in the new year. Please visit our [Facebook group](#) for updates.
- The Ottawa School Food Network is examining opportunities to provide more training and networking events in the new year. Upcoming event notifications will be shared on the [OSFN Facebook group](#) and through member network channels.