

Food and Nutrition in Nova Scotia Schools

An Environmental Scan of Key School Informants



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Healthy Foods in Nova Scotia Schools Steering Committee*

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A school should not be a preparation for life. A school should be life. – Elbert Hubbard

FORWARD

In February 2003, the Office of Health Promotion publicized its intention to work with schools, school boards and other community stakeholders to conduct a survey of food choices in schools. This survey was presented as a first step in the development of a provincial food and nutrition policy for schools that would address food and nutrition needs and concerns. While poor school food choices and nutrition have recently been positioned as predominantly child health concerns, to be inclusive and reflect the complexity of the issue, the Office of Health Promotion and Department of Health assembled partners from the Department of Education and Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. Together, staff from these departments formed the Healthy Foods in Nova Scotia Schools Steering Committee.

During initial discussions, the steering committee agreed that a more detailed account of the current school food environment would be prudent before proceeding with any policy or strategy discussions concerning school food and nutrition. It was decided that a consultation with provincial school key informants to explore current processes, successes, challenges and opportunities related to school food and nutrition would be conducted in place of the school food survey.

This report is the result of the key informant, in-depth interview process with two groups of school food and nutrition stakeholders – school board program directors and selected elementary, junior and senior high school principals from across Nova Scotia. The key informant survey process was not intended to capture the perspectives of other school food and nutrition stakeholders, notably parents, teachers, students and school food service organizations. The report captures perspectives on a variety of key issues at a point in time in the individuals' school food experience. As an environmental scan, the key informant survey process and resulting information analysis were not designed to capture all possible perspectives (i.e., saturate all themes) on school food and nutrition issues.

The information contained within this report will be considered as one information source as the provincial government, community partners and other stakeholders move toward addressing the school food and nutrition environment for all Nova Scotian students.

THE CURRENT SCHOOL FOOD AND NUTRITION ENVIRONMENT IN NOVA SCOTIA

The School Environment Influences Children's Food Choices

A variety of broad determinants influence the nutritional health of children and youth, including the availability and affordability of foods present in their environments (Health Canada, 1999). Many academic and government publications report that parents, children, communities and government departments identify the school environment as having significant influence over children's food choices. Evidence and best practices from these and other reports recommend fostering supportive school environments for affordable nutritious foods through a combination of curriculum, policy and school practices (Health Canada, 1997; Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1997; Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 1996; World Health Organization, 1998).

More Children Are Fed in School

The school food situation in Nova Scotia is very different than it was 10 or 20 years ago. Gone are the days when the majority of students walked to and from local schools, returning home for meals prepared by parents or caregivers. Communities have expanded far beyond the walking distance to schools. More children are driven or bused to consolidated schools with the intention of remaining for the full day. As well in many households, both parents work full-time outside of the home (Health Canada, 1999). The combination of these factors has necessitated that food be available to children in school. Newer schools have been built to include food service facilities. However, older schools lacking food services have had to solicit donations and fund-raise to adapt existing facilities or turn to outside providers for delivery of food.

Business Partnerships with Schools as a Source of Funding

The business world is keenly aware of the potential to build preferences and cultivate brand loyalty by targeting schools that house a captive and impressionable audience of future consumers (Nestle, 2002; Media Awareness Network, 2003^{a,b}). Provincial schools, struggling with budget issues for the past few years, have entered into partnerships with businesses as a quick and easy way of tapping into new financial resources. One of the most popular business agreements in Nova Scotia schools is the "pouring rights contracts" with beverage companies: companies provide money upfront in exchange for exclusive rights to sell and market their products in school. Pouring rights contracts have allowed schools to purchase computers, sports equipment and additional resources. Contracts with vending and food services have become revenue sources for schools seeking to fund activities and provide materials that can benefit students. Few school boards have policies in place outlining the types of agreements that can be made with businesses. No provincial policies or guidelines currently exist to protect students from commercial interests (F. Covey, Nova Scotia Department of Education, personal communication, October 30, 2003).

The School Milk Program is the Only Provincial Program Supporting Nova Scotia Agricultural Products in Schools

The Nova Scotia School Milk Program, established in 1974, offers Nova Scotia school children a nutritious milk beverage at less than wholesale price. Despite pouring rights contracts, the program has encouraged and maintained the consumption, affordability and availability of milk at school (L. MacDonald, Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, personal communication, November 24, 2003). Beyond the school milk program, there are no other programs nor formal processes dedicated to promoting and supporting the use of Nova Scotia products within school food services.

