

School Food and Food Education Training Hub: Needs Assessment Report

Overview

In 2023-24, [Farm to Cafeteria Canada](#) (F2CC) conducted interviews with 25 Canadian educators to gain insights on the gaps and opportunities for expanding food literacy education in K-12 schools across Canada. Findings will inform the development and implementation of F2CC's School Food and Food Education Training Hub¹, which will offer professional development training, resources, networking, and knowledge sharing opportunities in collaboration with our [Implementation Partners](#) from coast to coast to coast. The aim is to build a nationally recognized, go-to space to build educator capacity to design and deliver engaging, equitable, and evidence-based food literacy and school food programs that will reach thousands of students across the country each year.

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¹Working name; we will decide upon the official name in the next phase of the project in consultation with partners and educators.

Key Findings

Educators report that hands-on and student-led approaches to food literacy education that are rooted in their interests and experiences and foster connections to community, place, and/or land are the best ways to engage students and see positive outcomes.



A caring, knowledgeable, engaging educator is a top factor in ensuring success when teaching the curriculum through food, along with a supportive school community who understands the benefits of food literacy education, and the proper setup and materials.

Common challenges to food literacy education include insufficient time to learn about, prepare and deliver experiential food literacy lessons; lack of organizational support and buy-in; integrating big picture or systems thinking into lessons; as well as funding, infrastructure, program sustainability, and the logistics of cooking and gardening.



Most educators said there are very limited training opportunities when it comes to developing teaching knowledge and skills around food, food systems, and nutrition.

All the educators we spoke to reported that more professional development training opportunities are needed to help expand evidence-based and culturally responsive food literacy education in Canada.



The majority of educators want to see the Hub offer cohort based training courses that include opportunities for connection and sharing between teachers, tangible activities they can implement in their classrooms, and in-person, place-based training as possible.

"I rarely find that any professional development directly helps me with food literacy learning. It just doesn't really exist out there."

Full Report

Project Background

Food literacy education is a central component of farm to school², which evidence shows has far-reaching benefits. Improved food literacy and skills can foster healthy eating habits and benefit children and youth's physical and mental health (Slater et al., 2018; Vidgen & Gallegos 2014), support food systems sustainability (Ingram et al., 2020), and help raise awareness of broad socio-economic and justice issues and inspires students to work towards positive change (Classens & Systma, 2020; Martin & Massicotte, 2021; Powell & Wittman, 2018; Yamashita & Robinson, 2016).

Food literacy education supports the well-being of children, youth, and the planet, yet lack of educator training prevents teaching the curriculum through food from becoming wide-spread. To fill this gap, F2CC is creating a Canada-wide School Food and Food Education Training Hub to provide professional development training, tools, and resources to grow educators' capacity to teach about food and food systems using experiential and culturally responsive pedagogy. The Hub will support educators to share knowledge and learn age-appropriate, equity-centred ways to teach about food including how to build critical thinking and life skills in order for students to take positive action towards their health and wellbeing, and the wellbeing of their community and environment.

“When you involve students in the growing, even just in the cooking too, they're going to be a lot more invested in trying new things and then advocating for what they are learning in the future.”

Needs Assessment Overview

To inform the development of the Hub, one hour interviews were conducted with 25 key informant educators in each province and one territory between December 2023 and May 2024, most of whom had significant experience teaching about food, food systems, and/or nutrition through experiential approaches. Educators were asked a set of open ended questions that covered key areas such as current teaching practices and preferred approaches to teaching about food, food systems, and nutrition; challenges in integrating food literacy education in schools; gaps and opportunities in food related professional development (PD) training and resources; and preferences and ideas for PD course format, topics, educator incentives, and best ways to promote and share Hub offerings.

Most educators we interviewed (n=23) identified as white and two identified as Indigenous. In order to hear input from a more diverse audience, we plan to speak with more organizations and individuals working in food justice spaces (fall 2024). Forty-eight percent of educators we interviewed were between the ages of 35-45; 29% between 45-55 yrs old; 19% between 25-35 yrs old, and 5% (n=1) was between 55-65. Fifty-two percent of respondents identified as women; 43% as men. The median amount of time teaching was 15.5 years. Sixty percent of respondents teach K-8, and the remaining 40% teach high school, Gr. 9-12. There was also a diversity in teaching locations from rural to urban.

² While F2CC takes a “farm to school” approach, to better reflect the diversity of local and traditional foods that can be enjoyed in schools from coast to coast to coast, we also call this a “local food to school” approach.

Findings

Teaching Practices

Most teachers shared that taking an experiential approach to food literacy education was one of the best ways to ensure success and engagement in the classroom, and that a hands-on approach helps to build life skills, confidence, investment, and excitement for learning. Many educators also noted the importance of centering students in the design and development of activities which allows learning to be tied to what matters to children and youth. Connecting teaching to place, community, real world learning, and the land was also raised by many educators as what works well when teaching food literacy, which helps make learning relevant. Several educators also noted the importance of building trust and providing a safe space to build ownership, personal agency, and self-esteem. Some educators said that food helps inspire curiosity and joy, which helps motivate students to share their learning with families. A few respondents shared that using tried and true recipes and lesson plans was helpful.

