

Executive Summary

The Farm to School Salad Bar is a new and innovative initiative in British Columbia (BC) designed to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables amongst students and raise awareness of the health benefits of doing so. Although the concept of farm to school appears simple, it has multiple planning-related objectives including adopting a comprehensive and holistic approach to school nutrition, establishing links with local farmers and or producers and ensuring the initiative is environmentally friendly. The initiative drew on the work and experience of other farm to school initiatives from the United States (US) and from Ontario, as well as a local BC salad bar pilot project that was established in Dragon Lake Elementary School in Quesnel, B.C. in 2007.

Background

As part of its Healthy Eating Strategy, the BC Healthy Living Alliance (BCHLA) awarded an \$825,371 grant to the Public Health Association of BC (PHABC) to develop and implement farm to school salad bars in BC schools. A total of 16 elementary and high schools located within the jurisdictions of BC's Northern and Interior Health Authorities were selected and awarded grants to develop and implement a farm to school salad bar for the 2008/09 school year. These schools had responded to a request for proposals in April 2008 and they were notified in June 2008 that they had been successful. Under the terms and conditions of the grant, the schools were to develop farm to school salad bars to:

- provide a salad bar lunch to students twice a week for 26 weeks;
- provide lunch salad bar lunches to children between 5 and 18 years of age;
- be available to all students at a cost of \$2.50 for each salad bar meal with financial assistance for those who wished to use the salad bar but were unable to afford it;
- be self financing and sustainable;
- use local produce;
- provide six vegetables, three fruits, one grain or bread, one meat or alternative at each salad bar;
- establish links between local producers and farmers and schools;
- develop curriculum-based activities;
- disseminate information on best practice on operating a farm to school salad bar; and
- develop a “how to” guide on establishing and running a farm to school salad bar.

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation was commissioned to evaluate the Farm to School Salad Bar. SRDC focused the evaluation on the implementation.

The Farm to School Salad Bar Initiative was an ambitious undertaking. The initiative was implemented in 16 schools, many of which were in rural and remote areas of BC. It was designed to achieve multiple goals. While not all goals were met, the schools taking part in the initiative were committed to the initiative and accomplished a lot in a short

time. In the 11 schools participating in the evaluation, the initiative reached about 5,000 elementary and secondary students. The implementation study offered the following lessons on the implementation of this initiative.

Planning the Farm to School Salad Bar

Those involved in this initiative all agreed that more time was needed to plan and develop the salad bars in schools. School principals, staff and volunteers were pleased and relieved at how the farm to school salad bar had developed. However, with the benefit of hindsight, all wished there had of been more time to plan the initiative and to make sure renovations were complete, permits were in place and equipment arrived before the original start date for the salad bar. Schools that were able to put the necessary infrastructure in place quickly were able to implement the salad bar earlier.

The Timing of the Start of the Farm to School Salad Bars

Most schools started between October and December 2008, when the supply of local foods, especially fruit and vegetables, was diminishing. Those trying to develop menus using local produce struggled to find items that would work in the salad bar and, most reluctantly, had to rely on larger chain grocery stores to provide the range of foods at a cost the schools could afford. It was suggested that starting the salad bar in January, when schools could benefit from agreements with farmers to use poly-tunnels to produce early crops, would work much better for all involved. This approach would free up the fall term to plan menus, link with local producers or farmers, and develop supporting curriculum activities.

Staffing the Farm to School Salad Bar

Being able to staff the salad bar with enthusiastic and committed individuals was key. All those involved in the initiative stressed the importance of having a good team of people to implement the salad bar. The staffing of the farm to school salad bars represented substantial hidden costs within this initiative, and many schools, especially elementary, relied on a small group of volunteers. Without the work of volunteers, staff and contractors (all of whom did more than they were supposed to simply because there were things that needed to be done), the farm to school salad bar would not be able to operate.

Operating the Farm to School Salad Bar

The majority of those involved in the initiative had expected the farm to school salad bar to be relatively straightforward to operate. All emphasized the fact that there was a lot more involved in operating the salad bar than anticipated, and suggested other schools thinking about starting a salad bar should be aware of the other tasks involved. They suggested that understanding what was involved would reduce stress levels and “make life easier.”

Changes to the school system

One challenge for some elementary schools was managing the flow of students through the salad bar. Those involved in the salad bar were reminded that students, especially those in the lower grades, did not eat very quickly and needed more time to access the salad bar. Some elementary schools moved to a “play first, lunch later” system because students came in happy and hungry and accessed the salad bar more quickly. They were also more willing to try new foods.