Food and Beverage Offerings in Schools

The nutritional quality of the foods and beverages served in schools has become a contentious issue in Nova Scotia. A wide variety of foods and beverages are served in schools across the province, and as this and other provincial reports describe (Nova Scotia Department of Health and Nova Scotia Nutrition Council, 1993), the majority of offerings do not comply with national nutrition guidance. Given the increasing rates of overweight and obesity in Nova Scotia (Nova Scotia Department of Health, 1995; Colman, 2000), along with the poor provincial health statistics for diabetes (Diabetes Care Program of Nova Scotia, 2003) and heart disease (Nova Scotia Department of Health, 1995), many groups have expressed concern regarding the nutritional quality of the foods and beverages offered to children in school.

Schools Struggle to Improve Food and Beverage Offerings

Some schools, school boards and surrounding communities have taken steps to improve the nutritional quality of the foods and beverages served to children in school. However, there are concerns about the ability to sustain the positive changes made. As this report further illustrates, many more schools have been unable to initiate improvements to foods and beverages due to numerous competing school priorities, financial challenges, inadequate information and resources for school food, and the limitations of school food service facilities.

Nova Scotia Lacks a Formal Approach to School Food and Nutrition

In Nova Scotia, there is neither a formal nor consistent process to address food and nutrition in schools, yet most schools provide food and beverages during the day. Few school boards have food and nutrition policies. There are no provincial standards or guidelines governing the food and beverage choices available to students in Nova Scotia schools.

Healthy Child and Youth Development: The Context of Our Work

Over the past several years in Nova Scotia, across Canada and internationally, many organizations and individuals have been involved in a movement to enhance investments and supports for the promotion of healthy child and youth development. Within an overall population health approach, issues related to social, emotional and cognitive development, healthy eating, physical activity and the prevention of overweight and obesity have been identified as areas of focus. Initiatives within the province that provide a context for this report include the following:

- enhanced supports for the child care sector, home visiting and a comprehensive early childhood development system made possible through the federal government's Early Childhood Development Initiative;

- formation of the Nova Scotia Alliance for Healthy Eating and Physical Activity;
- release of the research report, “Physical Activity Levels in Children and Youth in the Province of Nova Scotia”;
- the development and implementation of *Active Kids, Healthy Kids* the provincial physical activity strategy for children and youth;
- several Canadian Diabetes Strategy funded initiatives that focus on developing an understanding of and promote and protect healthy eating and physical activity among children and youth;
- the Children’s Lifestyle and School Performance Study (CLASS);
- and the development of a provincial chronic disease prevention strategy, which includes a provincial healthy eating strategy.

The numerous partners and stakeholders who are involved in these initiatives, notably *Active Kids, Healthy Kids*, the provincial chronic disease prevention strategy and the provincial healthy eating strategy, are committed to integrated and comprehensive approaches to facilitate improvements in overall health from a population health perspective, including physical activity and healthy eating patterns and behaviors. As an example, Active School Communities is one strategy component of the *Active Kids, Healthy Kids* strategy that sees teachers, students, parents, administrators and community leaders in sport, recreation and health working together to make their schools places that support active, healthy lifestyles among children, youth and families. Some Active School Communities Committees have identified nutrition, on their own initiative, as complementary to achieving their physical activity goals.

KEY INFORMANT SUMMARY REPORT AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

This report presents findings from consultations with provincial school key informants regarding the provision of healthy food choices in school. Included are solutions suggested by key informants for improving the existing food and nutrition situation in Nova Scotia schools.

STEERING COMMITTEE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT SCHOOL FOOD AND NUTRITION

In February 2003, the Office of Health Promotion publicized its intention to work with schools, school boards and other community stakeholders to conduct a survey of food choices in schools. This was presented as a first step in creating a healthy food policy that would address food and nutrition needs and concerns in provincial schools. In order to encompass the broader range of school food and nutrition issues, the Office of Health Promotion and Department of Health also assembled partners from the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. Together, staff from these departments formed the Healthy Foods in Nova Scotia Schools Steering Committee. During initial discussions pertaining to the school food survey, a number of assumptions were made about the current status of food and nutrition in Nova Scotia schools.

