



Food For Change: Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

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Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

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For any additional information on the York Region Food Charter or this specific project, contact York Region Food Network at 905-841-3101 or foodcharter@yrfn.ca.

Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
Project Design	7
Limitations	8
Data Analysis	9
Results and Discussion	22
Recommendations.....	24
Bibliography	25
Appendix A: York Region Food Charter Online Survey.....	26
Appendix B: Key Informant Interview.....	31
Appendix C: Food System Workshop	33
Appendix D: Glossary of Terms	34

Executive Summary

Based on five interconnected values – economic opportunities, education and skills, equity and social justice, health and wellbeing and environmental sustainability – the York Region Food Charter (YRFC) is a platform by which to bring together individuals, organizations, businesses and governments, to consciously recognize the significant role farming and food has on shaping and improving our community. Aligning with municipal and regional strategies, the YRFC is a vehicle to assist in the development of inclusive, healthy, accessible and people-first communities, where a resilient natural environment and agriculture system supports biodiversity and health living.

The purpose of *Food for Change: Exploring the local food system in York Region schools* is to assess what opportunities exist for agencies to promote and support the local food system and food programming within York Region schools and in the community. The data collected in this report include a self-reported survey to understand what is currently happening within schools in the York Catholic District School Board (YCDSB). Key informant interviews were held with teachers and principals in six elementary schools and facilitators held food system workshops in four classes between three schools to understand what opportunities around food students are interested in pursuing.

Supporting the pillars of the YRFC, responses from the online survey, key informant interviews and food system workshops identified equity and social justice, environmental sustainability and health and wellbeing as the primary priorities of importance. These identified priorities correspond with the most commonly offered food programs/services in York Regions schools: EcoSchools, Healthy School Committees and Student Nutrition Programs.

Every school that participated in this research have, to varying degrees, levels of food programming in the classroom. Based on the key informant interviews, conducted with representatives at schools in Georgina and Markham, enabling conditions for successful food programming within schools include embedding the activities within daily routines, volunteer support, building momentum and interest in activities at the classroom level and champions within the school (e.g. caretaker, teacher and principal). Consistent in all data collection methods to this research is the idea that respondents feel it is beneficial for this knowledge to translate back to students' homes as well as the classroom.

At the school level, adult respondents expressed a desire to expand current programming in schools, and students expressed enjoyment for activities that allowed them to create and share food together. When probed at what programming respondents would like to see implemented or expanded in the community, 42 percent of respondents indicated community gardens and student nutrition programs as a priority, followed by 39 percent of respondents who would like to see an increase in restaurants serving local food and networking between schools with food programs.

Based on the findings of *Food for Change: Exploring the local food system in York Region schools*, ongoing outreach on the YRFC is important to educate on the importance of building a healthy food system. This study is a preliminary step to acquire information and insight from York Region schools about opportunities

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools



to implement the York Region Food Charter. While it is not a comprehensive study, our findings have led to a number of recommendations. There is interest from schools in York Region to integrate food and agriculture into students' routines. It is recommended that tools, such as an inventory of all York Region food and agriculture services and lesson plans for the food system and nutrition, be made available to interested individuals in York Region schools. With survey and key-informant respondents indicating commitment to student nutrition programs, it is also recommended that the York Region Food Charter Working Group align with efforts at the provincial level to build awareness and advocate for a universal Student Nutrition Program for all Ontario publicly funded elementary and secondary schools.

Introduction

The York Region Food Charter (YRFC) aligns with a food movement across Ontario, supported by Bill 36: Local Food Act¹, which supports a system from farm to plate that promotes access to local food. The YRFC is a vision of thriving urban and rural communities where residents, businesses and governments are creating a resilient, just and sustainable food system.

York Region is fortunate to have many well-established food assets. With a strong agricultural heritage, York Region has infrastructure and opportunities for existing and new agri-food businesses to succeed, and for residents to have access to an abundance of local foods. Developed through a series of community consultations, the YRFC is a vision for farming and food in York Region. The YRFC is a coordinated, systems approach to the food system – connecting existing and emerging policies, projects and programs, while celebrating and promoting our local food system.

Based on five interconnected values - economic opportunities, education and skills, equity and social justice, health and wellbeing and environmental sustainability - the YRFC is a platform by which to bring individuals, organizations, businesses and governments together, to consciously recognize the significant role farming and food has on the future of our community. Aligning with many municipal strategies and York Region's Vision 2051, the YRFC is a vehicle to assist in the development of inclusive, healthy, accessible and people-first communities, where a resilient natural environment and agriculture system supports biodiversity and healthy living.

Through community consultations in the development of the YRFC¹, one component identified from residents in all nine of York Region's municipalities² is the importance of education in shaping values, habits and thinking around the food system, and in promoting health. Probing further, student nutrition programs and hands-on experiences such as school gardens were identified as food programs York Region community members want to see expanded and strengthened in schools. Residents also identified value to students sharing meals together.

The purpose of this research project is to assess what opportunities exist for community agencies to promote and support the local food system and food programming among school-aged children and youth. This research is based on the premise that “food preferences are learned via experience with food and eating” (Birch, 1999), and thus when children and youth are given an opportunity to be involved in food activities and try different foods, their preference for a diversity of food increases. In discussions of mitigating chronic disease and improving well-being this is important as food activities may be one avenue where children and youth have regular exposure to a diversity of healthy foods – increasing their

¹ The first of its kind in Canada, Bill 36: Local Food Act passed by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario in November 2013. The purposes of this Act are: 1) To foster successful and resilient local food economies and systems throughout Ontario; 2) To increase awareness of local food in Ontario, including the diversity of local food; 3) To encourage the development of new markets for local food.

² Spanning from Steeles Avenue to Lake Simcoe, York Region is comprised of 9 municipalities including City of Markham, City of Vaughan, Town of Richmond Hill, Township of King, Town of Aurora, Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville, Town of East Gwillimbury, Town of Newmarket and Town of Georgina.

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

immediate consumption of healthy foods. Research has also shown that “unhealthy eating practices that contribute to chronic disease are established early in life; young persons having unhealthy eating habits tend to maintain these habits as they age” (Kelder, Perry, Klepp, & Lytle , 1994), and consequently developing healthy eating habits at a young age may help set-up healthy, lifelong habits.

There are many settings where students gather, and which could have been home to this research, such as homes, childcare centres and recreational facilities. This research chose to focus on where children and youth spend at least 6 hours a day, equivalent to 40 percent of their waking time, including 1 to 2 meals and 2 snacks daily: school (Healthy Kids Panel, 2012). Studies have shown that developing food literacy and healthy eating habits among children and youth in schools contributes to a decrease in absenteeism, improvement of students’ concentration in school, and less likely to be hyperactive (Healthy Child Manitoba, 2012). Consequently integrating food into school routines has the potential of creating many positive spin-offs in the classroom and in developing healthy youth who will carry those life skills with this into adulthood.