Involvement of Local Producers or Farmers

Local farmers and producers saw the farm to school salad bar as a real opportunity to develop strong links with schools and to have a market for their produce. However, for most, this partnership did not materialize in the first year largely due to the small order sizes from schools. Local producers and farmers needed time to plan ahead to enable changes to be made to planting schedules so they would be able to provide schools with a wider variety of produce. Some farmers and local producers were planning to develop a root cellar to store produce so as to ensure a steady supply through the winter. This was a time-intensive process, and schools needed to factor this into their plans.

Cost was another issue for farmers and local producers. They understood that schools were constrained in what they could charge students, but some orders were so small that it was not financially viable for the farmers/producers to supply the schools.

The Farm to School Salad Bar and High Schools

All high schools failed to meet their predicted targets for students using the farm to school bar despite the effort they had put into developing and operating it. Various strategies were used to encourage participation, and some met with limited success. A further challenge was that some high schools students were mobile and were able to leave campus, unlike elementary students who had to use the services provided by the schools. Some high school participants suggested that the farm to school salad bar model needed to be refined if it was to work successfully in this setting.

Raising Awareness about Healthy Eating in Schools

The speed at which the farm to school salad bars were rolled out prevented many schools from developing accompanying classroom materials or establishing the kind of partnerships they wanted with local farmers and producers. All were keen to move forward with these aspects in year two, as they realized the farm to school salad bar could encourage students to eat more healthily but the reasons *why* health eating was important needed to be reinforced for students.

Changing Students’ Eating Behaviours in the Short Term

Schools participated in the farm to school salad bar initiative to help improve students’ eating behaviours. Based on their own observations and anecdotal feedback from students, staff and parents, those interviewed believed they were slowly achieving this goal. It takes time, but they were beginning to make real changes to the nutritional intake of their students.

The preliminary results from the surveys in four schools suggest that students were more willing to try new fruits and vegetables and they found it easier to eat fruit and vegetables every day with the farm to school salad bars. Students had increased their consumption of fruit and raw vegetables and there was a small but significant change in the frequency with which students ate salad or grated vegetables.

The feedback received from parents was very positive. They were very satisfied with the farm to school salad bar and reported their children enjoyed it. They wanted to see the initiative continue and they would happily recommend it to another parent.

The Need for Ongoing Support

The PHABC employed a project manager to oversee and support this initiative. The schools appreciated the help and support provided, but some felt they would have benefitted from more practical support and help with the everyday aspects of the farm to school salad bar. They also wanted input to develop strategies to address low student participation rates.

The Need for Ongoing Funding

All schools stressed the importance of ongoing funding to meet some of the operating expenses of the farm to school salad bar. All struggled to make the salad bar financially viable within the first few weeks. As the farm to school salad bars became more established, revenues increased, but the need to keep operating costs low prevented some schools from shopping locally. While the schools acknowledged that it might be possible for some salad bars to cover the cost of the food, they indicated that they would be unlikely to recover staffing and other costs.

The Challenge for Policy and Practice

All the schools that participated in this evaluation achieved a lot in a relatively short period of time. They were able to do this because of the enthusiasm, commitment and goodwill of those involved. However, all schools found that it took more time, effort and resources to plan, develop and operate the farm to school salad bar, especially if it was to become an established and integrated component of the school.

The multiple goals of the project may at times have been in conflict with one another, and phasing in selected goals (e.g. links with local producers and farmers and schools) at later periods and over a longer timeframe may have made the implementation easier and smoother.

To make the farm to school salad work, schools adapted the original model so that it addressed local needs. A one-size-fits-all approach would have limited success, especially in the Northern and Interior Regions of BC. The challenge for practice and policy is how to support this initiative on an ongoing basis. For the farm to school salad bars to be implemented successfully, there needs to be:

- adequate time for planning and development;
- funding for operating as well as capital costs;

- assessment to determine whether the school has the equipment, space, facilities, funding and resources to operate the program;
- a mechanism to support volunteers;
- practical supports to schools to help them solve problem;
- reliable sources of locally produced fruits and vegetables available at an affordable price;
- provincial supports reflecting local challenges; and
- government endorsement for long-term sustainability.

In addition, the practical lessons from this initiative are substantial. The initiative has already produced a “how to” guide for schools and communities planning this type of initiative. It may be further strengthened through the findings detailed in this evaluation, for instance through the advance development of materials and resources that can be provided to schools to be adapted for their environment, or support to school administrators on engaging school communities (particularly high school students), sourcing, cost, time, paid and volunteer staffing. This type of “how to” manual and the factors for success listed above can play an important role in future endeavours.