

BEYOND THE PLATE

Youth perspectives on
school food programs in BC



McCreary
Centre Society

Youth health • Youth research • Youth engagement

McCreary Centre Society is located on the ancestral, traditional, and unceded territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the xwməθkwəy'əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səl'ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tseil-Waututh) Nations. We also acknowledge the ancestral and continuing connection to this land of the Métis Nation.

Beyond the plate:

Youth perspectives on school food programs in BC



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Fall 2023, McCreary Centre Society (McCreary) was commissioned by the Public Health Association of BC (PHABC) to gather youth perspectives on school food programs in BC, as part of a larger project to advance healthy, student-centred school food programs in BC and Canada.

McCreary trained and supported a team of 37 youth facilitators to host 25 conversations with their peers to better understand how youth feel about current school food programs, and to gather their suggestions for any ways that these could be improved. McCreary staff facilitated an additional 10 conversations. In total, the conversations engaged 256 Grade 7–12 students from diverse backgrounds and communities, including urban, rural, and Indigenous communities across BC. These conversations highlighted examples of successful school food programs, and identified areas where improvements could be made.

Students frequently praised school food programs that offered a variety of nutritious and balanced meals, as well as some treat foods. Many students also appreciated the culturally diverse food options that reflected the diversity of their school's student population. Indigenous youth particularly appreciated programs that incorporate traditional foods, and taught traditional practices in food gathering and preparation. Schools that involved students in the food programs, such as in the preparation of meals, were also highlighted as they fostered a sense of ownership and empowerment for students, and provided opportunities for students to learn important life and work skills.

Youth also offered their recommendations on how schools could improve their food programs. These included:

- Provide balanced and nutritious meals, focused mainly on whole foods.
- Enhance the variety of food and menu options.
- Regularly incorporate authentic, culturally diverse foods.
- Ensure access to traditional foods and gathering practices for Indigenous youth.
- Allow for choice and autonomy.
- Ensure students have enough time to eat meals
- Reduce stigma and barriers for students to participate in school food programs.
- Provide opportunities for student engagement and input.
- Improve eating area conditions and layout.

This report highlights the value of youth engagement in discussions about school food in BC. It is hoped that the input provided by students can assist school food programs to better meet the specific dietary needs and preferences of the students they are serving, as well as offer students opportunities for connection, education, and skill development through those programs.

INTRODUCTION

Background

In February 2023, the BC Government announced the Feeding Futures program, an investment of \$214 million over three years for school districts across the province to build or expand school food programs (BC Ministry of Finance, 2023). The Feeding Futures program aims to ensure students have access to local, nutritious food at school.

This initiative is timely. Findings from the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) completed by 38,500 students in Grades 7 through 12 showed that the percentage who ate fruit, vegetables, and salad was the lowest in 15 years. Also during this time, there was an increase in eating sweets, fast food, and drinking energy drinks. The percentage of youth who ate breakfast on school days decreased from five years earlier, as did the percentage who got their breakfast at school while the percentage who went to bed hungry because of a lack of food at home increased slightly. However, BC AHS results also show that BC youth who had access to healthy, nutritious, and regular meals were more likely to report positive physical and mental well-being (Smith et al., in press).

Considering these findings and the rising cost of living across the province, school food programs play an increasingly important role in promoting positive health and well-being and lessening the burden of food insecurity for youth and families in BC.

Youth Health Ambassadors represented the diversity of youth in BC and included those from rural, remote, and urban communities in each of the province's five regions (North, Interior, Vancouver Island, Fraser and Vancouver Coastal).

Project description

The BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food (BC-CHSF) sought to meaningfully engage youth in conversations about school food in BC through a two-phased project:

Phase 1: Led by McCreary

McCreary hired, trained and supported a diverse team of 37 Youth Health Ambassadors (YHA) ages 12 to 18 to host conversations about school food with their peers.

The YHA were also trained to map the physical space and experience of their school's eating area, and to conduct brief interviews with school staff and administrators to gather their perspectives on school food. Data from these conversations, interviews, and activities was analyzed, and the key themes and recommendations are shared in this report. These conversations were completed between October and December 2023.

In addition to their peer engagement work, the YHA worked together to create a youth-friendly version of the Coalition for Healthy School Food (CHSF) Guiding Principles for school food programs. The youth-friendly adaptation of the guiding principles can be used to engage young people in conversation about school food (see Appendix for more details). They also discussed as a group the food skills and knowledge they felt were important for youth their age to learn (see Food literacy section on page 39 for more details).

Phase 2: To be led by City Hive

The YHA have the option to continue to the second phase of the project, to be conducted by CityHive, who will provide capacity building and training on civic engagement. During this phase of the project, the youth will review the findings from Phase 1, and identify an issue, concern, or area they want to address. The youth will be supported to present their ideas to decision makers at the school and school district levels.

Phase 1 Project activities

YHA peer to peer conversations

YHA hosted 25 conversations with 154 youth across BC. Each conversation lasted about one hour, with an average group size of 5 to 7. They hosted conversations with their peers in school and through extracurricular clubs and activities. Most conversations had one YHA facilitator, but about a third of the conversations were co-facilitated by teams of YHA.

Each conversation began with a round of introductions and a brief icebreaker question. The YHA then shared information about the project, and confirmed participants were agreeable to continue the conversation. The YHA explained that participation was voluntary, and that information collected during the conversation would be shared anonymously and confidentially in a final report. The participants were provided an opportunity to ask questions before beginning the activities.

The conversations included three activities to gather youth perspectives on existing school food programs and their ideas for the future of school food in BC.

1

Participants were asked to reflect on what they liked and what they wished was different about their current school food programs. The youth were prompted to think about the food available at their school, the physical space where students eat, and the experience of accessing food programs.

2

Participants designed an 'ideal' school food program based on the CHSF Guiding Principles (See Appendix to read the YHA's youth-friendly version of the Principles). Question prompts included 'what would the food look and taste like?' and 'what would the space where students eat be like?'.

3

Participants were asked to draw and describe an enjoyable, nutritious, satisfying meal.

Following the conversation, participants were invited to complete a confidential, anonymous, and voluntary 7-question survey. The survey gathered basic demographic information, any dietary requirements, and provided an opportunity for participants to share any additional information.

Optional YHA activities

YHA also had the opportunity to complete two optional activities.

The first activity involved observing and mapping their school mealtime, including recording the physical spaces where students get and eat food, as well as the experience of being and eating in those spaces.

The second activity was to interview a school staff or administrator to gather their perspectives on the current food program and eating space in their school, including what they liked and what they wished was different. The YHA also asked what the adults felt was the biggest barrier to making change, and how they would like to see students involved in the food program moving forward.

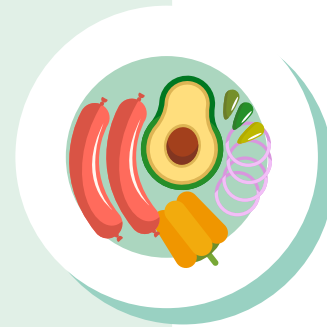
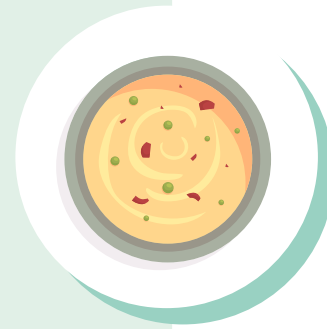
Images and notes from the school mapping activity are included throughout this report. Notes from the staff interviews are shared separately.

McCreary staff facilitated conversations

To ensure representations of youth voices from parts of the province where there were no YHA, McCreary staff hosted a further 10 conversations. The conversations followed the same format as the youth-led conversations.

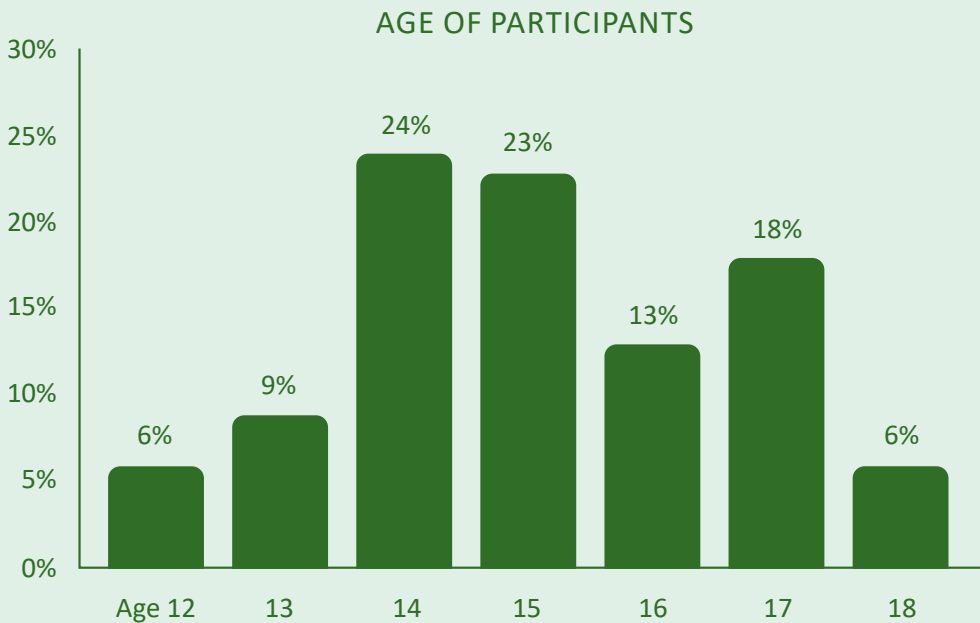
Limitations

While significant efforts were made to ensure conversation participants represented the diversity of the province, information included in this report is not necessarily representative of the experiences and perspectives of all youth in BC. For example, there was greater representation of YHA from urban communities than from rural and remote communities. Also, some YHA had to adapt their conversations to meet the needs of the group, such as hosting conversations online or splitting up a conversation into multiple shorter sessions. It is unknown if these changes impacted youth participation and responses.