The research questions guiding *Food for Change: Exploring the local food system in York Region schools* are twofold:

- 1) What is currently happening within the York Region District School Board and York Catholic District School Board to promote and support the local food system?
- 2) What opportunities exist for schools and community organizations to further integrate food systems thinking into students’ daily lessons and experiences?

This report is broken down into four sections. Section 1, *project design* outlines the construction and implementation of this research. Section 2, *data results* quantifies and qualifies findings from the online survey, key informant interviews and food system workshops. Section 3, *analysis and discussions*, brings into broad context what the data means. Section 4, *recommendations*, brings into light next steps.

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

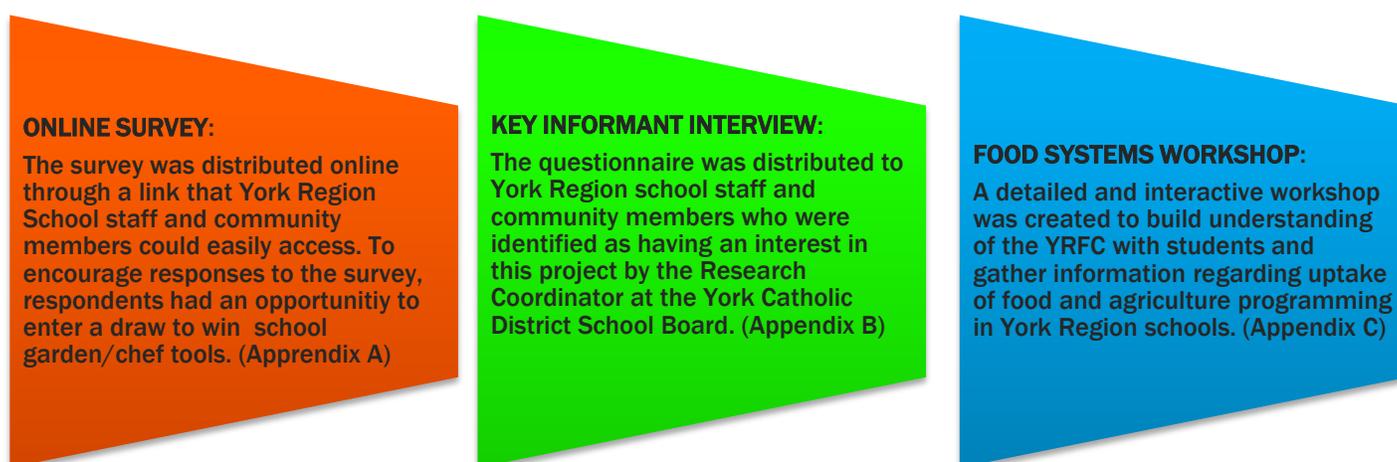
Project Design

Funding for this research was made available in the 2012/2013 school year. Due to labour tensions at the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) at that time, YRFN targeted this research to the York Catholic District School Board (YCDSB). Following approval from the Ethics Review Panel at YCDSB in Spring 2013, the research project began formally in Fall 2013. Six Catholic elementary schools in York Region expressed interest in this research, one located in Georgina and five located in Markham.

To address the research question, “*what is currently happening within the York Region school boards to promote and support the local food system?*” the first point of conduct is an environmental scan. A detailed e-mail was sent to the principal at each of the six schools. The email asked principals to forward an attached online survey link to interested colleagues, parents and program volunteers within their school. The email also invited principals to participate in a key informant interview in order to gain in-depth knowledge about what conditions need to be in place for food and agriculture programming to succeed in schools.

Those who completed the key informant questionnaire were offered an opportunity for their students to participate in a Food Systems Workshop. This workshop was created and facilitated by two YRFN consultants, with the intention of engaging students in food systems thinking, while gaining students’ perspectives and interests as it relates to food and agriculture at home, in school and in the community.

Figure 1 Data Collection Tools



The key informant questionnaire and the online survey were developed through consultation with YRFN staff, York Region Public Health, the York Region Food Charter Committee and the York Region Food for Learning Committee.

Limitations

In 2012/2013 York Region Food Charter Working Group, care of York Region Food Network, gained funding approval to assess opportunities to integrate the York Region Food Charter into schools in York Region. With limited funding, it was essential to target this research. In targeting this study, we do recognize that this study and analysis does have some limitations within it.

During the 2012/2013 school year, teachers at YRDSB were 'work to rule', meaning that they were discouraged from participating in activities outside of their classroom hours. Due to the political context in schools at the time of funding, this research project was officially pursued with YCDSB, which means YRDSB's 172 elementary schools were not engaged in this work.

In order to gain permission to work with schools in YCDSB, an application for Research Ethics was submitted in Winter/Spring 2013. Upon approval, the research was set to begin in Fall 2013. Once interested schools had been identified, and the online survey launched, the survey and key informant interviews ran for only 6 weeks, from mid-October to November 30, 2013.

While the online survey was promoted via social media channels to target a more comprehensive representation of York Region, for logistical considerations, key informant interviews and workshops focused exclusively on elementary schools in the Town of Georgina and City of Markham. Representing the northernmost and southernmost municipalities in the Region, Georgina and Markham were chosen to ensure both urban and rural experiences were documented. By targeting elementary schools in Georgina and Markham, there are many other voices, experiences and age groups who are not represented in this report. Additionally, the schools that agreed to participate in this study are also schools that are already involved in Student Nutrition Programs, Healthy School Committees, school gardens, and EcoSchools. Consequently this work was in a sense 'preaching to the converted', gaining the perspective from schools already interested and pursuing food related programming. Unfortunately this study did not gain the perspective from schools who are not aware of food programming or who are struggling to pursue it.

This research took a three-phased approach. First, parents, volunteers, teachers and principals were engaged via an online survey. Second, teachers and principals were asked to participant in key informant interviews in order to further deconstruct what conditions need to be in place to foster a supportive environment for food and agriculture initiatives in schools. Third, students were engaged in order to understand what they want to see and do in their community and school around food. The intention of this phased approach was to develop a comprehensive assessment of food and agriculture interests at school and at home, in order to determine how programming in schools or for children and youth in the community can be supported at home as well. Unfortunately due to the short duration that the survey was open, we did not reach many parents, and consequently the results are not as comprehensive as we would have liked. Many online survey questions asked respondents to self-report their food activities, which puts into question the accuracy of their answers as their perception of how often they follow the Canada Food Guide or compost may not be the reality.

