

Healthy fare in schools? It's food for thought

Ontario students understand local food is more nutritious, tastier and green-friendly

DICK SNYDER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Erin Beagle understands the power of local food.

She's seen it transform the minds and tummies of students in Thunder Bay, Ont., where she runs the Roots to Harvest program in the city's high schools.

With the catchy catchphrase "punks growing food," Roots to Harvest leverages the allure of local food to educate and motivate kids in high schools across the city. Not only do they learn how to grow and prepare fresh food, they also study how the food system works and why it matters.

The kids get it, she says. In fact, they're way ahead of it — young people understand that fresh local food is tastier, nutritious, better for the environment and has major economic benefits.

Even the school's more casual attendees make it to class when the punks are in the house.

"We get kids coming to the schools because they know we'll be in the gardens or cooking and they can eat good food," Beagle says.

Ontario's schools are a hotbed for local food advocacy, among both the students and the change agents that work with teachers to get kids directly involved with the things they eat.

The power of local food as an economic driver is well documented, but many feel it's still considered a "nice to have" rather than a "must have" in our public institutions.

Eleven per cent of Ontarians — or one in nine — are directly or indirectly employed by the agri-food system, which generates more than \$63 billion of economic activity.

Since 2003, the provincial government has spent \$160 million to promote local food. Advocates would like more action, such as local procurement quotas, more efforts around food literacy through education and outreach programs, and support to help launch and integrate a new generation of farmers and food-service businesses into the system.

Ontario's Broader Public Sector (BPS) institutions — hospitals, school boards, universities, colleges and municipally run long-term care facilities — spend about \$750 million a year on food, according to a report prepared by Food and Beverage Ontario (2014).

As of 2014, Ontario had 48 universities and colleges, 919 secondary schools and 3,974 elementary schools. School nutrition programs (SNPs) and in-school cafeterias serve about two million students each year.



KAELAN KARIJALAINEN

Toronto-based Real Foods for Real Kids feeds 15,000 kids a day. About a year ago, the organization moved into a facility with a state-of-the-art kitchen.

"(Schools) are institutions that are owned by the people of Ontario and the thinking is that we should be supporting our farmers."

BURKHARD MAUSBERG

CEO OF THE GREENBELT FOUNDATION AND THE GREENBELT FUND

"These are institutions that are owned by the people of Ontario and the thinking is that we should be supporting our farmers," says Burkhard Mausberg, CEO of the Greenbelt Foundation and the Greenbelt Fund. According to Greenbelt research, every dollar invested translates to a \$13 increase in local food sales.

This year, FoodShare celebrates the 10th anniversary of the Big Crunch, which rallies schoolchildren across the province to bite into a local apple at the same time.

The gesture helps align young minds with actual agricultural output, while the Greenbelt Fund helps with the purchase of 10,000 Ontario apples.

"The beauty of this is its simplicity," says FoodShare's Brooke Ziebel. FoodShare's Food to Table Schools is an award-winning teaching program for students from JK to Grade 12. "Teachers are really hungry for that kind of information."

A new FoodShare project happen-

ing in 10 Ontario schools involves a Good Food Machine with two aeroponic (no soil, just mist and oxygen) tower gardens, an Apple iMac and a mobile cooking cart. Students grow and cook their own snacks. It's based on the Green Bronx Machine project in New York, which resulted in a 35-per-cent increase in students' enjoyment of fruits and vegetables and 90 per cent of students making healthier food choices.

"I think it's a really exciting time for education in food literacy and we're headed in the right direction," Ziebel says. "The Ministry of Education is now one of our biggest partners and allies."

"But we really need a Ministry of Food."

Ontario's educational institutions may be primed for more local food, but there are challenges to getting it there. Years of reliance on junk food or "rethermed" processed foods have perpetuated a system that is not easy to adapt, even when there is demand for change. But those demands are

getting louder.

"When students make local food decisions, they really do apply the balance of sustainability. Yes, it's about the environment, but also about health and wellness," says Alan Griffiths of Mohawk College in Hamilton. A new project at Mohawk is studying ways to increase local food procurement at all 24 of Ontario's colleges. (See "A healthy hunger on campus" below.)

Founded in 2004, Real Foods for Real Kids (RFRK) is a Toronto-based company launched by a husband and wife who were fed up with the poor quality of food in their children's day-care. They got started using a local catering kitchen in off-hours, cooking meals from scratch with only real ingredients. About a year ago, they moved into their fourth location, a 30,000+ square-foot facility with state-of-the-art equipment and processes.

While the demand is certainly there — RFRK brings "real" foods to schools, daycares and camps and they plan to expand into Hamilton this year — challenging the status quo and taste buds at the same time is a never-ending battle.

"We serve 15,000 kids a day," CEO David Farnell says. "Among our competition, we've seen them shift and

change. At least their marketing has changed, but I don't know if their content has changed. We've clearly impacted the approach to discussing kids' food."

There is a lingering perception that local food costs more, which advocates say is no longer a valid excuse.

Roots to Harvest's program at Westgate Collegiate has students running a café that serves food made with local ingredients.

"The maximum a student will pay is \$6, and that will get something like a homemade pizza and salad, and it's all built from scratch," Beagle says. "It's cheaper than McDonald's."

Food advocate Joshua Maharaj was brought in to revamp Ryerson University's food service in 2013.

"The only reason change happened is because the students were so dissatisfied. They literally occupied the president's office," she says.

She set about bringing local food producers into the university's procurement process.

"Better food in schools is low-hanging fruit," Maharaj says. "It's really not a big expense compared to dealing with diet-related illness on the other side."

But, she stresses, it's up to "the people" to advocate for better food. "It won't just happen on its own."

A healthy hunger on all college campuses

Hamilton college looking to boost local food procurement

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Hamilton's Mohawk College is leading a two-year project aimed at uniting all 24 Ontario colleges with a common model for local food procurement.

"We're looking at how we can find ways to support regional economies, improve student experience and enhance the overall sustainability of campus food services," says Alan Griffiths, manager of sustainability at the college.

With a \$100,000 grant from the Greenbelt Fund, the project is expected to increase local food sales at three Ontario colleges by \$1.5 million over two years.

Sustainability has been a strategic direction at Mohawk for years, Griffiths says.

He cites an educational approach built around "the three Ps": production, preparation and procurement.

"I can teach a student to grow a garden, but if they can't prepare the food, they aren't likely to. I can teach a student how to grow something and how to cook it, but I also need to teach them how to buy it."

The Mohawk team consulted with stakeholders, from farmers and food-service providers to students and college food-purchasing staff.

The project lead, Kate Flynn, is a local farmer who grows on two acres in the Hamilton area.

The goal is to identify the common barriers that make it difficult to get local food into the system and then develop procedures to knock



MOHAWK COLLEGE

Students at Mohawk College in Hamilton tend to their vegetable garden.

them down.

"There are about six to 10 common issues," Griffiths says, "which we will detail in a report in February."

Pilot projects will then kick in with some of the colleges to test new approaches and inform the creation of a step-by-step guide that all the col-

leges can use to amp up their local food game. The guide will be released in November at the Ontario College Local Food Summit.

Students eating local food...possible

To learn how the Greenbelt Fund is changing the way we eat and drink local in Ontario visit Greenbeltfund.ca/news



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