THE ROLE OF PLANNERS IN PLANNING FOR FOOD SYSTEMS RESILIENCE:

School Food meets Local Food in British Columbia

By Tammara Soma, Elina Blomley, Hafsa Salihue, and Dina Sadeghi

SUMMARY

Farm-to-school programming offers programs such as food growing, school meals, and food literacy, and seeks to connect students with nature, the land, and food producers. While planners support various food interventions, it is not immediately clear how planners can contribute to school food meals. At the Food Systems Lab, we identified how planners can help scale up local food procurement for schools to create "win-win" opportunities. In this article, we will share lessons learned from three projects, highlighting the important contribution of farm-to-school programs and planners' roles in supporting food systems resilience and youth health.

SOMMAIRE

Les programmes « de la ferme à l'école » proposent des programmes tels que la culture d'aliments, les repas scolaires, l'alphabétisation alimentaire, et cherchent à mettre les élèves en contact avec la nature, la terre et les producteurs de denrées alimentaires. Si les urbanistes soutiennent diverses interventions dans le domaine de l'alimentation, la manière dont ils peuvent contribuer à la restauration scolaire n'est pas évidente. Au Food Systems Lab, nous avons identifié comment les urbanistes peuvent aider à développer l'approvisionnement en produits alimentaires locaux pour les écoles afin de créer des opportunités « gagnant-gagnant ». Dans cet article, nous partagerons les leçons tirées de trois études de cas mettant en évidence l'importante contribution des programmes de la ferme à l'école et le rôle des urbanistes dans le soutien à la résilience des systèmes alimentaires et à la santé des jeunes.

Student pantry

CLICK TO RETURN TO TABLE OF CONTENTS

In exploring diverse solutions to improve food security, food systems resilience, and food literacy for youth, there is a growing interest in the development of a national school food program. Currently, one-third of students in elementary schools and two-thirds of students in secondary schools in Canada do not eat a nutritious breakfast.[1] To alleviate this issue, Farm to School BC, a program run by the Public Health Association of BC, offers food literacy programming such as food growing, food education, school meals, and school food procurement. Farm to School BC also seeks to connect schools with local growers and improve food security, food systems resilience, and Indigenous food sovereignty. While planners support various place-based food interventions,[2] it is not immediately clear how planners can play a role in connecting the loop between food producers and schools.

At the Food Systems Lab, we explored how planners can help scale up school food programs and local food procurement to create "win-win" opportunities for local farmers and traditional food providers, educators, children, and their families, particularly for farmers in B.C.'s Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), and other producers. The B.C. Finance Minister's most recent commitment of $214 million dollars in funding over three years for school lunch programs in partnership with the Feed BC program,[3] has the potential to create new economic development planning opportunities that can strengthen farmland preservation for food production.

In this article, we will share lessons learned from three projects highlighting the important contribution of farm-to-school food programming and planners' roles in supporting local food systems resilience.

LOCAL FOOD AND FARMING CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS

To support local food procurement for school, there needs to be the capacity for the local food systems in B.C. to supply and provide the ingredients for school meals. Moreover, there is a need to gauge farmers' interest in tailoring their operation to fit with the diverse needs of schools in the province and to participate in the program. To understand the local food and farming capacity, we conducted a study to understand the feasibility of scaling up farm-to-school local food procurement programs. This particular study feeds into the overall priorities for the Feed BC, Grow BC, and Buy BC programs, and identifies potential barriers to strengthen economic development opportunities and alternative markets for farmers who are located in the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). Planners in B.C. have played an important role in farmland preservation through the establishment of the ALR in 1973, a provincial designation whereby agriculture has been identified as the priority use and non-agricultural uses are restricted.[4] However, farmland protection alone is insufficient, as there is also a need for an 'agriculture first' agenda for the ALR. Currently, half of the zoned ALR is not being used for agriculture,[5] and in 2023, 150 acres of Richmond farmland have been removed from the ALR to support a landfill recycling operation.[6]

Understanding what is needed in the agricultural context to scale up school food procurement in the province is critical. We engaged with farmers and food growers, planners, educators, policymakers, and non-profit administrators who support school food programs. The participants identified the main barriers and opportunities to scaling up local food to school procurement, and provided key insights on how planners can support local food procurement for schools. Some of the planning barriers identified by the interviewees include:

1. Outdated and inaccessible planning processes and policies;
2. Inadequate regional food infrastructure, transportation, and post-production/processing facilities;
3. Gaps in communication between different stakeholders; and
4. Expensive land and farming costs.

One farmer in our study, for example, noted how infrastructure such as food hubs (a place where farmers can send foods to be processed and where food can be aggregated, packaged, and distributed) should be on public land and publicly supported: "When it comes to the actual physical location, food hubs really should not be paying rent. … This needs to be public land and it needs to be publicly funded, because this is a community asset that we're building."

PLANNING FOR INFRASTRUCTURE AND CROSS-SECTORAL NETWORKS

Our team also organized four focus groups/workshops to bring diverse stakeholders together in urban, rural and remote areas of B.C. to identify ways that schools can better integrate local foods into school food programs. The first focus group was focused on identifying key issues around policy, infrastructure, and funding. A problem tree and solutions tree analysis was used to identify root causes for the problem and identify solutions. At the second workshop, an agri-food aggregator was identified as a key food infrastructure that planners should explore to support the local food system (see Figure 1).