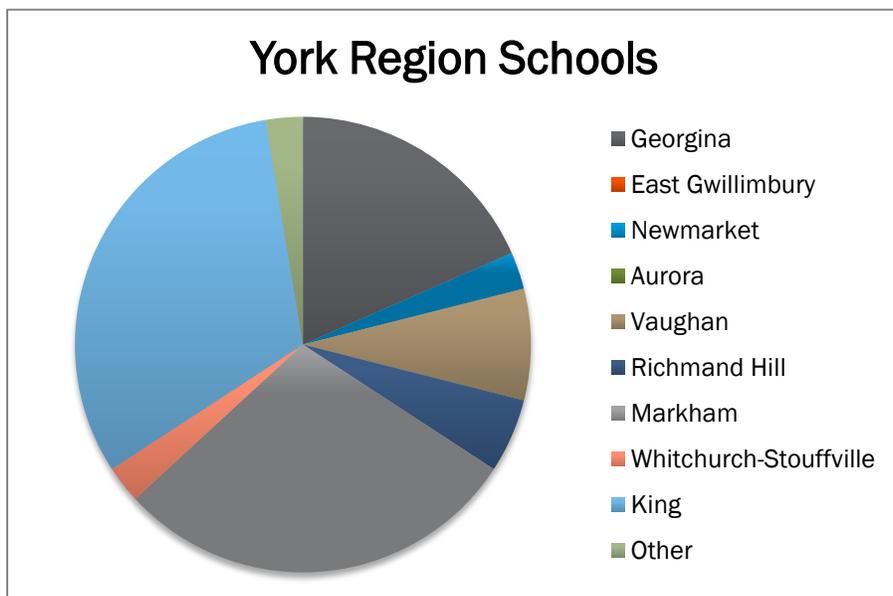
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Data Analysis

Online Survey Data

There were a total of 68 respondents to the online survey. *Figure 2* provides a map of where the responses came from within the nine municipalities of York Region. In addition to working in York Region, 88 percent of respondents reside in York Region as well.

Figure 2 Representation of York Region Schools that completed the online survey

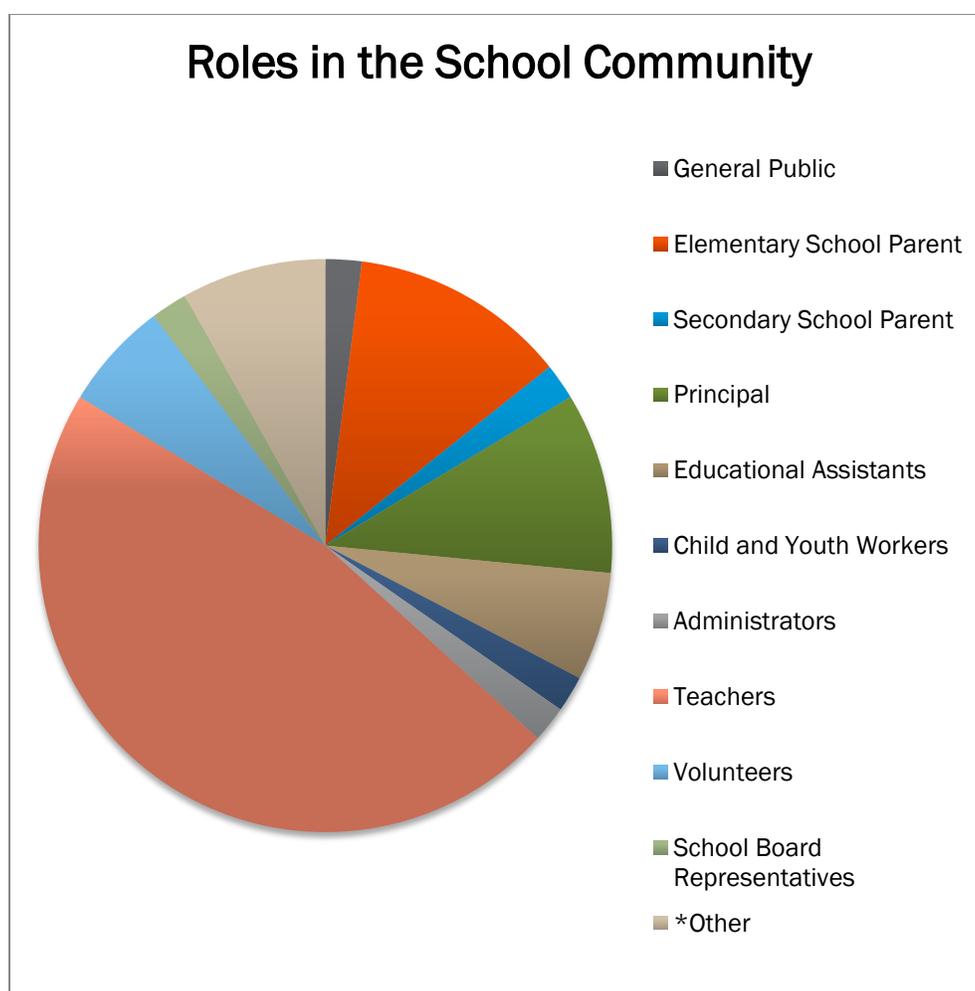


*Other includes those who work with many different elementary schools in York Region.

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

Responses to the online survey were represented by a variety of roles within the school community. These include parents of both elementary and secondary school students, principals, teachers, educational assistants, child and youth workers, administrators, school board representatives and volunteers (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Respondents' roles within the school community



*Other includes Public Health Nurses and Healthy School Champions.

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

When asked about their knowledge of the food charter, most respondents (58%) had never heard of a food charter (*Figure 4*), and 26 percent had heard of the term, but do not really understand what it means.

Figure 4 Respondent’s familiarity with the York Region Food Charter

Response	Chart	Percentage
Yes, I understand the significance of a Food Charter		16%
No, I have never heard of a Food Charter		58%
I've heard the term, but don't really know what it means		26%

As outlined in *Figure 5*, respondents were asked to rank the importance of the values and principles of the York Region Food Charter based on their perception of the priority issues that a local food system should support.

Most respondents agreed that all people should have access to safe, local, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and therefore, should not have to rely on emergency food programs.

Most agreed or strongly agreed that schools should play a role in supporting local businesses. Sixty-two percent of respondents agree that the education system should play a larger role in food and agriculture by offering more programs that address farming and environmental sustainability and by providing career guidance to students interested in pursuing food and agriculture-related work in the future.

The link between environmental sustainability and food and agriculture was strongly agreed upon by respondents. Fifty-six percent of respondents also strongly agreed that the local food system should help protect our environment.

Finally, the majority of respondents strongly agreed that consuming locally produced food is important for their overall health. They agree that locally produced food should, therefore, be readily available in schools, workplaces and municipal and regional facilities.