Conversation participants

The 256 conversation participants ranged in age from 12 -19. Over half of participants were age 14 or 15. Conversation participants were attending schools in the Northwest, Okanagan, Fraser North, Fraser South, Richmond, Vancouver, North Shore/Coast Mountains, and South Vancouver Island areas.



Across all conversations, 59% of participants identified as female, 34% as male, and 7% as non-binary. Youth participants represented diverse backgrounds, and the most common background identified was European. One in ten youth who participated identified as Indigenous.

| FAMILY BACKGROUND | |
|-------------------|-----|
| European | 24% |
| East Asian | 21% |
| Southeast Asian | 17% |
| South Asian | 13% |
| Indigenous | 10% |
| Middle Eastern | 7% |
| Latin American | 4% |
| African | 3% |
| Caribbean | 1% |
| Other | 1% |
| Don't know | 4% |

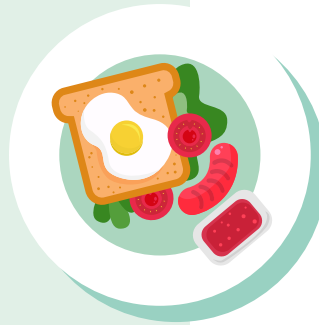
Note: Youth could mark all that applied.

Youth were asked whether they had any dietary requirements, such as food allergies or eating specific diets. About one quarter of youth (24%) reported having specific dietary requirements. When asked to specify, the most common responses included lactose intolerance, following a halal diet, food allergies (e.g., wheat), and vegetarianism. A small number of youth reported having textural sensitivities related to food.

Youth who completed a survey, were asked if there was anything they wanted to share that they had not discussed in the focus group or survey. Many of those who commented shared their appreciation for the opportunity to provide their opinions, and hoped their input would make positive change in school food in BC.



*"Thank you!
I had fun!"*



*"Thank you
for asking our
opinions."*



*"Our school is in
desperate need of a
larger space for people
to eat and/or buy food
and I would love to see
some change from this
conversation made
towards this goal!"*

*"Please add cafeterias
to elementary
schools or at least let
people from one class
eat with the other."*

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON CURRENT SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS

Students were asked to share what they liked and what they wished was different about the food currently available in their school, and the places where students eat meals. They were prompted to think about no cost programs, as well as food for purchase programs (e.g., breakfast programs, cafeteria meals, and snacks or produce programs).

Variety and choice of food

Across all conversations, youth reported liking the variety of food currently available at their school. This includes having a wide range of food choices, choice in the size and type of meal, and different options for where to get food.

Youth really appreciated that schools offered a variety of different foods each day, and that food offerings changed day-to-day. Some youth mentioned that this variety allowed them to enjoy food they were familiar with, as well as to try new foods they may not eat at home.

"I like the variety of options for lunches. Lots of different kinds of foods."

"Variety. It's the spice of life."

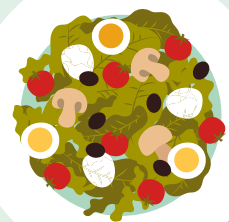
"The food is changed every single day → food variety."

"I like that the food in cafeteria has a wide selection to pick from."

"Try all different kinds of foods → allows to try new foods."



Youth also appreciated having a variety of options to meet different tastes and dietary needs, including ways to customize meals based on their personal preferences. They gave examples of schools offering vegetarian options, halal meals, and foods that were safe for students with certain allergies.



"They do 3 different types of chili - one regular one, one spicy one and one veggie one, so everyone can have it."

"Our school has a variety of options → vegetarian, dietary restrictions."

"Has options for people who are vegan/vegetarian and can't eat certain meats."

"Pizza where you can build your own and add the ingredients."

Students who reported being too busy during lunch time to sit down and enjoy a full meal (e.g., because they were studying or meeting with school clubs), and those who wanted to supplement their packed lunch appreciated that their school provided options for small or large meals, hot or cold meals, and for grab-and-go items. This includes being able to purchase these items at a cafeteria, school café/store, or vending machine. At one school, students liked that there were six to eight different food stations serving a variety of hot and cold food.

"Shorter orders, mains and desserts → they have meals if you want a small snack, or a bigger meal or something sweet."

"I appreciate the vending machine when I need a quick snack."

"The school store offers a good alternative to vending machines for snacks, drinks and baked good, somewhat affordable, although it isn't open outside of lunch."



Even in schools with limited daily food options (e.g., pizza for purchase a few days per week, granola bars available in classrooms), students still identified liking the 'variety' of having more than one type of pizza or granola bars.



"At least there are options with pizza."

"I like that there's many choices of juice flavours."

"I like that we can get different granola bars in [my teacher's] class."

"We have different snacks and fruit near the office."

Despite an appreciation for the variety of food options available, many youth wished that more healthy choices were available in their cafeteria, in vending machines, and at school stores. For example, while many youth noted liking items like pizza, chicken strips, and fries, they also wanted more fruit and vegetables (cooked and fresh), more lean protein, and other whole foods like rice and quinoa.



“School rarely or even never have dishes w/ fruits included: easy way to prepare and to provide nutrition.”

“Wish the caf sold more different fruits (not just apples, oranges, bananas) rather than just desserts.”

“I wish that there were different varieties of foods like rice bowls and a salad bar and fruit parfaits.”

“[Wish] we had a variety of foods and not just the same things every day.”

“We don’t have many options for lunch (only pizza).”

“I do prefer a healthier diet with lots of fresh food.”

“Wish for various food types: beginning to get boring + not amusing, having certain meals over and over again (salad w/ pasta, pizza w/ fries, etc.)”

“More fresh food would be nice + healthier options.”

Some youth wished there were more options for those with dietary needs or restrictions, such as vegan, vegetarian, and gluten-free diets. One student noted that many students have braces, so wished school food programs would offer at least one item that was soft but nutritious.

“More vegan/vegetarian option would be good to accommodate people with dietary restrictions and for less waste/sustainability.”

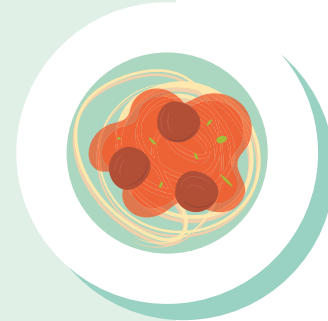
“At least one option of softer food for people who have braces → when braces are tightened it hurts to eat and there is no options for soft food.”

Finally, while many youth liked the convenience of having different places to buy food, others reported challenges with some of these options. For example, they reported vending machines were expensive and often broken; school stores were only open during lunch hours; some schools did not have a cafeteria and/or had very limited or no hot lunch options.

“The selection of the food in the vending machine is terrible, nothing nutritious or substantial at all.”

“I would like a cafeteria where you could buy your own food.”

“Vending machines are overpriced and low options → also prone to jamming, tech malfunction.”



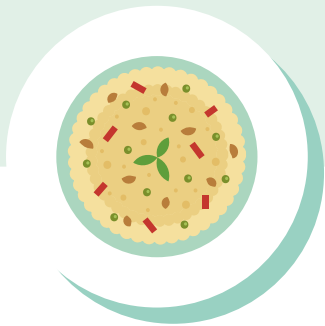
Cultural diversity

When sharing the foods they liked at their school food program, many youth indicated liking a range of culturally diverse foods, with specific mentions of Mexican (e.g., tacos, burritos), Indian (e.g., curries), and Asian (e.g., stir fries, noodles) cuisines. A few thought their schools provided a good variety of culturally diverse foods and meals.

“Very culturally diverse → have many options from a bunch of cultures.”

However, many youth also noted the need for more authentic culturally diverse food. They noted that many of the culturally diverse meals that are offered do not taste authentic. One youth noted that this felt *“disrespectful.”*

Students from diverse backgrounds wanted meals from their culture, that were similar to those they ate at home. Some students also wanted opportunities to try foods from different cultures.



“Want not white-washed sushi/or other cultural foods.”

“Chinese food is not made properly (more diverse cultures).”

“More cultural food should be incorporated, rather than just serving the basic pizza, pasta, chicken w/ garlic bread.”

“Ethnic foods aren’t always made well and is disrespectful and just gross.”

“Study more about other cultural foods before making → more culturally authentic.”

“[We] want more foods like [we] get at home...things from [our] culture or atmosphere.”

“I am a very picky person when it comes to food because the taste palate here is so different from the Filipino palate when it comes to my likes and dislikes.”

“The food tastes and smells like home which is good.”

“I want more meals like dinner meals.”

Types of food available

When reviewing food programs at their school, youth commonly noted liking fast food and sweets such as pizza, fries, and cookies. However, a greater number reported liking healthier foods like yogurt, fresh fruit, and balanced and nutritious meals like chicken, tofu curry, vegetable Bolognese, and tacos.

"I like the meals that provide lots of vegetables."

"My favourite is the bean burritos from the school cafeteria."

"Fruit kabobs at the front office."

"The yogurt. I like the berry flavour + the granola bits mixed with the yogurt."

"You can make your own sandwiches e.g., ham and turkey, and add dill mayo, lettuce, tomato, salt and pepper, cheese and mustard."

Regardless of the specific foods they liked, youth frequently described liking food that was fresh, felt nutritious, and tasted homecooked, or like food they would eat at home. Similarly, the kinds of foods they wished were more readily available at school included hot meals, fresh food (e.g., fresh fruits and vegetables, meals made with 'fresh' ingredients), and meals that had a balance of food groups (e.g., meals that provide vegetables and/or salad, a lean protein, and a whole grain).

A few youth suggested some processed foods could be replaced with more natural versions (e.g., replacing margarine with real butter).

"They use too much margarine."

"Need more flavour, more seasoning, more salt."

"They need to serve better rice. It's too dry."