It was thought that...

- there was a variety of reasons why nutritious foods and beverages were and were not available to students in school
- purchase decisions by students in school were motivated by previous experience, personal preferences, price and the products offered
- the cost of food to schools and students had an impact on whether or not nutritious food and beverages were served in school
- the range of food and beverage offerings in schools was influenced by a complex system of financial, human resource, infrastructure (e.g., school space, equipment, capacity) and knowledge factors (e.g., nutrition, foodservice, food, planning and purchasing)
- schools were able to generate more revenue by selling some food and beverage items compared with others
- schools were under pressure to provide food in school

The Steering Committee realized that these assumptions came with significant and complex policy implications. It was agreed that a more detailed account of the current school food environment would be prudent before proceeding with any policy or strategy discussions concerning school food and nutrition. It was decided that a consultation with provincial school key informants would be conducted in place of the school food survey.

PURPOSE OF THE KEY INFORMANT CONSULTATION

Consultations with provincial school key informants were held to:

- learn more about the current school food environment in Nova Scotia
- probe specific elements of the school food environment, including decision-making processes, influencing factors, successes and challenges, affordability, use of Nova Scotia food products, and supports and resources for school food and nutrition
- obtain suggested solutions for the improvement of school food and nutrition in Nova Scotian schools
- identify cross-sectoral policy issues pertaining to the provision of healthy, affordable and local food product use in schools
- identify areas in need of further research

Information gained from key informant consultations will be used by the Healthy Foods in Nova Scotia Schools Steering Committee to recommend next steps for addressing school food and nutrition issues. These recommendations will assist the provincial government, community partners and other stakeholders in planning and designing policies and strategies for the provision of healthy, affordable foods and beverages in Nova Scotian schools.

METHODOLOGY

A consultation with provincial school key informants was commissioned by the Healthy Foods in Nova Scotia School Steering Committee. Telephone interviews were held in August and September 2003 with school board program directors and a group of elementary, junior high and senior high school principals representative of all eight provincial school boards. An interview tool was designed to facilitate questioning around strengths and successes, issues, challenges and opportunities related to the provision of healthy food choices and use of Nova Scotia food products in Nova Scotia public schools. Participation in the consultation was voluntary and confidentiality was assured. Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in length, with most interviews lasting 50 minutes.

Twenty-six interviews were completed. School board program directors, and in two cases their equivalent staff, were interviewed in the seven provincial English-speaking boards. Two additional interviews were conducted with school board specialists in food and nutrition upon the request of program directors. Sixteen interviews were completed with school principals: eight elementary, four junior high and four senior high schools. One or two schools were contacted in each provincial school board.

A thematic analysis was performed on responses. Although only a segment of provincial school principals were contacted, very similar responses and issues were noted among them. Adequate representation was further reinforced by similarities in principal and program director responses. Strong themes emerged that encompassed the issues of both key informant groups, and for this reason responses were combined for the purposes of the report. In some cases, opposing views emerged within themes and in such instances; both perspectives were reported.

WHAT KEY INFORMANTS SHARED ABOUT SCHOOL FOOD AND NUTRITION: THEMATIC AREAS

FEEDING CHILDREN IN SCHOOL

The question of responsibility for feeding children in school surfaced in almost all interviews. There was unanimous agreement that healthy food and beverage choices were important for children and youth. Even so, there was a wide range of opinions on the level of school responsibility for providing healthy, affordable food to students, as well as who else should be held accountable.

Schools

Some respondents felt schools had been forced to take on too much responsibility for feeding children and that schools had only a minor role in providing nutritious meals and choices. Others believed that feeding children was a natural part of their role in “in loco parentia” (i.e., in the place of a parent). For instance, many key informants operated and passionately supported universal (i.e., available to all students), free school breakfast programs to ensure children were prepared for the day’s learning, regardless of the reason for arriving at school hungry (e.g., early buses, no food at home, no one at home to prepare food, not hungry, not valued as a habit at home, etc.). These same individuals described starting and sustaining breakfast programs as one of their greatest challenges, expending precious time and resources to secure grants as well as donations of food, money, facilities, equipment and volunteers.