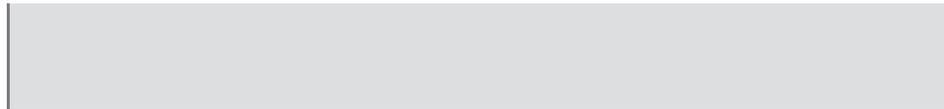
Figure 5 Ranking priority issues that a local food system should support

Economic Opportunities

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Schools should support local food-related businesses	0%	3%	15%	56%	26%

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(production, processing, distribution, consumption) in our communities



Equity and Social Justice

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
All people in our communities should have access to safe, local, nutritious and culturally appropriate food	0%	0%	5%	8%	87%
Members of our communities should not have to rely on emergency food programs	0%	8%	13%	31%	49%

Education and Skill Building

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The education system should offer more programs that include food skills and knowledge about healthy eating	0%	3%	11%	37%	50%
The education system should offer more programs or courses on farming and environmental sustainability	0%	3%	15%	62%	21%
The education system should play a larger role in food and agriculture	0%	8%	31%	38%	23%
The education system should provide career guidance within the food sector	3%	3%	16%	45%	34%

Environmental Sustainability

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	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
It is important that we maintain sustainable and environmentally sound farming practices in York Region	0%	0%	3%	41%	57%
The local food system should support and enhance community health & well-being	0%	0%	5%	39%	55%
The local food system should help protect our environment	0%	0%	3%	41%	56%

Health and Well-Being

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The food system should support and enhance individual health and well-being	0%	0%	8%	27%	65%
Healthy, local food should be readily available in schools, workplaces, and municipal and regional facilities	0%	0%	15%	26%	59%
Eating locally produced food is better for my overall health	0%	5%	15%	33%	46%
Food is an integral part of the culture of York Region	2%	0%	22%	39%	37%

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

Figure 6 shows a compilation of food programs and/or services currently available in York Region schools. Many schools in York Region run a variety of food and agriculture-related programs. While the interest is there, most identified being unable to expand and sustain programs due to lack of capacity and funding.

Figure 6 Food programs and/or services offered at York Region schools

Response	Chart	Percentage
School Garden		18%
Green bin/compost program		18%
EcoSchools		70%
Student Nutrition program (e.g breakfast or snack)		45%
Healthy Schools Committee		61%
You're the Chef		15%
Nutrition Tools for Schools		6%
4 for Lunch		6%
*Other, please specify...		27%
*Other, please specify...		9%

*Integration of food and health education into the curriculum.

Many respondents identified participating in similar activities around food and agriculture in their homes (Figure 7). Many identify an interest in doing more if they were not faced with barriers such as:

1. Time and space restrictions

- a. Lack of space to grow food
- b. Lack of time necessitate reliance on fast food/convenience foods

2. Lack of financial resources

- a. Affordability of local produce
- b. High farmers market prices

3. Lack of information

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

- a. Growing food
- b. Nutrition/healthy eating
- c. Availability of local farmers markets and food basket services for fresh produce

Figure 7 Respondent’s participation in food-related programs in their homes

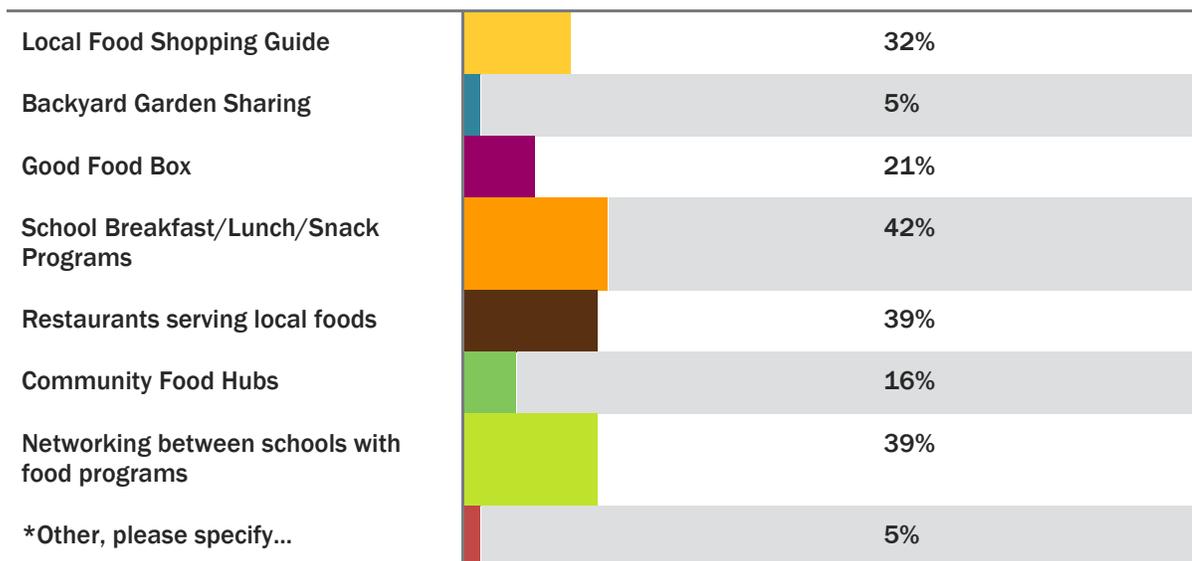
	We already do this	We would like to do this
Gardening / Food Growing	63%	37%
Following Canada’s Food Guide	91%	9%
Eating local foods	74%	26%
Going to farms, farmers’ markets	74%	26%
Waste management (e.g. reduce, reuse, recycle, compost, etc.)	94%	6%
Cooking meals and snacks together as a family	81%	19%
Shopping together as a family	93%	7%
Meal planning	88%	12%

Respondents were asked to indicate the top three program choices that they would like to see implemented or expanded in their communities. In total, 88 percent of respondents live in York Region. The majority of respondents identified community gardens (42%), student nutrition programs (42%), restaurants serving local food (39%), and networking between schools with food programs (39%) as their top choices. See *Figure 8* for other preferences.

Figure 8 Programs respondents would like to see implemented or expanded in their communities

Response	Chart	Percentage
Community Gardens		42%
Community Kitchens		21%
Farmer's Market		29%

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools



*Food pantry, more opportunities for high school classes to participate in food-related community activities as a class

Key Informant Interview

Teachers and principals from three municipalities took part in the key informant interviews. Georgina represented 29 percent of the responses, Markham represented 57 percent and Vaughan represented 14 percent.

Unlike the results from the online survey, most respondents (71%) had heard the term food charter but were unclear about its meaning.

Respondents were asked about the current food and agriculture programs and initiatives currently operating in their schools. In addition, they were asked what enablers and challenges allow or inhibit these programs from being operational. *Figure 9* summarizes findings from the key informant interviews.