From the interviews, it was clear that an engaged, fun, caring, and knowledgeable educator with strong classroom management skills is a top way to ensure success in food literacy education. Many educators also said that having a supportive administration, colleagues, and/or organizational structure, and strong community and partner connections is also key. Educators noted the importance of having sufficient time to learn about food topics and prepare hands-on, curriculum-linked lessons, and that the right setup (i.e. infrastructure, resources, support people, and materials) is important in making food literacy education possible.

Challenges

Educators face various challenges in teaching food literacy. The most common problem raised, by almost half of respondents, is when there is an unsupportive school community (i.e. administrators, teachers, system) who do not see or value the benefits of food literacy education, which results in lack of buy-in to develop, deliver, and sustain programs. Several educators noted that they felt like they were working in individualized, siloed systems and most educators said they did not have sufficient professional development opportunities or support to learn more and expand their knowledge and teaching on food, food systems, and nutrition.

"Part of the problem is getting time recognized, which is a major challenge. School principals would rather have us supervise students than give us time for food-related activities. We are starting from very very far away... I'll confess that I often volunteer, and well, it all rests on the backs of the teachers who decide to embark on an adventure like this."

In the classroom, many educators noted that not having sufficient materials, funding, and infrastructure to run and sustain programs is challenging, which are findings consistent with the literature. Several educators reported that lack of time to plan and/or learn about food topics was problematic, and some said that managing large classes of students in kitchens or gardens and

insufficient instructional time is challenging. Some respondents struggle with integrating theory and big picture thinking into hands-on food classes, making lessons accessible to all students, and developing relationships with community partners. A few educators shared that not having a well-known space to find evidence-based, trusted food resources is also an issue.

Professional development needs

All of the educators we spoke to (100%) said that they believe that more professional development training to support food literacy education is needed, and that it would be helpful to be connected to other food literacy educators across Canada. The top areas that educators felt like additional training could support their teaching include:

- Food systems and sustainability, including hands-on tying activities into big picture concepts (e.g., social justice, climate change, etc.)
- Indigenous food, food systems, and ways of knowing
- How to embed culturally responsive pedagogy so food literacy teaching and learning is inclusive, appropriate, and authentic
- Best practices and approaches to introducing food to students to support their mental health and positive relationships with food
- Age-appropriate ways to use food to build systems and critical thinking, and citizen-oriented skills
- Food as it relates to science and technology (i.e. soil science, chemistry, biodiversity)
- Logistics of cooking, gardening, or other land-based learning programs (e.g., food safety, effectively organizing and managing students, growing and harvesting food, summer garden maintenance, food waste, composting)
- Building connections with community partners to ensure lessons are place-based
- Creating supportive school systems and programs that are sustainable over time, including grant writing

Given experiential and student-centered learning were common themes that emerged from the interviews, F2CC will prioritize work to create training courses that address the areas above through hands-on approaches that support educators to tie learning into students interests and experiences. F2CC will also work to support educators in making curriculum links, and help educators embed theory and systems thinking into hands-on classes.³

"I think if [educators who are less experienced with food literacy education] could get some professional development, that would be fabulous. And then ways to integrate and see - it doesn't have to be more work. It might actually lubricate what you're trying to achieve in your classroom already with literacy and math and science..."

To read more of what we heard from educators and their PD needs, see [here](#).

³ Most respondents said they saw opportunities to link food into subjects across the curriculum, but less experienced educators need support to understand how to make these connections and integrate learning so food is no longer seen as an add-on.

Cultural and Inclusive Teaching

Food is an important vehicle to learn about culture and can help educators build safe and welcoming classrooms, so we asked for advice on how to ensure that the Hub's training and resources are culturally appropriate and inclusive for students. We heard that it would be helpful to create a course where educators could learn about how to share different food cultures in appropriate and authentic ways, create a sensitive and inclusive learning environment, and connect learning to students' personal experiences and cultures.

"Like leaving the door open for children, for students to incorporate their own cultural foods is just a wonderful way to validate that student and make school resemble their culture, and resemble them. That's a really valuable way to make learning real and relevant. And a great avenue for Indigenous learning about for Indigenous studies, and reconciliation work and again, connecting people to the land."

Several respondents suggested that educators should create spaces for knowledge holders, parents, and students themselves to be involved in the sharing of food, experiences, and teachings from their culture, and a few noted that educators need to have guidance on protocols of how to bring community members into the classroom. A few educators shared that trusted resources to support their teaching in this area would be helpful, including how to adapt resources to different learning styles and student knowledge, as well as how to integrate and honour varying perspectives and food-related experiences, traditions, and histories.

"Students in classes come from a variety of backgrounds...These different perspectives could best be honoured through open-ended inquiry and learning activities, relating personal experiences and family knowledge to new ideas and methods being presented in class...Helping students and teachers navigate shared learning while respecting and honouring multiple perspectives is so important and challenging due to time constraints. I see this Training Hub as a possible way for educators to build confidence and access credible resources that will remove barriers to exploring these food literacy topics within the practical parameters of their teaching assignment."



Gratitude and Next Steps

F2CC would like to thank the educators who gave their time to provide insights, ideas, and information on how to build a School Food and Food Education Training Hub that will meet the diverse needs of educators across the country. The information gathered through this needs assessment will inform the design and development of the Hub courses and resources, which we will pursue in the second stage of this project when funding is secured.

For more information or questions, please contact Sarah Keyes, F2CC's Food Literacy Lead, at sarah@sustainontario.ca.