Parents

All respondents saw parents sharing the responsibility for feeding children in school. Parents were seen as having a vital role in the development of children’s eating habits - both good and bad. It was felt by some that parents were generally well informed about proper nutrition for children and took pains to ensure their children ate well. A few key informants were concerned that schools, by offering nutritiously poor choices, were undoing the good work of parents who had helped their children form healthy eating habits. Many more felt that parents did not have adequate nutrition knowledge. They were very troubled by the food and beverages packed as lunches and snacks sent from home, citing chips, chocolate bars and highly processed convenience foods as typical fare. Some believed parents faced similar issues as schools when it came to providing food for their children: they lacked time, information and in some cases, the proper financial resources.

Food Companies and Establishments

Principals and program directors felt schools struggled to combat “years of poor eating practices” reinforced by the larger environments to which children were exposed (e.g., aggressive food and beverage marketing, easy access to poor food choices in communities, pressure from peers, habits learned and reinforced from home). Within this larger environment food service companies, restaurants and convenience stores were identified as having tremendous influence over the food and beverage choices of children. It was mentioned that many of these businesses provided food services to schools. Additionally, many students were said to frequent food services and convenience establishments in close proximity to schools during and after school hours.

What Key Informants Had to Say About Feeding Children in School...

“Food is important in school - for learning, mental and physical stamina. But kids are faced with food and other problems when they leave the school. They are only here for five hours a day. We need to look at how to address issues outside of school, too.”

– Program Director

“The school should not be made responsible for providing the main nutritious meal of the day. It is not a school function to be the primary meal provider for the day!”

- Elementary/Junior High Principal

“I hear people say, ‘feeding kids is not a school job.’ But they are wrong. We do have a responsibility for the children who are in our care from 8:30 am to 4:00 pm. Part of our code is abiding by loco parentia. When we are with children, we are their caregivers and we need to be nurturing and caring in our conduct. It is part of our job to make children feel safe and protected, and we are accountable and liable if they are injured and we did not ensure a safe environment. The same goes for food. We need to be more responsible with the food served.” - School Board Consultant

“Maybe most or all of the poor eating habits that kids have end up being encouraged by what is served in schools. Students may enter the school with good habits and have them worsen because of what is served. In effect, the schools may help create these poor eating habits.” - Program Director

“We can educate the children about the importance of healthy choices, but they are not the ones buying the food. The parents are! So how much influence can school have if it is not reinforced at home?” - Elementary School Principal

HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Many key informants expressed frustration over the lack of common priorities and goals between the departments of Health and Education: the Department of Health focusing on improving the health of the population, while the Department of Education focuses on educational attainment. Respondents felt these sectors ended up pitting priorities against one another, forcing schools to choose one over another when faced with limited time and resources. In contrast, a smaller number saw common ground for education and health priorities in the link between food and school success. These key informants were convinced that the availability and promotion of healthier food choices had resulted in positive outcomes for their schools (e.g., students were better learners, could cope better with stress and experienced fewer disciplinary episodes). These same informants considered school food and nutrition as part of broader initiatives designed to support healthy school environments for students.

Principals and program directors were unsure about the level of priority that could be assigned or remain committed to school food and nutrition given competing priorities within the present education system, as well as the limited knowledge, resources and tools schools currently had to address school food.

What Key Informants Had to Say About Health and Education Priorities...

“Fundamentally, concern around school food and nutrition has not been a priority for the Department of Health until now—when we are in crisis.” - Program Director

“I see school food as a minor part of the school in the big picture of priorities. At school the main thing should be education. Educating students seems to get the back burner when it should be a priority. My time away dealing with other issues is time away from education. As a principal, I only have so much time. The department keeps mandating things. If they want me to focus on serving nutritionally acceptable food, they need to tell me what I have to give up! We need some assistance here.” - Elementary/Junior High Principal

“This [school food/nutrition] should not be handled as separate programming. It needs to be connected to address the larger issues and how they are interconnected. I don’t want to have to play physical activity against healthy eating or violence prevention because of competing priorities and lack of resources.” - Elementary School Principal

“Before we can even look at student achievement, we need to build this in first [healthy food]. School success depends on healthy food choices.” - Board Program Supervisor

“I see my job as producing young healthy citizens. This goes beyond academics. A secure, healthy environment supporting physical activity, healthy eating and emotional well-being needs to be created alongside [academics]. Academic achievement cannot happen without these.” - Junior High Principal

REVENUE VERSUS HEALTH

“Where profit is, loss is hidden nearby.” – Japanese Proverb

The need for revenue generation versus the concern for students’ health was one of the most passionately discussed features of the consultation. Most key informants used the word “profit” when discussing school needs for revenue.