Figure 9 Enablers and challenges to keeping food and agriculture programs and initiatives operational

Municipality	School food and agriculture programs	Number of years operating	Program lead	Enablers	Challenges
Georgina	Snack Program	Several years	Catholic School Council	Parent volunteers, grants and donations	Cost of food, lack of volunteer support and limited funding opportunities

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

		3 years	Parent volunteers and students	Food for Learning and grants	Volunteer power and not having all supports needed at the start of the program e.g. equipment and funding
	You're the Chef	2-3 times/year for one year	Parent volunteers	Educational for students	Volunteers
	Recycling and Composting	3 years	Teachers	Teamwork and making it part of the daily routine	
	School Vegetable Garden	New	Students, teacher and parents plant and harvest vegetables for the snack program	It is part of the curriculum and of their environmental initiatives	Volunteers
Markham	Snack Program	3-4 years	Principal and volunteers	Volunteer support	Lack of funding
		4 years	Parents, teachers and principal	Everyday routine	Lack of funding
		1-5 years	Principal, secretary and school council	Established procedures are in place and there is a regular delivery of goods	Lack of volunteer assistance
	Recycling and Composting	7 years	Eco-club	Integrated into the school day e.g. bins and posters are in every classroom	Lack of funding
		Boomerang lunch program (students take their garbage home) for 3 years	Eco-club	Competition between classes keeps the students interested.	
	Healthy School Committee (focus	4 years	Catholic council, parents, teachers and public health	Teamwork	Funding and sustainability

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

	on food and agriculture)		nurses		
		4 years	Parents, teacher, principal		
	The Big Crunch (promotion of fruit)	4 years	Principal and teachers	Teamwork	Community support and funding
	Teaching healthy eating as part of the curriculum	4 years	Teachers integrate this into physical education classes	Integrated into the curriculum	Lack of resources
		5 years	Teacher and principal	Mandated through the curriculum	
	Hot lunch program	4 years	Principal	The Ministry of Education's School Food and Beverage Policy provides a set of nutrition guidelines	Not all parents can afford a hot lunch program
Vaughan	Snack Program	4 years	Parent council, custodians and students	Being organized and having volunteer help	Students sometimes lose interest and programs stop running
	Recycling and Composting	4 years	Parent council, custodians and students	Being organized and having volunteer help	
	Healthy School Committee (focus on food and agriculture)	4 years	Parent council, custodians and students	Being organized and having volunteer help	

In comparing programs offered, all three municipalities offer student nutrition programs, recycling and compost. The school interviewed in Georgina has developed a school food garden, and the schools interviewed in the more urban municipalities of Vaughan and Markham have been focused on developing Healthy School Committees, with a priority on nutrition.

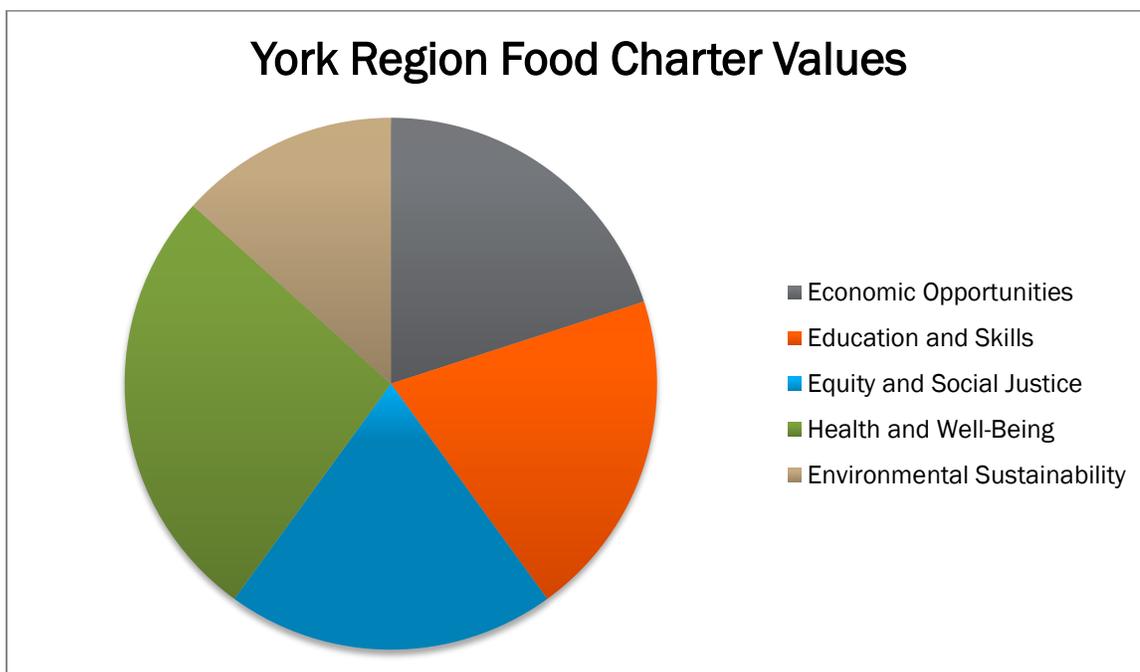
Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools



The common challenges identified by all schools were funding, lack of volunteer support and lack of resources. Many schools felt that their programs were most successful when adequate volunteer support and funding were available. In addition to this, mandates and integration of programs into the current curriculum better enable schools to sustain them.

When asked what York Region Food Charter values resonate most within their school communities (*Figure 10*), respondents felt strongly about the importance of addressing education and skills, and environmental sustainability to improve health. Some interviewees identified concerns about economic inequities within their school, indicating the value of health and wellbeing and student nutrition in helping to balance disparities. Though different values were chosen, interviewees were extremely consistent in the message that justified their decision. All interviewees chose a particular value because they felt it would improve food literacy overall, and encourage students to value the importance of healthy eating and how that can be translated into their homes and communities.

Figure 10 Rated importance of addressing priority food and agriculture initiatives



Education and Skills:
 “To make solid change, we have to educate our children. They are the ones who will make a difference.”

“The more we know about sustaining the land and the more we know about using these resources in our homes, the healthier we will be.”

Many interviewees believe that there is a knowledge gap that may result in poor eating habits and respondents felt that it would be beneficial for this knowledge to translate back to students’ homes as well as in school. One respondent said, “I am a true believer that if kids come to school healthy, they will learn better.” Incorporating this topic area into the curriculum would be beneficial. They feel that students should be educated about where their food is coming from and how the nutritional value of food is impacted as a result. They feel nutrition education is important in understanding the ingredients used in processed foods. Finally, they value knowledge about the economic impact that importing food can have on our local economy.

When asked how respondents would like to see these issues addressed and supported within the school community, they stated that they are enjoying the programs they currently offer, however, are not able to expand due to limited capacity in the form of volunteers and/or funding. Funding for programs such as student nutrition programs and volunteer support for initiatives such as school gardens were identified as necessary conditions to a program’s success. The schools interviewed identified the need for internal and external support to keep programs operational, and to have the opportunity to initiate other programs. Respondents suggested that avenues to support schools’ agriculture and food programming include information sessions for parents, newsletters, student education programs in the curriculum and recommendations for Ontario grown foods in supermarkets (including ethnic grocery stores). Schools who currently run student nutrition programs identified wanting a clearer funding model and “one-stop shopping” for funding instead of requiring the majority of funding to come from school-level fundraising.