Plating and presentation

Youth appreciated when their school provided non-disposable plates and metal cutlery. One youth said that eating off non-disposable plates felt like eating at home, which helped them feel like they were eating a real meal. At one school, students were responsible for cleaning and putting these dishes away after their meal. One youth shared that this helped students feel a sense of responsibility and it built trust with school staff and administration.

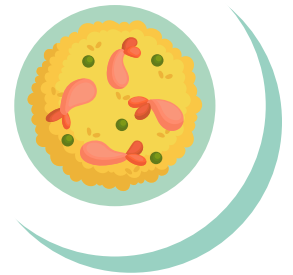
Youth who had to use paper plates and plastic cutlery did not like these. They felt that these utensils were not environmentally friendly, and were difficult to use because the cutlery often broke and the plates got soggy. They wished their school provided porcelain plates and metal cutlery.

"We get to eat off dishes [as opposed to paper plates, etc.], and then clean and put them away. It shows they trust us to learn responsibility."

"Plastic utensils broke when eating."

"Give me a real plate!!!"

"Don't like: Students have to eat off paper plates."



A few youth wanted containers and utensils to take food to go, for example, if they wanted to study elsewhere in the school.

Youth also wished the meals could be presented in a more visually appealing way, particularly individual, pre-plated dishes, and food in serving trays.

"Food presentation and organization, [I would like to see] dry and wet foods separate and not mixed together and making it sloppy."

"The presentation of food is not good, sometimes smashed even though food itself can be good."



A few youth suggested having full ingredient lists provided in the cafeteria, to help youth make informed choices and to help those with allergies and dietary restrictions feel safer.

"I wish there was a list detailing the ingredients used for a cafeteria item."



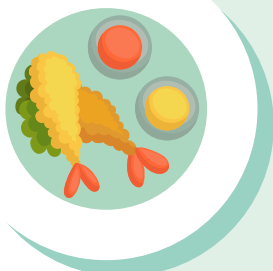
Food safety

Many youth raised concerns about food hygiene and safety. Examples included having found hair in their food, being served food past its best before date, and having had food poisoning which they attributed to the school food.



"Quality control of food. Sometimes it's not cooked properly and I am nervous it will make me sick."

"The salad is rubbish, there are bugs and the lettuce is moldy and rotten."



"My friends do not like the food at our school because it makes some weary of our safety protocols because one of them got food poisoning once."

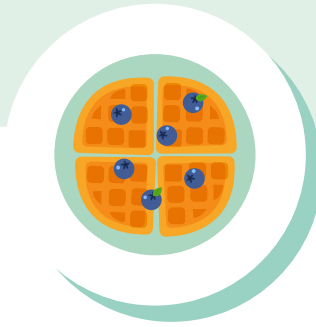
"I don't like how there is hair in my food sometimes."



Breakfast programs

Youth who had access to breakfast programs felt these were valuable for low-income students, as well as for those who just wanted some additional food in the morning. Many of these programs provide 'self-serve' breakfast options, like fruit, yogurt, granola, and toast. They liked that they had the autonomy to take what they wanted, and felt comfortable and welcome in accessing this food.

For a few youth, the breakfast programs were also a chance to connect with school staff outside of class. They appreciated having staff help them with getting food, but also liked seeing a friendly face in the morning.



"I like how the breakfast is accessible for everyone (include yogurts, granola bars, and fruit)."

"Breakfast club: food that is free that is set up at a table and available for anyone to get a healthy meal in the morning."

"[My teacher] is usually at breakfast and says hi and jokes with me."

"The people giving us food in the morning is a bit beyond the best before date but still nice."

"I like the breakfast club that gives breakfast to students who didn't have breakfast or students who just want to eat it."

"The Breakfast Club serves free breakfast to anyone who wants it. The program is great with lots of options and friendly staff and teachers helping serve you."

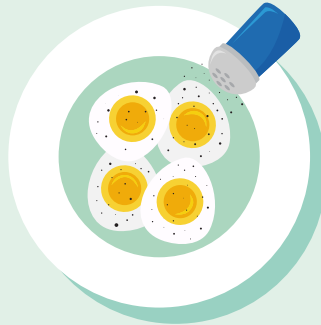
"I like the free food at breakfast club!"

Most of the comments about breakfast programs were positive. However, a few students felt the breakfast program at their school ended too early, which meant that students who were late for school did not have time to get breakfast. One noted that students who are running late may be the ones who need a free breakfast most, for example if they slept in and did not have time to eat at home.

"I love the morning breakfast but I wish it was til 8:30 (or 8:25) not 8:20."

Affordability

Students commented on how the cost of school food is a barrier for many students. They appreciated when food was affordable or provided at no-cost, and was still of good quality.



"I like the fact that there are so many options for professional level food and that all the food is set at a reasonably cheap price."

"Once every year we get free pancakes."

"Reasonable prices (affordable for some)."

"There's free food at the end of the school year, everyone can get free meal."

"It is all free and there are hot lunches."

"I like that food is free in the mornings."

A few students liked that they received a free lunch through school 'lunch cards,' and felt the cards reduced the stigma of getting a free lunch. Lunch cards can be loaded with money or meal vouchers to pay for school meals. This allows students who receive meal vouchers to get free or subsidized meals using the same process (e.g., swiping a lunch card) as all other students.

"I like the lunch cards (you can get free lunch from the caf)."

"Lunch card lets me get free lunch, but not sure if everyone can get one."

Other students did not have such positive experiences of receiving free school meals. For example, one student had to go to a portable classroom at the back of the school to receive a free packed lunch. They felt stigmatized and ashamed and that the school was “*hiding the poor kids*”. They also felt that other students could clearly see which students were going to access the free lunch program. Some students refused to be part of the program for this reason.

Most students noted that school food was too expensive, especially considering the portion size and quality of the food. A few students noted that some food items (e.g., ramen noodles) were more expensive when purchased at school than in stores or markets outside of school, meaning they often left school campus to buy these items.

“I think free breakfast and lunch at school should be accessible to all the students who don’t have money to afford it.”

“Quantity of the food in the cafeteria is small compared to the prices.”

“A lot less expensive → spending \$30/\$40 for one meal.”

“The price of ramen is too high; I rather buy the same one in the gas station.”

“Price is [more] expensive than normal, especially + compare to market outside of school.”

“Food is overpriced and not very nutritious.”

“I have to make my own lunch in the morning and if I am not able to do that I have to wait to eat when school is over.”



Methods of payment for food were a barrier for some students. For example, some school stores only accept cash, and other schools have vending machines that only accept credit cards.

“We’re teens and don’t have credit cards. It’s not a good thing for the schools to be saying, ‘You should get a credit card so you can buy a snack.’”

My school meal map

Draw a map of mealtime at your school, including the food that is available and where students eat meals. Make sure to include notes about what these spaces look, sound, and feel like.

Date: YHA name: Meal start time: Meal end time:

* food option

- Legend
- ① Career center
 - ② Bathrooms
 - ③ Multipurpose room
 - ④ outside seating
 - ⑤ Rampacks
 - ⑥ Foyer
 - ⑦ lending machines
 - ⑧ hallway
 - ⑨ classroom
 - ⑩ foyer
- foyer of the school
 ↳ 3 tables for people to sit at
 ↳ side benches
 ↳ walls
 ↳ speciality sale
 ↳ happy hour (fundraiser)
 ↳ cozy

⑨ classroom
 ↳ chill (usually)
 ↳ depending on the classroom, it may be noisy or quiet
 ↳ feels studious & academic
 ↳ some classrooms have microwaves! (like physics)

⑦ lending machines
 ↳ fundraiser for food bank
 ↳ very overpriced foods
 ↳ tables & chairs (seating)
 ↳ noisy all the time
 ↳ cold sometimes but good place to study

⑧ hallway
 ↳ sitting against the lockers
 ↳ lots of people choose this option
 ↳ crowded during rush times for lockers (loud)



“There are different places for students to eat at my school, like the multipurpose room, classrooms, outside seating, and hallways.”

– YHA, South Vancouver Island

Eating areas

Youth were asked to reflect on what they liked and what they wished was different about where students get and eat food in their school.

Some youth liked that they were allowed to eat almost anywhere in their school, and that school eating areas (e.g., the cafeteria) felt like places where they could socialize with friends.

“No limitation of where we can eat (except library).”

“You can eat anywhere, except the gym!”

“Positive environment → can choose where to eat.”

“Likes: eating in classroom (quiet, relaxing).”

“Eat with others without it feeling too loud in a big space.”

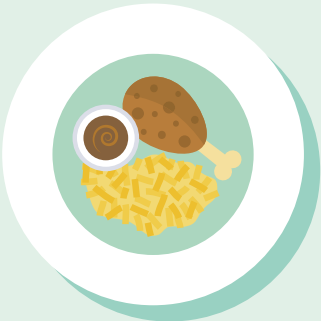
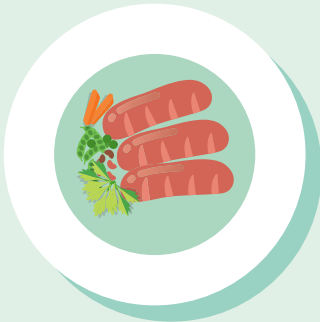


Other youth also shared that their school eating area (e.g., cafeteria) felt dirty and unsanitary. They noted that tables and microwaves were dirty, and hand sanitizer was not available. Many also shared that students often did not clean up after themselves or properly sort waste, recycling, and green bin items, which created a mess at the disposal area and negatively impacted sustainability efforts.

In many of the conversations, youth wanted better queue management in the cafeteria. Many remarked on how poor layout and poor line management contribute to a stressful and disorderly line-up. This often resulted in lines moving so slowly that students did not have time to eat the food they purchase, and of most menu items being sold out by the time some students made it to the front of the line, after others had pushed in.