Profit or Perish

Generally two options were declared by key informants when it came to providing foods and beverages in schools: offering nutritionally inferior foods and beverages that provided revenue or nutritionally balanced, affordable choices that supported student health at the expense of “profit.” Most respondents vehemently stated that schools had come to depend upon monies from vending, cafeteria and canteen sales to generate funds for basic school necessities, classroom supports and extra-curricular activities. School food services were required to operate on a cost-recovery basis because school boards would not compensate for losses. As a result, it was mentioned that schools became desperate to sell items that guaranteed sales, i.e., popular convenience, snack, and fast foods, and that nutrition was often sacrificed in the process. Additionally, many pointed out that in junior and senior high schools, students accessed food off-site, resulting in decisions to serve similar foods as a way of competing for much-needed revenue.

All respondents said that they would like to offer exclusively healthy food at school, but for many it was not felt to be fiscally possible. For example, the only school board currently having a food and nutrition policy in Nova Scotia stated that the need for revenue from school food sales has precluded compliance with the policy in many schools.

Fewer in number were those who mentioned offering exclusively healthy food and beverages to students. Some in this situation said that as a result, they had to sacrifice programs, equipment, class trips and other supplements used to enrich the curriculum. Conversely, others challenged the notion that revenue and programs needed to be sacrificed in order to serve nutritious, affordable food.

Curriculum versus Environment

A number of key informants felt that having to choose between health and revenue goals had produced an ethical dilemma. Many stated that they and their teaching staff felt hypocritical for teaching students about healthy eating while the current school environment provided few opportunities to make good food and beverage choices, given its dependence upon selling revenue-generating, nutritiously poor foods. Fewer in number were those who felt that the school food environment was supportive of the health curriculum. In most cases, these were principals who had made the decision to offer exclusively healthy foods to students.

Affordability and Availability of Food

Most respondents felt that food and beverages sold at school were priced so that the majority of students could afford to purchase them. However, all articulated concerns about students living in financially challenged situations. All described strategies that existed in schools for “quiet” ways of providing food to students in need. The strategies described ranged from having food on hand to feed hungry students to “free” meal tickets from food services as a reward for having students perform chores or for good behaviour. Additionally, some mentioned that the higher cost of healthier foods and beverages was a barrier to their use and promotion to students.

Commercial Interests in Schools

All informants acknowledged the increased reliance on corporate sponsors and private companies as a source of revenue for schools. They were aware that business interests in schools were motivated by profit potential but felt schools often had to make the difficult decision of sacrificing nutrition, control and at times, principles in order to acquire funds.

What Key Informants Had to Say about Revenue Versus Health...

“Schools run canteens for the wrong reasons - it is run for profit at present. It should be run to provide nutritious foods for the students, but this is not possible with the limited amount of funding and support.” - Elementary School Principal.

“School food is a fundraiser. For hockey teams, playgrounds, extra curricular activities. This all depends on if they have any money left from the cafeteria or canteen sales. In most schools the profits aren’t that much.” - Program Director

“We have no vending machines in our school. Some of the parents have said we should have machines because they can make so much money for the school. I tell them if it’s the money that they want, we could sell drugs and make even more!” - Elementary School Principal

“From a board perspective, I am ready to rescind the administrative procedures of the [school food and nutrition policy] because schools cannot meet the procedural demands - they cannot afford to implement them.” - Program Director

“Our school never did sell chips, chocolate, etc. in the canteen. That’s why we are such a poor school. But we are healthy!” - Junior High Principal

“Since we have changed the school food to more nutritious offerings we have not lost money like we expected.” - Elementary School Principal

“We have been hypocritical - saying one thing in class and doing another in our canteens and cafeterias!” - Elementary School Principal

“There are students in situations where there is no food at home. There are also kids who do not receive good choices at home. They can’t concentrate in school without the proper nourishment.” - Board Program Supervisor