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

Respondents see great value to food and agriculture culture and tourism in York Region. To support local agri-education opportunities, respondents suggested that it would be helpful to have information about local farms that are willing to partner with schools to provide local produce, education to students and low-cost field trips. Schools would be interested in having access to a link or inventory of local farms/community organizations that can support schools.

Schools identify needing certain conditions to be in place in order for food and agriculture initiatives to be further integrated into schools such as:

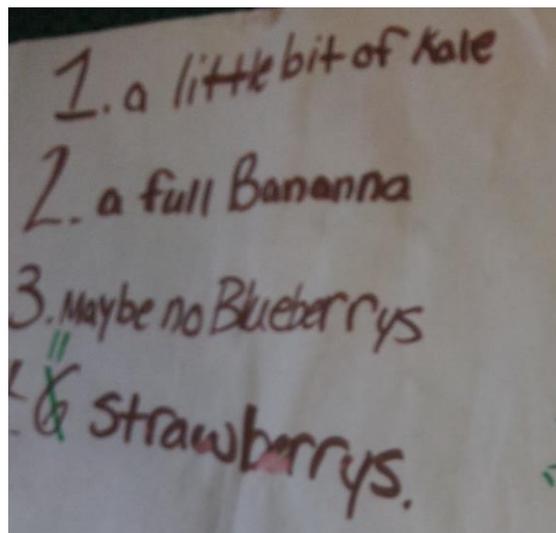
- Programming for students and parents (e.g. cooking classes, how to create a vegetable garden)
- Community partnerships with community agencies, farms and grocery stores
- A steady and clear source of funding
- Volunteer power
- Integration into the curriculum (e.g. readily available teaching units)
- An inventory to connect schools with local external partners
- School board and principal support
- More communication, such as a community forum or list

Food System Workshop

Based on interest from key informant interviews, four interactive workshops with elementary school students were held. Three workshops took place in Markham schools and one workshop took place in Georgina.

By focusing on the local food system, the purpose of this workshop was to educate students and teachers about the food system through a hands-on activity, where students had the opportunity to experiment with local flavours by preparing food and eating it together. Students were asked to be chefs in this activity, measuring and recording their culinary creation. Students were also encouraged to be creative and experiment with the strawberries, blueberries, apple juice, water, kale and bananas that were made available to them.

For consistency purposes, the same activity and discussion was replicated in each of the four classes, despite differences in age group and geographic location. Georgina, accounting for 21 percent of the total workshop participants, brought in the youngest participants, with 23 primary students from Senior Kindergarten to Grade 3 engaged in the



Smoothie recipe from primary students in Georgina

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

workshop during their lunch hour. Markham accounted for 79 percent of the total workshop participants, with approximately 60 students in grade 7 and an additional 14 students participating from grade 6 or 8. Fifty-four percent of the total students involved in this workshop are involved in their school's Eco-Club and/or Social Justice Club, and the remaining 46 percent of participants were not.

Taking a food system approach to the workshop, students were probed about their involvement in the food system, from production to waste consumption. In total, 42 percent of the workshop participants indicated that they are involved in food growing at home, and 75 percent indicated participation in the home green bin program or home composting. Grocery shopping with parents at a shop or farmers' market was a common practice for all students, regardless of age. Over 50 percent of students in each class indicated involvement with cooking at home - a greater percentage of female students than male students indicated participation in cooking at home.

Feedback gained from students following this workshop was extremely positive, indicating interest and enthusiasm for food activities. When asked, did you learn anything from this activity; students expressed interest in understanding “why [do] we buy tomatoes from other countries if we grow them in Canada”. As a grade 7 in Markham articulately stated, “by buying imports, we tell the government to keep getting imports...”, indicating a growing awareness of consumer influence.

Results and Discussion

Through the 3-phased approach to this study, experiences and input from students, parents, volunteers, teachers and principals within the York Catholic District School Board (YCDSB) made up the findings on which an analysis and all recommendations are based.

Eighty-eight percent of the online survey respondents reside in York Region, and thus they have a vested interest in the opportunities and recommendations this study offers. While some respondents were familiar with Food Charters, the vast majority had little to no understanding of what a Food Charter is, nor the potential of a Food Charter as a tool to bring groups together to work collaboratively on food system issues.

The high support for environmental sustainability and health is reflective in programming at individual schools, with Eco-Schools, Healthy Schools Committee and Student Nutrition Programs being common initiatives among represented schools in this study. Interestingly, the values and programs indicated by respondents also reflects the main activities they do at home, including promoting health by following Canada Food Guide to Healthy Eating, grocery shopping as a family and building environmental consciousness through waste management procedures.

The justification behind asking questions about both school and home settings is to understand how programming schools or the community may complement what is happening at home, as “children tend to acquire their parents’ health-related behaviours at a young age” (Perryman, 2011). This statement builds

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

on research by Brug *et al* (2008) which demonstrates that “child and adolescent dietary behaviour is likely to be strongly influenced by environmental factors...children’s eating behaviour is influenced by their responsiveness to environmental cues, and a variety of family and social factors start to influence children’s eating behaviours. The role of parents and schools is considered to be of particular importance” (S9). Consequently both school and home settings are extremely significant in forming a child’s understanding and relationship to food, building nutrition education, food skills and food preferences.

Within the key informant interviews, conditions for successful programming were discussed. One condition of successful integration in schools which was significantly downplayed is the role of a champion or leader within the school who drives forward food initiatives. The identity of the champion varied from school to school, in some cases it is a care-taker, in other cases a teacher or principal. The champion not only had ownership of the food initiative, the champion shares his/her passion and enthusiasm for the agriculture/food activities with students, parents and colleagues, authentically engaging them in the joy of the food system. Based on the workshops, students’ knowledge of food systems is reflective in staff’s commitment and enthusiasm for initiatives such as gardens and composting. Another condition for success, unidentified throughout the online survey, key informant interviews and food system workshops, but evident in the diversity of food programming offered at schools is the need for schools to design activities and programming that meet their school’s needs.

Not indicated via the online survey nor in the key informant interviews, is the value of eating with peers as a social skill. An article by Birch (1999) examines the development of food preferences, finding that “[especially for infants and children], eating is a social event, and others can have an impact on children’s food preferences and food selections” (52). Food and the act of eating with others is part of our culture, and particularly among children and youth, sharing food and food experiences can bring positive peer pressure. In facilitating food workshops with students, while our intention was to learn what students think about food programming in the classroom, we also sought to encourage students to try kale, a vegetable that 85 percent of the students indicated they had never tried. Despite initial looks of discontent and ‘yucks’ at the thought of kale, with encouragement from the facilitators and positive peer pressure, every student in every workshop indicated they tried kale; the majority were impressed with the taste of kale, and some groups even needed to ask for seconds of kale. This demonstrates that when students have the opportunity to observe peers trying food they perceive to not like, they are much more likely to try it. This is extremely important insight as we build programming and opportunities for children, youth, students and adults to be exposed to new types of local foods.