“At my school, my teacher told the class that the janitor would look at the recycling and if there was plastic/garbage, they would throw the whole thing out. :(“

“Cafeteria unsanitary (messy, dirty, disgusting, cold).“



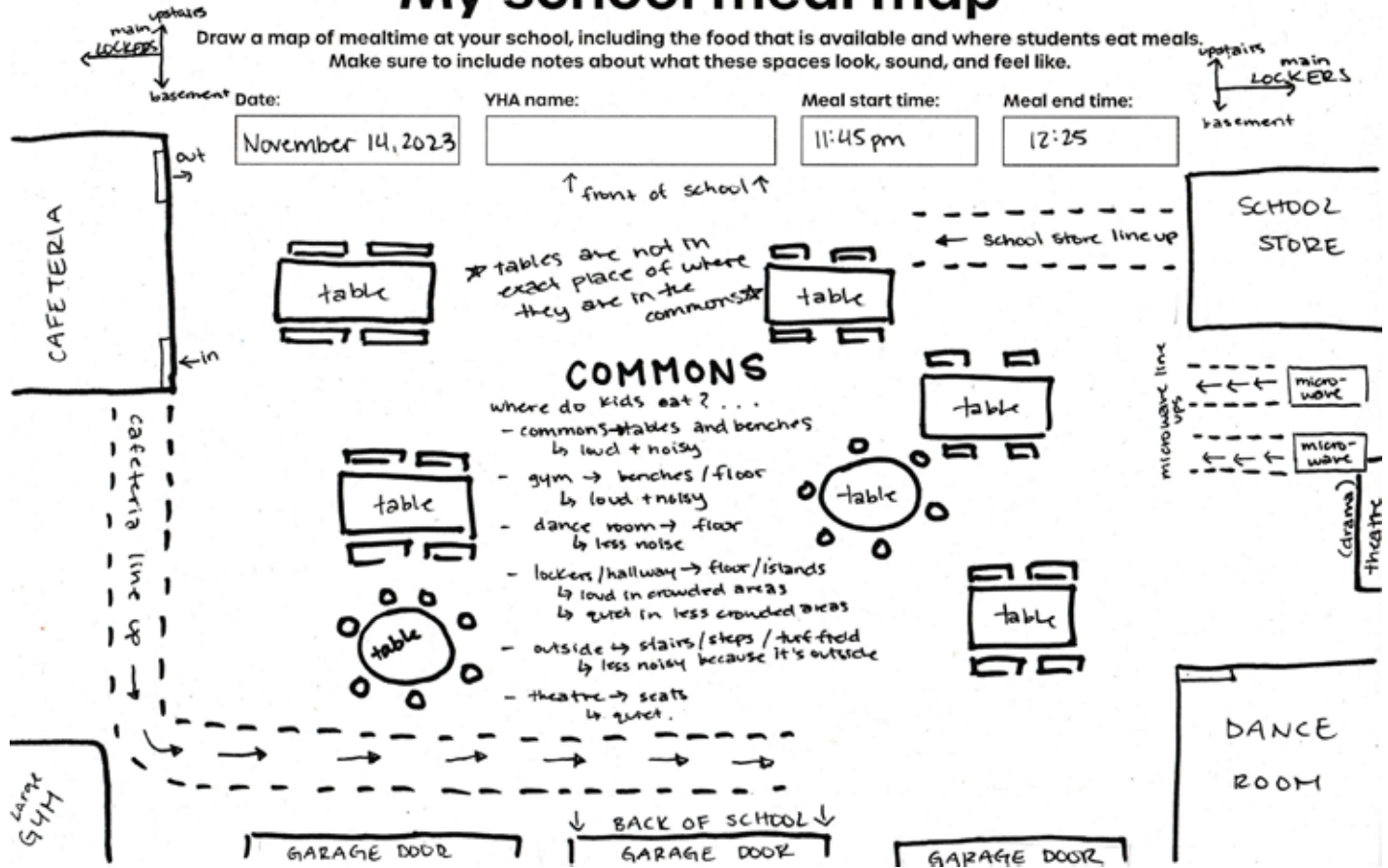
“I wish they could make it so that there are several stations to collect food because most of the time, you have to line up for lunch and if you are too slow, you’ll have to wait in line for 20 or more minutes.“

where students get food: what food is there:

- cafeteria → different meals everyday (rice/chicken/beef, salad...)
- school store → ramen (instant noodles), candy, arizonateca
- vending machines (on each floor) → chips, granola bars, drinks, candy

My school meal map

Draw a map of mealtime at your school, including the food that is available and where students eat meals. Make sure to include notes about what these spaces look, sound, and feel like.



"Long line-ups or the cafeteria, school store, and microwaves. The commons [where the cafeteria, school store, and microwaves are located] is where many students eat and is loud and noisy."

- YHA, Fraser North



"Lunch is too short but the line is too long, it causes students to be late."

"We need a more efficient way to get lunch at the lunch line. The lunch line needs to be more organized."

"There is a big problem at [our] school where the line up is so long people who wait in line don't get food they are waiting for."

"Problems with the lunch line: 2 disorganized lines, people pushing each other, someone might get hurt."

Location of school food programs

A few youth liked when food programs (including breakfast programs and the cafeteria) were available in centralized, accessible areas in the school. They felt this allowed any student to feel welcome to access the program.

“Nice accessible spot in school.”

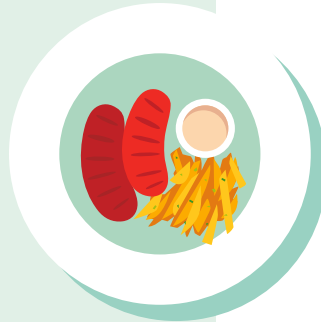
“The Breakfast Club it’s by the main office so you just walk in and get some food.”

Some students found the cafeteria overcrowded and overwhelming and felt there were few other places to eat. In such cases, some were able to eat at outdoor seating or in classrooms, but others reported having to sit on the ground, which they describe as cold, dirty, and embarrassing.

“It is embarrassing to sit on the floor bcuz people walk past in the hallways and look down.”

“Cafeteria is fairly small, not many students can eat there but there are other spaces like classrooms where you can eat and have more private lunches.”

“Eating outside → it’s also good to do that.”



Length of lunch break

Many youth wanted longer lunch breaks, particularly as lunch time is when school clubs meet, and when students might need to study or do homework. They often stated they did not feel they had enough time to purchase and eat a meal, and had to rush their food or skip eating altogether.

"[Lunchtime] isn't long enough sometimes, so you get to take it with you to class."

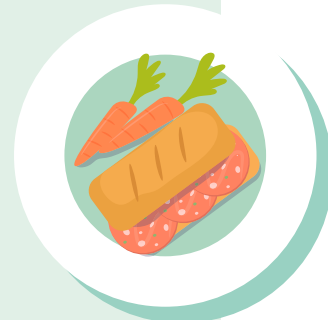
"Lunch needs to be longer to let students eat properly and let them gather their things together for classes."

"I would extend the time for lunch, as many people including me don't have time to eat lunch due to extracurriculars such as clubs."

"Not enough time to finish the food at lunch. They send us out and yell at us to get out. Sometimes I am left hungry and I have to sneak food."

"I wish [I had] more than 15 minutes, because it makes me rush so much."

"My stomach hurts because there's no time to digest the food properly, then I'm doing a physical activity right after :("



Student involvement

Finally, youth shared their thoughts on how students are currently involved in school food programs. Youth in schools that provided students opportunities to participate in food programs, such as by helping to cook meals, often noted that as something they liked.

“The cafeteria food is well cooked by a team of student chefs.”

“I like it’s run by student volunteers.”

“Students make [lunch] once a week. My brother made lunch today.”

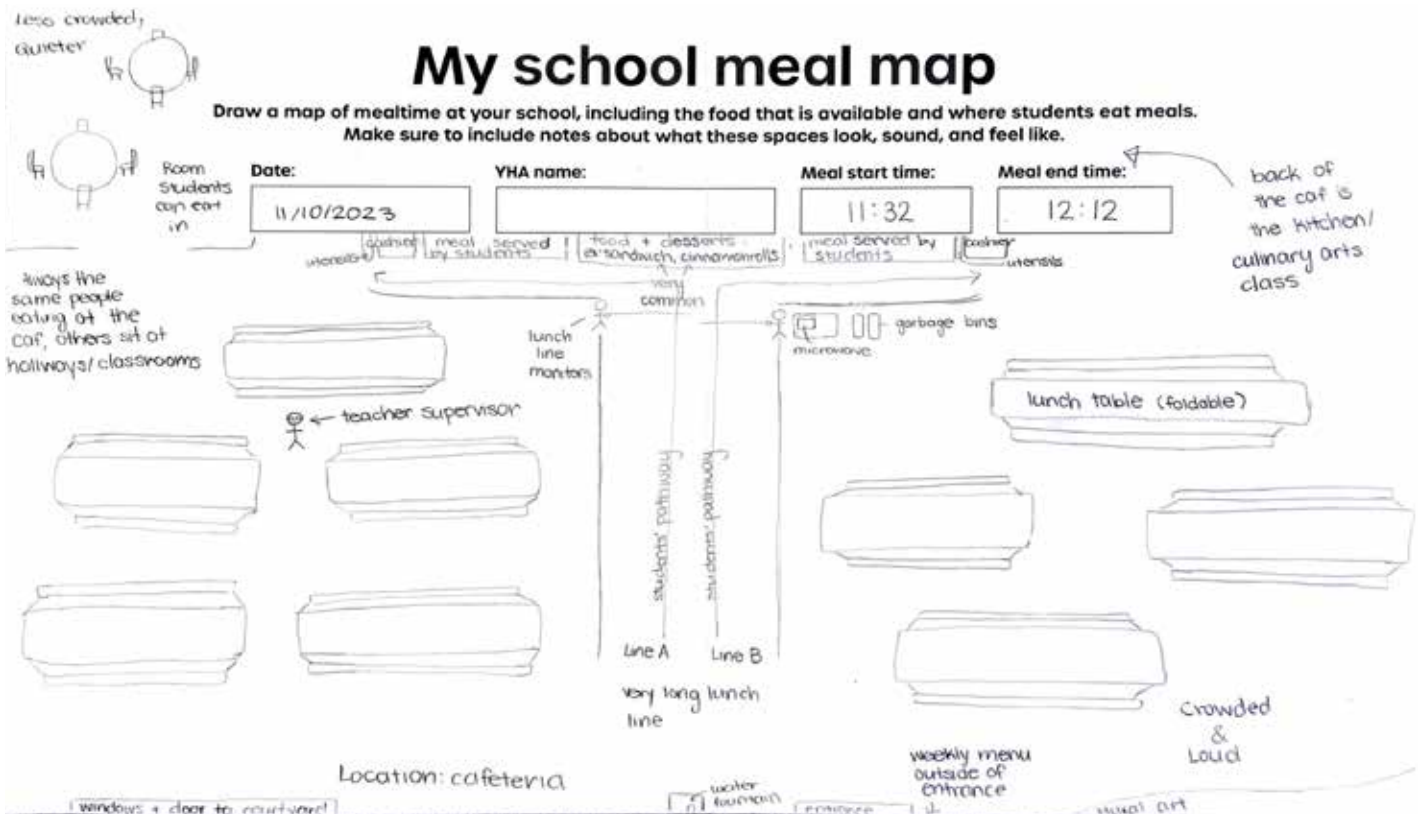
For those who are not provided such opportunities, they frequently shared that they wished they had a voice or a role in their school food program.