We found that there is low availability of local food to meet the demand from school food programs, with one of the key reasons being the lack of infrastructure to support local food supply chains,[7] also known as the "infrastructure of the middle". "Infrastructure of the middle" refers to

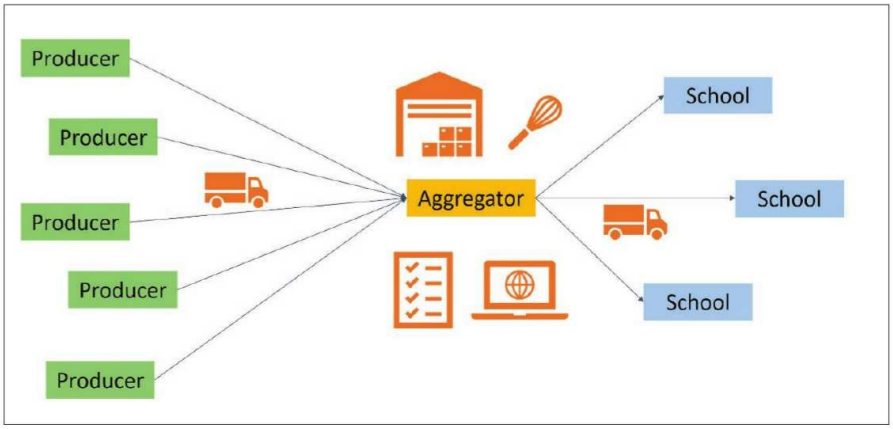

Figure 1: Generic School Food Program Aggregator Model

The author teaches food literacy to a school group. Photo by SFU.

the resources, facilities, and networks that create a critical mass, enabling alternative food producers to meet the needs of high-volume, high-profile food service clients, especially public sector institutions.[8] An aggregator or a food hub is a great example of an "infrastructure of the middle" as it can help with connecting all of the disparate systems and support both farmers and those managing procurement in schools. Food aggregation can take the form of primary aggregators, which combine products from multiple sources and markets to buyers, value-added food aggregation (food processing, storage, and product development), or distribution, marketing, and sales aggregation.[9] Further strengthening the importance of aggregation, one stakeholder noted the need to strengthen food distribution infrastructure: "...not everywhere has these kinds of warehouses or collective spaces where farmers are coming together as a distribution hub. Perhaps there needs to be infrastructure, either that is championed by a school district or by a collection of farmers that allows for that kind of amalgamation of food across different farmers."

SCHOOL FOOD AND FOOD SYSTEMS RESILIENCE

Finally, our team focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school food programs and the numerous challenges the pandemic posed for their continuance. Within schools in B.C., particularly when the schools had to close or needed to limit their operations, school food programs had to adapt to disruptions caused by the pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the need to consider school food programming as an essential service as the meal programs offered by schools provide much needed support for children's nutrition, health, and well-being. Understanding how public spaces that offer food, like schools, responded to pandemic restrictions is critical in order to prepare for future emergencies and to improve both food security and food systems resilience. In an emergency, school infrastructure can also act as community hubs, as they are embedded within neighbourhoods, with spaces often available for growing food, cooking food, and distributing food not only for children but also for their families. We engaged with coordinators of food centres/food hubs, school food champions and non-profit organizations, school district staff, and relevant policymakers to gain lessons learned.

Food systems resilience during disruptive events, such as natural disasters caused by climate change, earthquakes, and pandemics, requires an understanding of the nature of emergencies, the importance of establishing relationships with key actors, and addressing systemic causes of inequalities in food systems.[10] Many of the schools in our study pivoted from feeding not only the one child, but also supporting their families: "So where we used to feed, you know, that child in that classroom, it obviously isn't right to just go 'Oh, so you know, we know there's one child that needs food in your family,' and you remember only sending food for the one child, that's part

of what drove us to say, we got to give more when a family comes to pick up food, this isn't just about feeding that one kid, it's about the family."

Planners can help strengthen local food capacity through better food infrastructure and support collaboration between food systems stakeholders in school food programs. These interventions include, but are not limited to:

1. Supporting the establishment of place-based local food infrastructure via a bioregional approach (food hubs, food processing, aggregators, etc.);
2. Connecting relevant stakeholders and fostering collaboration through community engagement to identify common aspirations and goals;
3. Implementing regulatory instruments to prevent speculation of farmland;
4. Undertaking a community food assessment or food asset mapping to obtain a baseline to prepare for emergencies and support food systems resilience; and
5. Supporting ALR reform by better connecting farmland preservation with economic development opportunities such as school food programming.

As momentum continues to grow with the establishment of a national school food policy, and with provincial governments such as B.C. taking active leadership in funding, there are opportunities for planners and food systems planning to contribute to this emerging priority.

The projects noted above illustrate the importance of recognizing schools as a critical community food asset and the need to work towards better policies and guidance to support a local food ecosystem that will enable food producers, educators, children, and communities to thrive.

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Seedlings grown by a classroom. Photo by Tammara Soma.