Students in the workshop expressed enjoyment with coming up with their own recipes, using tools to measure their ingredients, and experimenting with local flavours. Students also indicated pleasure with preparing and consuming food with their peers.

Though through the workshops students were not exposed to food growing, research also shows that “children who plant and harvest their own vegetables are more willing to taste and even like them than children who did not participate” (Morris, Briggs, & Zidenberg-Cherr, 2000), indicating value to integrating food growing and gardens into schools.

Recommendations

The York Region District School Board and York Catholic District School Board, encompassing 203 and 103 schools³ respectively, are committed to continually improving schools by creating environments where students can thrive. Schools are based on community partnerships, ensuring that the needs and potential of students are met and exceeded. In supporting a healthy and vibrant local food system, the York Region Food Charter, similar to *No Time to Wait: the Healthy Kids Strategy (2012)*, believes that “everyone has a role to play in supporting parents’ efforts to ensure their children grow and thrive. We need action everywhere – from parents, caregivers and kids themselves, childcare settings and schools, health care providers, non-governmental organizations, researchers, the food industry, the media and municipal and provincial governments – and a willingness to take risks (2). This study is a preliminary step to acquire information and insight from York Region schools about opportunities to implement the York Region Food Charter. While it is by no means a comprehensive study, it has led to the following recommendations.

1. It is recommended that additional research is conducted with both elementary and secondary schools throughout York Region to fully understand opportunities for the integration of food and agriculture activities in York Region schools.
2. It is recommended that an inventory of all York Region food and agriculture agencies and services, including local farms and community agencies, be created and made available to all York Region schools.
3. While there is interest and demand for food programming in schools and the community, findings from this research indicate unfamiliarity with the concept of food charters. It is recommended that ongoing outreach and education is offered around the municipal and regional food policy initiatives.
4. There is strong interest in integrating food system and nutrition lesson plans into the curriculum. It is recommended that lesson plans regarding the food system and nutrition are available to York Region schools.
5. It is recommended that the York Region Food Charter Working Group align with efforts at the provincial level to build awareness and advocate for a universal Student Nutrition Program for all Ontario publicly funded elementary and secondary schools.

³ YRDSB has 172 elementary schools and 31 high schools. YCDSB includes 88 elementary schools and 15 secondary schools.

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Appendix A: York Region Food Charter Online Survey

York Region Food Charter Online Survey

The Food Charter Working Group has developed a Food Charter for York Region! A food charter is a document that outlines the values and beliefs about food that a community considers most important. These values include health and well-being, environmental sustainability, equity and social justice, economic opportunities and education and skills. The purpose of this survey is to understand what is most important to York Region schools, parents and students regarding the local food system. The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete and all information will remain confidential. The survey will be available until November 29, 2013.

As a thank you for completing this survey, you may enter your name in a draw to win a school food growing kit. Your responses to the survey and your contact information for the draw will not be linked. If you have any questions about the survey, please contact lisac@yrfn.ca.

Demographic Information:

Which school are you involved with?

Which municipality in York Region do you live in?

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aurora | <input type="checkbox"/> East Gwillimbury | <input type="checkbox"/> King |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Georgina | <input type="checkbox"/> Markham | <input type="checkbox"/> Newmarket |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Richmond Hill | <input type="checkbox"/> Vaughan | <input type="checkbox"/> Whitchurch-Stouffville |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other | | |

Please provide your postal code: _____

Please choose the description that best represents your role in the school when completing this survey (click all that apply):

- General public
- Parent of elementary school aged child
- Parent of secondary school aged youth
- Principal
- Vice Principal
- Educational Assistant
- Child and Youth Worker
- Administrator
- Teacher
- Volunteer at York Region school
- School board representatives. Specify: _____
- Other

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

Are you familiar with the concept of a Food Charter?

- Yes, I understand the significance of a Food Charter
- No, I have never heard of a Food Charter
- I've heard of the term, but don't really know what it means

Consider the following priority issues that a local food system in York Region should support. Rate the importance of each issue on a scale from 'Not at all important' to 'Very important':

	Not at all Important	Not Important	Neutral	Important	Very Important
The local food economy (food production, processing, distribution, consumption)					
Addressing hunger in our community					
Farmland protection					
Supporting local farms and farmers					
Healthy eating					
Education and awareness about food and farmland issues					
Agriculture/culinary tourism					
Food skills development					
Availability of ethnic food choices					
Decreasing greenhouse gas emissions and carbon footprint					
Understanding food labeling					
Improved waste management					
Student Nutrition Programs					

This section is to gather information concerning a healthy food system in York Region. We have categorized the topics under our five priority areas. Please consider the following statements and rate your level of agreement on a scale from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree':

Economic Opportunities

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Schools should support local food-related businesses (production, processing, distribution, consumption) in our communities					

Equity and Social Justice

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
All people in our communities should have access					

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools



to safe, local, nutritious and culturally appropriate food					
Members of our communities should not have to rely on emergency food programs (e.g., food banks, community meals)					

Education and Skill Building

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The education system should offer more programs that include food skills and knowledge about healthy eating					
The education system should offer more programs or courses on farming and environmental sustainability					
The education system should play a larger role in food and agriculture					
The education system should provide career guidance within the food sector					

Environmental Sustainability

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
It is important that we maintain sustainable and environmentally sound farming practices in York Region					
The local food system should support and enhance community health and well-being					
The local food system should help protect our environment					

Health and Well-Being

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The food system should support and enhance individual health and well-being					
Healthy, local food should be readily available in schools, workplaces, and municipal and regional facilities					
Eating locally produced food is better for my overall health					
Food is an integral part of the culture of York Region					

Please indicate what food programs and/or food services are available at your school (check all that apply):

- School garden

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- Green bin/composting program
- EcoSchools
- Student Nutrition program (e.g. breakfast or snack)
- Healthy School Committee
- You're the Chef
- Nutrition Tools for Schools
- 4 for Lunch
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

Please identify which activities you participate in at home and any barriers that might prevent participation in the following activities.

Activity/Experience	We already do this	We would like to do this	What barriers might prevent you from doing this? (e.g. time restrictions, affordability of activity, lack of information)
Gardening/Food growing			
Following Canada's Food Guide			
Eating local foods			
Going to farms, farmers' markets			
Waste management (e.g. reduce, reuse, recycle, compost, etc)			
Cooking meals and snacks together as a family			
Shopping together as a family			
Meal planning			
Other: _____			

Please indicate the top three program choices you would like to see implemented or expanded in your community:

- Community Gardens
- Community Kitchens
- Farmers' Markets
- Local Food Shopping Guide
- Backyard Garden Sharing
- Good Food Box
- Community Food Hubs
- School Breakfast/Snack Programs
- Restaurants serving local foods
- Networking between schools with food programs
- Other

Please share with us any additional comments and suggestions:

Food For Change Exploring the local food system in York Region schools



Thank you for participating in this survey! Your input is important to us.