“They don’t think about the menu, if the students actually like it or not.”

“Students should be able to have volunteering opportunities in order to support the program and actively make it better.”

My school meal map

Draw a map of mealtime at your school, including the food that is available and where students eat meals. Make sure to include notes about what these spaces look, sound, and feel like.



Map drawn by a YHA in the Vancouver region shows a cafeteria connected to the culinary arts class. At this school, students help cook and serve meals.

Traditional foods and practices for Indigenous youth

McCreary staff facilitated conversations at two schools in predominantly Indigenous communities. In these schools, the food program plays a vital role in supporting the health, well-being, and cultural connection of students.

These schools both have comprehensive school food programs that regularly integrate traditional foods, teachings, and practices, and involve students in every aspect of the program.

For example, one offers students a soup that is traditional to the local Indigenous peoples. This soup was noted as one of their favorite dishes by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Both schools have the facilities, staff support, and curriculum to provide opportunities for students to cook at school. Students in culinary arts classes are actively involved in menu planning, cooking, and serving food.

Students are provided with the tools and teachings, through school staff and Elders, to grow traditional foods in school gardens. Students sow, tend, and harvest the food grown in the gardens, which is then used to supplement the school food programs. Students are also supported to learn and participate in other forms of traditional food gathering, such as fishing. In one school, students can visit a nearby stream where they catch fish that they bring back to the school to cook.

A school administrator at one of these schools explained the importance of food in Indigenous culture, and shared the positive impact of the many food-related programs at the school. A third of the most recent graduating class had gone on to the culinary arts.

The positive impact of these school food programs went beyond those students who were actively involved in running the programs. When students were asked what they would change about the school food program, many students said there was nothing they would change. One student remarked that school should start later so they could also be provided dinner at school.

*“No changes.
It’s really good.”*



*“If school started
later, we could
get our dinner
here too!”*



DESIGNING AN IDEAL SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAM

Youth were asked to design their ideal school food program, including the food that would be offered, what the space would look like, and how students would be involved.

Food and menu items

In their ideal school food program, youth said they would have meals that are nutritious, balanced, and flavourful. They would be able to choose from a variety of freshly made hot meals and grab-and-go items. Both the hot meals and grab-and-go items would include each of the food groups, but some treat foods would also be available (e.g., fries, chicken strips). The meals would change depending on the season, and would feature fresh produce and locally sourced foods, where possible.

"A balanced diet: protein, carbs, and nutritious foods, flavoured foods."



"Hot lunches (lasagna, curry, udon/other Asian noodles)."

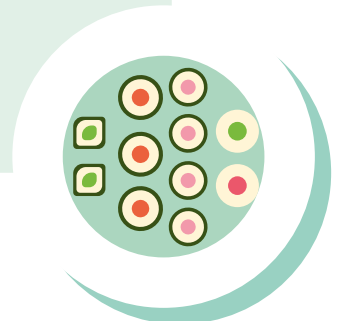
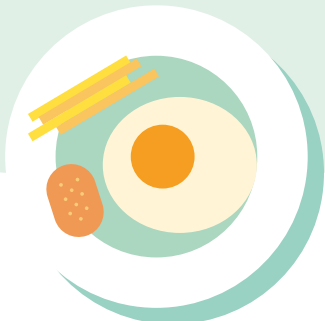
"To-go things (sandwiches, wraps, onigiri, rice foods)."

"Healthier foods touching every food group and crowd pleasers (i.e. chicken, pizza, chips)."

"Fresh/local foods: knowing specifically where it came from."

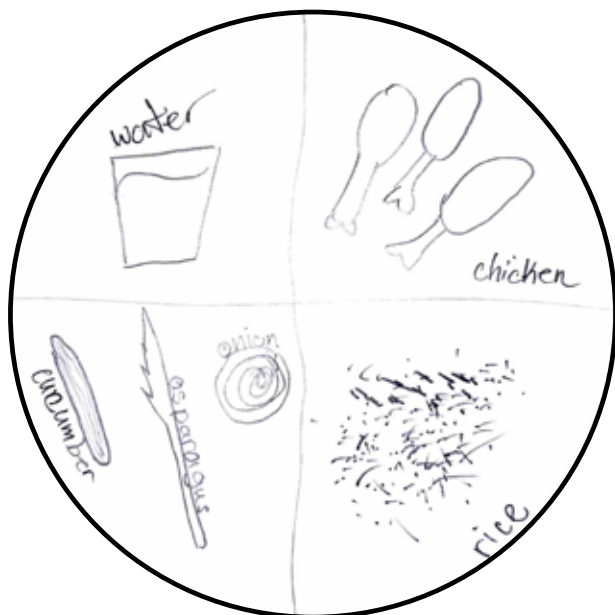
"Options change as the seasons change."

"Food according to the season. Summer → fruit and freezies; winter → soups and hot chocolate."



What's on your plate?

Draw a meal that you like and that you feel is nourishing and satisfying.



"Chicken, rice, and veggies with water. It has protein, carbs, and veggies and it's health and nourishing and tastes good."
 – YHA, Northwest



"All my favourite foods. It has every food type, has fresh fruits and veggies and cooked ones, lots of different protein, and whole grains and carbs to stay full."
 – Youth, Okanagan

More specifically, youth most wanted sushi, fresh fruits and vegetables, and fried chicken. Other ideas included wraps, sandwiches, burgers (beef, chicken, and vegetarian), and pasta dishes.

"SUSHI!!!"

"Fresh salad bar with lots of different vegetables and toppings and dressings."

"Vegetables that are prepared different ways."

"Fruits (fresh cuts): melon, kiwi, strawberry, orange, grapes, pineapple, cucumbers."

"Fried chicken."

"Upgraded mac 'n' cheese with something added, like veggies, chicken, tofu, herbs, etc."

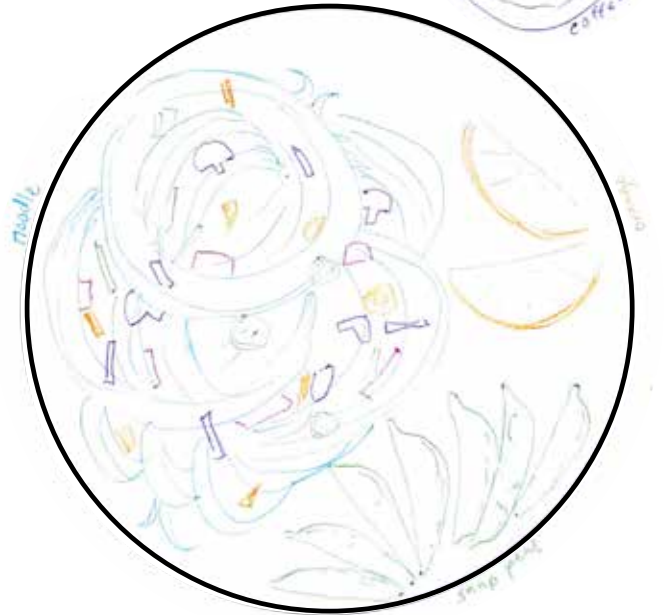
What's on your plate?

Draw a meal that you like and that you feel is nourishing and satisfying.



"I drew an apple, a sandwich, and water as my drink. The bread, meat, and veggies in the sandwich fill me up, and the apple is fresh. I can eat it with my hands, it tastes good, and it is healthy."

– Youth, South Vancouver Island



"Noodles w/ veggies (mushrooms, green onions, carrots), orange slices, snap peas, coffee! Warm drinks are nice, different kinds and textures of veggies make for variety, noodles are satisfying and filling without being greasy or anything, fruits that are juicy and sour feel refreshing at the end."

– Youth, South Vancouver Island

Youth in schools with large Indigenous populations said they would want many of the same food items as above, especially sandwiches, sushi, and burgers. However, their ideal school food program would also include traditional foods and foods popular among Indigenous youth, like bannock tacos.

Menu options would be available for those with dietary restrictions, such as vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, halal, and for those with food allergies. Ingredient lists would be provided for each menu item to help students with specific dietary needs.

"First Nations cultural food."

"I like to eat traditional foods."

"Ingredient lists so I don't have to worry about what I'm eating."



What's on your plate?

Draw a meal that you like and that you feel is nourishing and satisfying.



