

Teaching food literacy, one school lunch at a time ^[1]

Author: Leeder, Jessica

Source: The Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 7 Oct 2011

EXCERPTS:

Inside a handful of innovative schools across the country, students sit down to made-from-scratch lunches: whole wheat bread with rosemary, eggplant parmesan, burritos with local beans, sautéed kale with garlic and chilies.

...

Advocates here are still trying to make the case for why students ought to be fed anything at all. About 90 per cent of Canadian children are not provided with a meal at school unless they bring it from home. The small number of meal programs that exist endure because the administrators and volunteers who operate them are convinced of the benefits.

New research has linked meal programs to better grades, motivation, likelihood of graduation and decreases in absenteeism; providing healthy food would help counter rising rates of obesity and disease. And with a global food crisis looming, food security experts see an even loftier potential in school meals: to raise student awareness about food production and increase revenue for local producers.

"We put food last as a society," said Debbie Field, the Toronto-based director of FoodShare, a non-profit education group working to reintegrate food into school curriculums by funding school gardens and cooking classes...

Canada is a blank slate on school meals, and Ms. Field and her comrades say this is an opportunity to redefine a generation's relationship with food. The provinces and territories are working toward this: Federal and provincial education and health officials will meet in Banff next week to discuss improvements to nutrient criteria for school food and beverages across the country.

...

"An important building block in a literate society is a higher level of food awareness. We've moved away from that because food has been so cheap," said Evan Fraser, a University of Guelph professor and co-author of the food security tome *Empires of Food: Feast, Famine, and the Rise and Fall of Civilizations*. "We need some basic food literacy. The entry point to that cultural shift is through a school nutrition program."

...

"The rationale was that through social services, we would give people enough income that they wouldn't need to have school food," said Mary McKenna, a school nutrition expert with the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy at the University of New Brunswick.

...

Despite this, schools are increasingly adopting snack, breakfast or subsidized milk programs funded with donations and some local government funding. Teachers say they improve student success.

Peer-reviewed data documenting the correlations between food and learning among children in developed countries are emerging to back such anecdotal reports. A free feeding program at seven schools in Toronto's troubled Jane Street and Finch Avenue neighbourhood shows promising results. Research published this year in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* linked nutritionally balanced school lunches with improved engagement and in-class motivation, fewer disciplinary issues and lower drop-out rates. In 2010, a pair of British researchers tracked increases in math, English and science test scores - and a 14-per-cent drop in absences - among primary pupils who were fed more nutritious meals compared with a control group. Unexpectedly, improvements were more pronounced among those of middle and high socio-economic status - the children who, in theory, have enough food at home.

...

Youth obesity rates in Canada have doubled over the past 30 years; among children aged 6 to 17, the rate more than tripled to 10 per cent of the population, according to a study released in June by the Public Health Agency of Canada. The latest government estimates suggest obesity and the chronic diseases linked to it have cost the country nearly \$7.1-billion.

Mr. Finkelstein, known as "Fink" during school hours, oversees an entire operation - school garden, wheat field and the Screaming Avocado, a student-run cafeteria - aimed at teaching children the value of real food and how make it for themselves.

...

Outside North America, school meals are viewed more as an investment than a cost.

In France, students are fed a fresh, multi-course meal each day and taught table manners; school administrators even send suggestions for dinner recipes home as part of the effort to train young taste buds.

In Sweden, children between the ages of 6 and 16 receive a hot meal each day under laws set by the National Food Administration. Pupils choose from three entrees, a vegetarian dish and a salad bar with at least five fresh choices; milk and bread are also served.

In Brazil, where food is a constitutional right, a massive national program feeds 47 million students at 190,000 schools each day; it is championed not only for improving student nutrition, health and social development, but for providing wider employment, feeding the agricultural economy, local food system and regional economic development.

In Italy, school meals are seen as a central part of education about national culture and health. Low-income families receive a 25 per cent discount on food; for the poorest, meals are free. More than half of the meals consist of organic food.

In Japan, children aged 6 to 15 receive school meals. A government initiative aims to ensure 50 per cent of the meals are made with local ingredients.

-reprinted from The Globe and Mail

Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: advocacy ^[3]

quality ^[4]

school system ^[5]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/10/teaching-food-literacy-one-school-lunch-time>
Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/10/teaching-food-literacy-one-school-lunch-time> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/advocacy> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-system>