The Working Group would like to acknowledge the Simcoe County Food and Agriculture Charter Steering Committee for permission to use and adapt the questions from the 2012 Simcoe County Food and Agriculture Charter Survey.

Appendix B: Key Informant Interview

York Region Food Charter Elementary School Questionnaire

Introduction

The York Region Food Charter (YRFC) aligns with a food movement across Canada, promoting a system from farm to plate that provides access to local, affordable and nutritious food. The YRFC is a vision of thriving urban and rural communities where residents, businesses and governments are creating a resilient, just and sustainable food system.

The YRFC is based on 5 interconnected values: economic opportunities, education and skills, equity and social justice, health and wellbeing and environmental sustainability.

The purpose of this interview is to build understanding around the food charter, while assessing if there are opportunities for community services to support what York Region schools are doing or would like to be doing regarding food and agriculture initiatives.

1. Do you consent to completing this York Region Food Charter questionnaire?

Do you have any questions?

2. What school are you currently associated with?

Which municipality is the school located in?

What is your role within the school community?

3. Please state your level of familiarity with the York Region Food Charter:

- a. Yes, I understand the concept of a food charter
- b. No, I have never heard of a food charter
- c. I've heard the term but don't know what it means

**** York Region Food Charter backgrounder – 64 food policy initiatives having been happening across the country, and food charters have proven to be a great tool to build civic engagement, foster collaboration and develop projects that promote a healthy food system.*

4. What Food and Agriculture initiatives/programs currently exist in your school community?

- Student Nutrition Program
- Healthy Schools Committee (focus on food and agriculture)
- School Garden
- You're the Chef
- 4 for Lunch
- Recycling and Composting
- Other _____
- Other _____
- Other _____

Food For Change

Exploring the local food system in York Region schools

- a. How long have each of these initiatives been happening?
- b. Who leads these initiatives?
- c. What makes these initiatives easy to do?
- d. Are there any challenges in keeping these initiatives operational?
5. What priority issues in York Region school communities could a local food system support? (Please refer to the York Region Food Charter values)
 - a. Why is it beneficial to schools that these issues be addressed?
 - b. How would you like to see these issues being addressed and supported within the school community?
 - c. Please identify the ways in which you see these issues being addressed.
6. What conditions need to be in place in order for food and agriculture initiatives to be further integrated into schools?
**** How do you think community services can support what is happening/what could be happening around food and agriculture in York Region schools?**
7. Which values of the York Region Food Charter would you like to see implemented within your school community?
 - a. How would this improve your school community?
 - b. What would make it easier to implement this in your school community?

The YRFN is conducting workshops/focus groups with students in York Region Elementary Schools to raise awareness about the local food system. Would you be interested in arranging this for your school in November?

Appendix C: Food System Workshop

York Region Food System Workshop Template

Time	Activity	Supplies
8 mins	<p>Introduction and short film on food system (YouTube Video)</p> <p>Discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does anyone grow food at home? - Does anyone cook at home? - Does anyone go grocery shopping with their family? 	Computer, internet, projector
12 mins	<p>'So you think you can cook' competition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Break students into 2-3 groups; each group is given a bin of various fruits and veggies, a blender, a blank recipe card, measuring cups - Each group must prepare a smoothie recipe, using a minimum of 4 local ingredients AND write down their recipe - Each smoothie will be judged based on number of local ingredients used, how students dispose of the waste materials, creativity 	Groceries Bins (2-3) Blank recipe cards Blenders (2-3) Measuring cups Glasses Compost bin/Vermi-compost
5 mins	<p>Waste Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why is vermi-compost and compost essential? - How does this cycle back into food production? 	Vermi-compost
10 mins	<p>Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What's important for a healthy food system? - What programs do you have that relate to this activity? - What activities/programs would you like to do that relate to this activity? 	Chart paper Markers

Appendix D: Glossary of Terms

Agriculture/Culinary Tourism

By combining local food and drink with travel, culinary tourism offers both locals and tourists alike an authentic taste of our bountiful province while contributing to a sustainable world economy. Culinary tourism bridges the gap between the food and travel industries, strengthening viticulture, agriculture, and aquaculture to promote the growth of culinary tourism.

Backyard Garden Sharing

Backyard Garden Sharing links people with unused yard space with those looking for a place to grow food.

Community Food Assessment

A community food assessment is a participatory and collaborative process that examines a broad range of food-related issues and resources in order to inform actions to improve community food security.

Community Food Hubs

Community food hubs increase access to healthy food among low-income community members, while also building capacity, skills and knowledge to encourage perceptions and behavior changes around healthy foods. Community food hubs reduce social isolation, offering residents an opportunity to forge connections and develop social networks in their communities.

Community Kitchen

A community kitchen is a small group of people who get together to prepare meals for themselves or their families.

Food Charter

A food charter is a statement of values that guide food policy development. A charter allows community members and other stakeholders to outline their vision of what food security looks like for their community. A food charter can help secure the commitment from local government, business and others to move towards building a sustainable food system.

Food Co-op

Food Co-ops are collectively owned grocery stores.

Food Labeling

Nutrition labeling is information found on the labels of pre-packaged foods.

Food Policy Council

Food Policy Councils (FPCs) bring together stakeholders from diverse food-related sectors to examine how the food system is operating and to develop recommendations on how to improve it. FPCs may take

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many forms, but are typically either commissioned by local government, or predominately a grassroots effort. Food policy councils have been successful at educating officials and the public, shaping public policy, improving coordination between existing programs, and starting new programs.

Food Literacy

Food literacy is how easily you are able you are to gain information about food, process it, analyze it and act upon it.

Food Skills

Food skills include: knowledge (i.e. about food, nutrition, label reading, food safety, ingredient substitution); Planning (i.e. organizing meals, food preparation on a budget, teaching food skills to children); Conceptualizing food (i.e. creative use of leftovers, adjusting recipes); Food Perception (i.e. using your senses- texture, taste, when foods are cooked).

Waste Management

Waste management and waste reduction of compostable and non-compostable goods produced in all phases of the local food system.

Local Food Shopping Guide

Map/guide of shops, farms and farmers' markets

Good Food Box

The Good Food Box is a non-profit fresh fruit and vegetable distribution system, where a fresh and nutritious box of affordable fruits and vegetables are available each month.

School Breakfast/Snack Programs

Providing healthy breakfasts and snacks at schools in York Region, a school breakfast/snack program would offer an opportunity to offer nutritional meals so kids can get the most out of their school day.