"Ramen with veggies, noodles, tofu, egg. Many vegetables, textures, flavours. Warm, filling, spicy."
 – Youth, Vancouver



"Indian meal with naan/roti, rice, vegetarian butter paneer, buttermilk/mango lassi. It's filling and energizing because of the spices and veggies and its warm. The lassi is refreshing and helps with the spicy. I grew up eating it."
 – YHA, Fraser North

Ideal school food programs would include authentic culturally diverse food, and students would be able to share family recipes to help schools create these meals. For some youth, culturally diverse food would be showcased on certain special menu days. For others, it would be incorporated regularly.

"Multicultural food days: allows students to eat their traditional foods, new encounter for students who have never taste that particular food."

"More diverse food every day or 1 or 2 times a week."

"Tteokbokki, tonkatsu, takoyaki!"

"Chicken shawarma."

"Students share recipe ideas (how to make cultural foods)."

"Indian chicken and curries, naan, pakora."

"Korean black bean noodles with radish and kimchi."

"More dishes from Vietnam."

Students would be able to choose how much food they want, either through a self-serve system or by choosing between set portion sizes (e.g., small, medium, large). Students would also be able to customize part or all of their meal to meet different tastes and preferences. Some examples include having different toppings for chili or ramen, or being able to create their own rice or grain bowls (e.g., choose grain, vegetables, protein, toppings).



“Taco bar (meat and vegetarian options, different roasted veggies, different salsas and toppings, hard and soft taco shells).”

“Rice/veggie rice bowls with some customization options for protein and toppings.”

“Build your own sandwich or wrap station with different fillings and toppings (variety).”

“Students serve themselves so they can decide how much they want to eat (reducing waste).”

“Food is served in separate buffet trays so students can just pick what they want.”

“Smoothies → build your own.”

“Have different sizes for meals.”

Snacks and sides would also be available, and would include items like fruits and vegetables, yogurt and granola, chips, crackers, and granola bars.

“Sides for every meal, chip bag, apple slices, yogurt cups, etc.”

“Many snack options that have less packaging.”

“Granola bars (variety that changes every week).”

“Pretzels and hummus.”

In their ideal school food program, the food would look colourful, fresh, and appetizing and would be served in a visually appealing way.

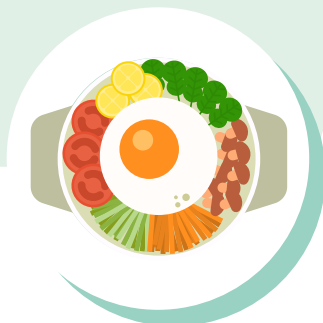
“I want the food to look nice and fresh, not like it’s cold, messy, and thrown together in a couple of seconds.”

“Looks fresh + colourful.”

“Food needs to look good.”

“Nicely presented not just mushed together on a plate.”

“The food should look colourful because bleak looking food sucks.”



What's on your plate?

Draw a meal that you like and that you feel is nourishing and satisfying.

rice/salad bowls



option 1.
more plain=
chicken,
rice lettuce,
peppers
and an oil
based
dressing

option 2.
vegetarian=
tofu,
mango,
avocado,
rice, soy
sauce type
dressing
etc

option 3.
everything
bowl=
lots of
toppings, so
many
veggies
rice, lettuce,
chicken,
beans as
much as
possibles



"Different rice/salad bowls. There's different options for different tastes, fresh and colourful, it's full of whole foods, lots of protein options, lots of veggies. Students can choose what toppings they want." – Youth, North Shore/Coast Garibaldi

Meals would be served on porcelain plates with metal cutlery, and reusable containers would be available for students to take meals away.

"Food is served on real plates with real cutlery (low waste)."

"Sustainable takeout containers (or bring-your-own container program) for students who want to eat elsewhere/take food to go."



Youth wanted mealtime to be enjoyable for students, so their ideal school food program would include special menu items to celebrate certain days (e.g., themed days, spirit days, holidays).

"Themed days: different fun/funny names for meals. For example: movie day and the meal names would be based off movies."

"Hot chocolate with different toppings at Christmas!"

"School spirit themed foods (like cookies with the school mascot on it)."

They would also want occasional visits from food trucks, especially if these trucks offered affordable food options. They wanted local chefs or local restaurants to create special menu items or to visit and lead cooking demonstrations. Youth also wanted visits from local farmers and food producers to share about the local food system.

“Food served by food trucks (maybe a food truck festival at school).”

“Visits/ presentations with local chefs.”

“Somewhat affordable food truck events → like every truck is \$5.”

“Visits from local farmers and animals to know more about the food system.”

After eating, students want to feel nourished, satisfied, and energized. They want to choose the amount and type of food they eat so they feel full, but not so full they feel tired or unable to participate in physical activity.

“Food should keep me full and nourished for the second part of the day.”

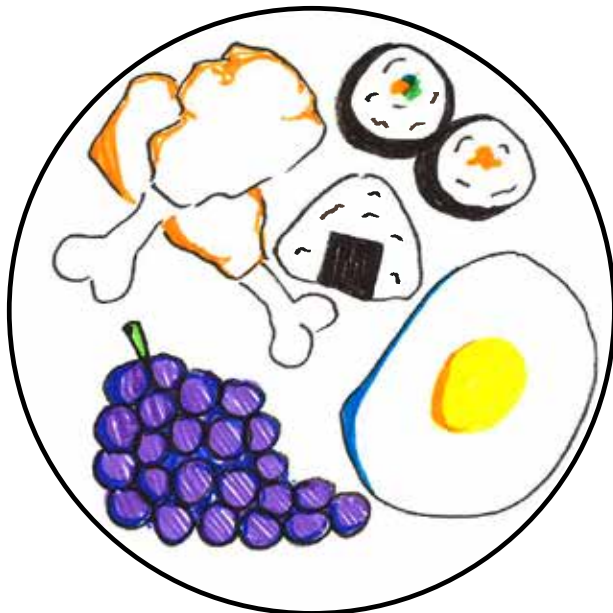
“I have gym after lunch so I wanna be full but don’t wanna to feel sick.”

“Energized and ready for classes.”

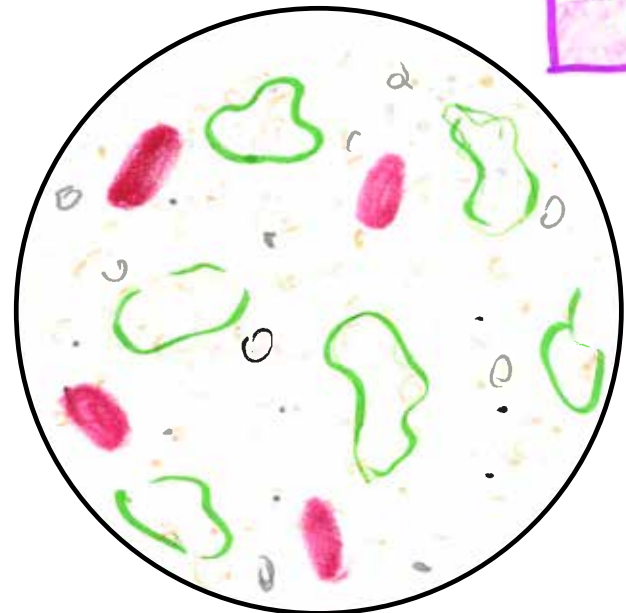
“Perfectly full – not too full or I need a nap.”

What’s on your plate?

Draw a meal that you like and that you feel is nourishing and satisfying.



“Sushi, fried chicken, fried egg, onigiri, grapes. Filling, all food groups in the same dish.” – Youth, Vancouver



“Salad/poké bowl and iced tea. The amount and variety of protein and fresh ingredients like veggies.” – Youth, North Shore/Coast Garibaldi

Eating area

Youth had many ideas for what their ideal school eating area would look, sound, and feel like. Overall, the space would look bright, spacious, and clean, and would be welcoming and comfortable for all students.

In an ideal school food program, no student would have to sit on the ground to eat lunch. There would be enough seating for all students. This would include long tables

for large groups, small tables for groups of two or three, and pods for students who wanted to sit alone. Many youth wanted a café-style space, with circular tables and individual chairs. There would be spaces to meet different needs, such as quiet areas for studying, as well as areas where students felt comfortable talking and having fun with friends.



“Plenty of space, and preferably actual chairs so kids don’t have to be right next to each other.”



“Comfortable and welcoming, lots of space, enough space for everyone to sit.”



“Small and large tables for different size groups.”



“Chairs with an actual back seat, not a bench.”

“Wide open space with enough tables so people don’t have to sit outside or in the halls when it rains. Lots of tables and chairs ready and normal amount of noise but regulated.”

“I would love quiet, small rooms where you can eat and study at the same time. Libraries don’t allow food, and I want somewhere I can study.”

“Big, open and lots of tables like an Ikea restaurant.”

“Bigger and smaller tables, 1–2 per table or 6–8.”

There would also be covered spaces for students to eat outside, which could be used year-round in any weather.

“A way to have seating outside but covered so even when it’s raining you can sit outside and not get wet.”

“Outdoor seating options.”

“More tables inside + outside (with shelter for rain).”

The main cafeteria would be energizing and fun, and would be a space where students could socialize and connect with friends. There would also be areas in the cafeteria or school that are calm and quiet, so students can study or relax quietly while eating lunch.

Youth described an ideal space to eat as bright with windows and natural light. Where there is no natural lighting, there would be soft, warm lighting. The space would be decorated with plants and greenery, as well as murals or art painted by students.

"Lunch is the only time to interact with friends, so I want to feel energized."

"I want it to be energetic but not too much to the point where it's chaotic."

"I want the place where I eat to feel relaxing so I can study 'n' chill."

"Low-sensory areas where students can eat and sit quietly."

"I want the space to feel like a social area where people can talk."

"There are different areas for different sound volumes."

"It's loud but you can hear yourself, and some people may have bad hearing so you also have to be respectful."

"The space makes you feel calm, relaxed, and not stressed. Not too loud to have a headache."

"Bright area, more light (daylight)."

"More murals on walls."

"Good lighting: bright, open space, natural lights."

"Students create art for lunchroom walls."

"Dim lighting (no white bulbs, change the bulb to a warm one), lamps."

"Lots of art on the walls."

"Lots of plants and greenery, and natural light with windows."



The ideal cafeteria would have organized and well-managed lines to purchase food, so the line-ups move quickly and efficiently. The cafeteria would include monitors or signage sharing the menu for the day. Information about menu items would be placed where students order food, as well as throughout the food line, so students can make decisions about their order before arriving to the cashier.

“Well-organized food service system.”

“Well-organized line to reduce rush & noise & clamour when people are purchasing.”

“Have monitors telling you what’s on special and what the caf is out of.”

“Signs in the line-up so kids can pick what they want to eat and don’t spend time figuring it out later and holding the line up.”

“Having menu by the front door instead of around the line.”

The space would be clean and sanitary, and would include stations to sanitize hands and wipes to clean tables. The space would have plenty of garbage, recycling, and compost bins, with clear signage to help students properly dispose of items.

“More hygienic, hand sanitizer station.”

“Clean, sanitary, hygienic.”

“No sticky tables. Wipes or towels to clean them.”

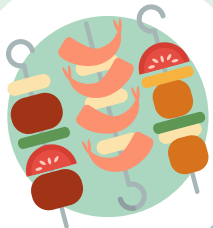
“More visible garbage cans and recycling.”

“Compost and posters to help students use it.”



Student engagement and involvement

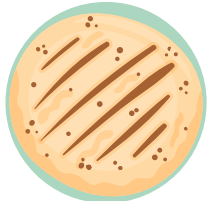
Youth had many ideas for how students should be involved in their ideal school food program. Most wanted schools to administer surveys or provide feedback or suggestion boxes to gather their input on current and future cafeteria menus. They would also want students to be able to vote on menu items, and to be able to taste test items for the menu.



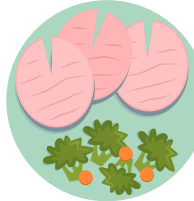
“School should collect feedback for cafeteria foods to know the students’ thoughts and opinions → what should be changed, etc.”

“Food survey for students to vote on what meals they eat each week or month.”

“Student polls on Instagram.”



“Suggestion box or a Google Form so students can give feedback on meals or suggestions for meals. Maybe with a small discount if u do it, so that people actually complete the survey.”



“A drop box where you can give feedback that they actually listen to.”

“Voting system for weekly cafeteria menu.”

“If students have a say in what to eat, then more students will buy/eat the food.”



“Taste testing menu items like Costco samples (to pick new menu items and to decide if they like a food before serving themselves).”

Some students suggested having a club, committee or designated student representatives who could provide youth input into any stakeholder meetings about school food programs.

“Students run school food committee to manage the program. A student committee should pick the meals, deciding how to allocate a daily budget.”

“Student government should have a say in it → meet with the principal.”

Youth also wanted the opportunity to be involved in running the school food program, including helping to cook and serve meals, and to run school cafés. These opportunities would help students learn important life and work skills, like cooking, teamwork, leadership, and entrepreneurial skills.



“Students work in the food program (for money or course credit).”

“Students run café or food program (like a student-led small business).”



“Senior students to be able to serve the food as volunteer hours (including cashier or line monitor).”



“Students that want to cook and serve meals to take courses (learn food safety and sanitation).”



“Students design branding, space, and menu (learn graphic design skills).”



Other youth felt that their ideal school food program would include a school garden to supplement the produce in the program. The garden would be managed by students.

STAFF PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS

YHA interviewed 9 school staff and administrators to gather their perspectives about school food programs. They spoke with teachers (including culinary arts teachers), cafeteria staff, school counsellors, and Vice Principals.

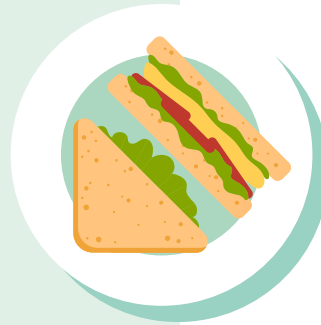
When asked what they thought was working well about their school food program, staff shared that they appreciated the variety of food options available to students. Staff who were directly involved in the school food program were proud of the variety of foods they and the students were making and serving at the school.

They liked that there were different places for students to purchase food, including the cafeteria, school café, and vending machines. They also noted the positive impact of providing free or subsidized meals for students facing food insecurity.

When sharing what they liked about the physical space where students eat, most staff liked that there are designated spaces for students in different classes to connect and socialize. Other staff liked that the cafeteria was a spacious, open area where many students gather. A few staff recognized the importance of having classrooms open for students to sit and eat, especially for those who want a quieter, calmer space.

However, other staff shared that the eating areas get busy and crowded, and many students are unable to find a place to sit. There was generally not enough space for students and staff to move or eat comfortably.

“Free daily food help is great because it helps out families that cannot provide their children with the sufficient amount of food.”



Examples of staff's suggestions for what they would change about the food program at their school included:

"Better system for students to get food. Wait times are too long for students lining up for the cafeteria."

"Better crowd and line management. Lots of students get pushed out of the way while waiting in line for food."

"The supply of food runs out before students can get food, then are left with nothing to eat."

"Giving more variety of food, especially for difference cultures in our school."

"I want students to have more choices in the food they eat."

"I would like to grow more of our own food. I want a big garden, similar to [another local school.]"

"I wish we could work more closely with local farms and local producers."

"More locally sourced food, more foods from local farms."

"More variety of food."

They were asked what they felt was the biggest barrier to making the changes they would like to see. All staff identified limited funding as the main barrier. Other barriers included the volume of teachers and students purchasing food on a daily basis, as this limited the school's capacity to make big changes or try new things; poor planning of food spaces and programs; and improving food programs not being considering a priority. A few staff noted that sometimes students may be resistant to trying new foods or those they perceive to be healthy.

"Have more students involved in making decisions and sharing their voice."

Staff's suggestions for ways they would like to see students more involved in school food programs included:

"More opportunities for students to think about and share recipes."

"Student power to have more challenging recipes."

"Students can learn how to read nutrition facts in order to make healthy choices."

"More students involved in the culinary program."

"Bigger culinary program at our school."

"Student government should have a rep from and for the cafeteria."

"Students can share their feedback on menu items and share ideas for what they would like to see."

"Students can help in making the food."

FOOD LITERACY

Comprehensive school food programs provide opportunities for students to build their food literacy, including the skills and knowledge to grow, prepare, and eat food to promote health and well-being. The BC-CHSF was interested in knowing what food skills and knowledge the YHA wanted to gain, or that they felt were important for youth their age to learn.

YHA all agreed that they were interested in learning about nutrition, including how to read nutrition labels, the nutrients in different food, and how to build a balanced meal. They also want to know how to eat to meet their health goals or needs.

“Finding out how to read nutrition facts in order to make healthy choices.”

“What nutrients do for your body (immune health, bone health, etc.)?”

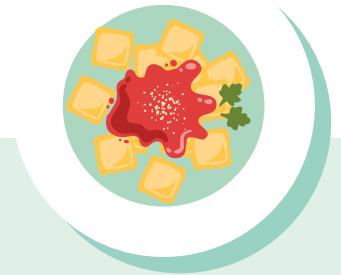
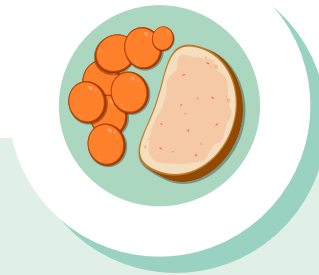
“What sorts of food should you eat to help gain muscles and support yourself if you workout?”

“What kinds of foods or meals are important for girls when they have their period?”

“How much food the average teen should eat a day?”

“How do different vitamins benefit your body – feeling dizzy → need iron → spinach or red meat?”

“How to increase how much protein I’m eating if I’m vegetarian?”



Most YHA wanted to learn to plan, prepare, and cook meals. This included basic cooking skills like how to use a knife or the stove, different methods of cooking (e.g., sautéing), and how to cook basic meals. Some youth specified wanting to learn how to make meals without recipes, and how to flavour food using herbs and spices.

“Knowing how to cut things like dice and [julienne].”

“How to cook chicken so it’s cooked but not dry?”

“How do people know what ingredients go with what to make something taste good (I wish I knew)?”

“Seeing ingredients and being able to make a somewhat complex dish out of that.”

“Which spices complement each other and when should I use them?”

Food safety was another priority for youth. They were interested in learning more about how to prepare and store food safely (e.g., to prevent cross-contamination), and to learn about date labels on food (e.g., the difference between 'best before' and expiration dates).

"What is the required temperature to cook different types of raw meat & fish?"

"[I want to learn] how to properly clean dishes to reduce cross contamination."

"[I want to learn] how to cook food and store food safely (using deep fryer etc.)."



Many of the YHA also wanted to learn about different diets and their impact on well-being and the environment. Some felt there was conflicting information about this, and did not know where to go to get reliable information. They were also interested in learning how to cook and make substitutions to meet different dietary restrictions.

"How do I know which foods I should be eating for the planet and for my health?"

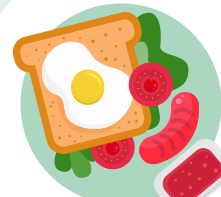
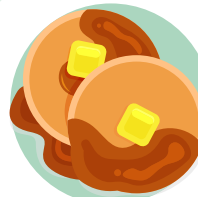
"Are there health benefits or risks by going vegan or vegetarian?"

"What diets are healthy according to specific goals that people want?"

"How to substitute items in the meals for allergies, health reasons or to make it healthier?"

"Is gluten good or bad to eat?"

"What's the difference between organic and non-organic? What's better?"



Most YHA wanted to gain life skills like meal planning and food shopping, including for specific diets or health goals (e.g., food allergies). Many were also interested in learning about budgeting and how to shop for food on a budget, especially while still meeting specific dietary needs or health goals. They also wanted to learn how to buy produce seasonally, and how to tell if fruits and vegetables are ripe.

“Managing monthly finances when buying food + ingredients to cook meals.”

“Money management and how to spend money wise on groceries. And to find proper ingredients.”

“What should be bought brand and what should be bought no name?”

“How to find what food is best to buy. (Price and Quality)”

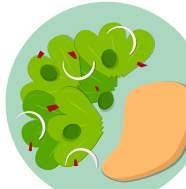
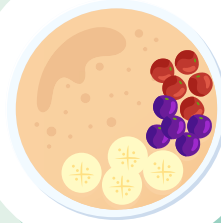
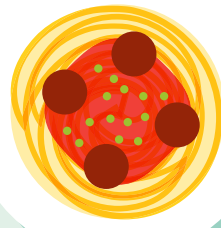
“Learning how to pick good fruit and veggies when picking them in the store.”

“What vegetables / fruits grow in what weather?”

A few YHA were interested in learning how to develop a healthy relationship with food, including how to find a balance between eating for personal health and for enjoyment.

“How do we create a healthy relationship with food?”

“A lot of my friends have [eating disorders] so it would be good to learn how to have a healthy relationship with food to be healthy but balanced.”



Finally, a small number of YHA were curious about foods systems and learning more about agriculture, food production, and food distribution. This included learning about where food comes from (locally and internationally), different approaches to farming (e.g., organic farming, free run vs. free range, how animals are treated), and how grocery stores set prices and manage inventory.

“Knowing where food is imported from.”

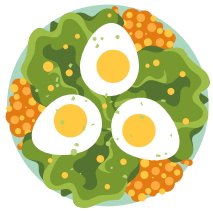
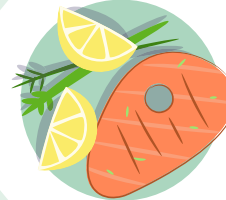
“Being aware about how animals and the land is treated.”

“Doing research on brands and how they get their produce.”

“Why do some grocery stores dictate prices instead of negotiation?”

“How do farmers make profits on some products?”

“What do grocery stores do with leftover fruits and vegetables and how do we reduce waste?”



YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of Phase 1 of the project, the YHA met to discuss the findings from their conversations with youth and staff at their schools, and to identify key themes. Based on those conversations and their own experiences with this project, the YHA developed the following recommendations:

1

PROVIDE BALANCED AND NUTRITIOUS MEALS, FOCUSED MAINLY ON WHOLE FOODS.

Schools should aim to provide meals that are nutritionally balanced, and that focus on whole foods, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and protein. Meals that provide a balance of food groups and nutrients can feel nourishing and satisfying, and can help to ensure that students meet dietary guidelines, such as eating a variety of fruits and vegetables each day. However, the inclusion of treat foods in moderation acknowledges the preferences and eating habits of youth, and may promote an understanding that these foods can be part of a healthy, balanced diet.

2

ENHANCE THE VARIETY OF FOOD AND MENU OPTIONS.

Eating a variety of foods is foundational to a healthy diet. Diverse menu options may help youth to meet dietary guidelines, can cater to different tastes and dietary needs, and can help make a school food program fun and engaging for students. Whether schools provide grab-and-go snacks (e.g., granola bars), hot meal programs, or another kind of food program, they should aim to provide variety in their food offerings.

3

REGULARLY INCORPORATE AUTHENTIC, CULTURALLY DIVERSE FOODS.

Schools in BC are becoming increasingly culturally diverse, and youth want the school food offerings to reflect this diversity. Including authentic, culturally diverse foods on school menus not only makes students from various backgrounds feel included and respected, but also provides opportunities for students to learn about different cultures.

4

ENSURE ACCESS TO TRADITIONAL FOODS AND GATHERING PRACTICES FOR INDIGENOUS YOUTH.

Schools should work to integrate Indigenous practices and protocols into school food programs. This can involve serving traditional foods and incorporating education about Indigenous food systems and practices, such as traditional methods of gathering and preparing food. Indigenous youth should be provided opportunities to contribute to these programs.

5

ALLOW FOR CHOICE AND AUTONOMY.

Providing students with options and choice in their meals empowers them and can increase their satisfaction and interest in healthy eating. It may also help youth to explore new foods and to expand their palate. This autonomy can be facilitated through options like build-your-own salad bars, providing option and choice for side dishes, or allowing students some amount of customization in their meal (e.g., selection of toppings). Allowing choice also helps in accommodating different taste preferences and dietary needs.

6

ENSURE STUDENTS HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO EAT MEALS.

In addition to eating, lunch breaks are an opportunity for students to socialize with peers, which is important for social and emotional development. Many students also use this time to study or participate in activities during lunch breaks, such as school clubs. Allowing students enough time to purchase and eat meals is important for proper digestion, and ensures they can enjoy their food without rushing or having to finish meals in or after class. This may also help youth to build skills in eating mindfully.

7

REDUCE STIGMA AND BARRIERS FOR STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS.

It's important to create an environment where all students feel comfortable accessing school food programs, regardless of need. This can involve discrete methods of providing free or subsidized meals, such as using loadable lunch cards. It could also include placing a food program in an accessible, centralized area of the school to encourage participation among all students. These programs could be self-serve to increase a feeling of anonymity and discretion for students, or could have school staff present to welcome and serve students. These friendly and supportive interactions may foster a welcoming atmosphere and help to reduce the stigma of accessing free meal programs for students.

8

PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND INPUT.

Involving students in school food programs can increase their interest and participation. It can also help them feel respected and empowered to effect change in their schools. Student involvement could include feedback surveys, providing roles for students in operating food programs (e.g., cooking, serving food), or supporting student food committees where students can voice their preferences and participate in decision-making.

9

IMPROVE EATING AREA CONDITIONS AND LAYOUT.

The physical environment where students eat can have an impact on their meal experience at school. A well-designed cafeteria or lunchroom can create a more enjoyable and relaxing environment for students to eat and socialize. Schools should aim to make improvements to eating areas, to ensure all students have a clean and comfortable place to sit. These improvements might include providing comfortable seating, adding student-made art or murals to the room, better managing cafeteria line-ups, and encouraging proper waste management. Given the limitations of many schools to add or expand a cafeteria, this could also include opening classrooms or other common spaces for students to eat during lunch.

CONCLUSION

Through the leadership of the YHA in facilitating conversations, young people across the province shared their feedback about school food programs, as well as their ideas for the future of school food in BC. What they shared highlights the many ways that schools are already succeeding in providing nutritious, accessible, and enjoyable food, as well as what could make school food programs feel more appealing and inclusive for students.

The youth recommendations shared in this report will hopefully provide guidance for schools looking to develop or expand their food programs. These recommendations include wanting a greater focus on variety and nutritionally balanced meals, and having choice and autonomy to help meet different dietary preferences and needs. They also recommend food programs provide authentic culturally diverse food options to reflect their school's diverse student population. For Indigenous youth, this includes school food programs built on sharing traditional foods, as well as traditional practices of food gathering and preparation.

Across the province, youth want more time to eat so they can enjoy and digest their food. They also want to have a range of spaces to eat in, and to be given ongoing opportunities to share their feedback and ideas about school food programs.

Throughout these conversations, many participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to share their thoughts on school food, and spoke of the positive impact of feeling that their voice was being heard. This highlights the importance of engaging students in the design, implementation and review of school food programs.

Meaningfully engaging students can not only build their skills but can also ensure food program respect student needs and preferences. Conversations with students at schools that saw their needs and culture reflected in school food suggested that this can not only encourage greater participation in these programs, but can also increase connection to school, and support health and well-being.

The YHA is available to share their findings and recommendations to interested schools and organizations. For more information, please email [**mccreary@mcs.bc.ca**](mailto:mccreary@mcs.bc.ca).

APPENDIX: COALITION FOR HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Coalition for Healthy School Food has a set of guiding principles based on a set of recommendation of key characteristics for a national school food program in Canada (The Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2018). The YHA created a youth-friendly version of these guiding principles. The youth-friendly adaptation of the CHSF Guiding Principles could be a helpful tool for engaging young people in the conversation about school food, especially in reflecting on the strengths and areas where additional work is needed in meeting to meet the standards of best practice.



THE COALITION
FOR HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD

YOUTH-FRIENDLY GUIDING PRINCIPLES

This document is adapted from the Coalition for Healthy School Food's Guiding Principles. It was created and reviewed by youth with support from the McCreary Centre Society in the summer of 2023.

Food helps us feel good physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Food is tasty.

Food is nourishing and feels satisfying.

Meals include the kinds of food students would eat at home and with their friends and family.

Meals include a variety of vegetables and fruit, whole grains, and foods with protein.

Every student can get what they need.

Every student can get food at school, if they want it.

Getting food at school is a fun, comfortable, and welcoming experience for all students.

Food meets the wants and needs of the students and community.

Schools provide foods that meet the tastes and needs of its students.

Students, parents, and caregivers are involved in deciding what kinds of foods are available.

School food programs include skills and knowledge that are unique to the school and community. This could include involving school staff or community members who can share their skills or knowledge, like beekeeping or traditional ways of cooking food.

Indigenous communities have full control over their own programs.

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities lead and manage food programs in their schools.

Indigenous students, families, and community leaders decide what their school food program looks like, including what their values are, what kinds of foods they offer, and what kinds of skills and knowledge they pass on to students.

Food is local and sustainable.

Schools get food locally, like from local farmers and food suppliers, when it's possible.

School food programs are as sustainable and environmentally-conscious as possible, such as by trying to reduce waste, including food waste.

Students gain food knowledge and skills.

School food programs help students learn about food, including where food comes from and learning about different kinds of foods and ways of eating.

Students learn how to have a good relationship with food and how to make decisions about food for good physical, mental, and emotional health.

Students learn different food skills, like growing food and cooking for themselves and others.

Students learn about intuitive eating, which is eating in a way that is relaxed and that focuses on how tasty and satisfying food is and how it feels in your body.

For more information, visit
healthyschoolfood.ca



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