“We need to provide a low-cost service to students - nutritious and low-cost foods. If we can’t do this, we shouldn’t be in the business of school food.” - Principal of P-12 School

“Companies try to consider nutrition, but it is a fine line. Companies are motivated by profit, so nutrition is worked in where it doesn’t affect the bottom line.” - Program Director

“Our school has a contract with Pepsi Cola that was in place before I was principal here. They provide money up front for exclusive rights to sell their products in schools. We have to keep them here until their contract expires.” – Junior High Principal

“We lose our code of ethics when we use food to promote business over the health of kids. We pay the price for the decision either way: good food means a “poor” school. Agreeing to product marketing in schools to get funding for the school means poor food and health for the children.” - Elementary School Principal

EDUCATORS OR RESTAURATEURS: Are schools equipped to serve food?

Much discussion was dedicated to the challenges of serving food and beverages within current school settings and situations. Three major issues arose in almost all interviews, revolving around school facilities, food service staff and nutrition and business expertise.

School Facilities

Key informants considered the school facility as a major determinant of the food and beverages offered to students. Descriptions of school food facilities, including storage,

preparation, service and dining space, as well as available equipment (i.e., fridges, freezers, stoves, microwaves) varied significantly among those interviewed. The description of facilities ranged from full-service, contracted cafeterias providing a large variety of food items to the absence of on-site facilities, necessitating that food be brought in daily from local fast-food or family-style restaurants.

Respondents were disturbed by the present inequities in school facilities across the province. Many were frustrated with the logistics of serving food within older school facilities (i.e., the lack of dedicated space for storage, preparation and delivery) designed at a time when most children returned home for lunch. In contrast, newer schools built with food services and dining areas were described as being comparatively better equipped to offer a variety of healthy options. Informants pointed out that even newly-built food services failed to meet the present space requirements of the student population. The lack of dining space for students was mentioned as a particularly troublesome issue. Many schools had been forced to split their lunch periods, which often resulted in very little time for students to eat (e.g., 10 or 15 minutes in some cases).

A number of respondents stated that school food facilities were bound by guidelines for provincial commercial food service establishments. They admitted that in far too many cases, schools did not have the proper commercial equipment and facilities required to serve food. Schools that had been inspected and directed to upgrade their spaces to meet the terms of food safety and service regulations often were not able to comply or had to fund-raise in order to do so. School board program directors confirmed that school boards were not allocated funds for school food service facilities or equipment.

School Food Service Staff

Key informants stated that one of the major challenges schools faced when it came to serving food was the lack of adequate food service staff. The number of staff available to procure, prepare and deliver school food was said to significantly influence what could be served to students. Schools lacking paid or volunteer food service staff tended to rely more on ready-made and convenience foods. In addition to, or instead of paid staff, schools often relied heavily upon parent, school staff and student volunteers. Some schools sought out grants to fund school food coordinators.

The lack of food safety, nutrition knowledge and training of school food service staff were concerns shared by many respondents. Most doubted that school-based staff or volunteers had formal training in nutrition, menu-planning or safe food handling. It was assumed that staff employed by contracted food services had safe food handling training at a minimum. It was pointed out that most school boards did not fund food handlers training for school staff and volunteers.

A number of informants were concerned about liability issues for food service staff and volunteers. Because school boards, schools nor individuals could not afford the annual fees for personal liability insurance required of paid food service workers in the school setting, many operated without it. There were concerns that this placed individuals and schools in potential legal jeopardy.

Many were distressed by the inability to pay food service staff adequately for their work due to a lack of funds. Respondents described having ethical concerns with underpaying stay-at-home moms, because stipends offered were often less than minimum wage.

Nutrition and Business Expertise

Key Informants generally felt ill equipped to operate food services in schools. Most did not have any formal food service, nutrition or business training. Informants were disturbed by the noticeable lack of food and nutrition expertise available to school boards and schools. Few boards in the province employed staff with nutrition expertise. Individual schools described consulting with family studies, home economics or physical education teachers if they had them. Advice was also sought from public health nutritionists, community dietitians and other health professionals, but not all schools had equal access to these resources.

Respondents were frustrated by the lack of information available regarding school food: what was appropriate to serve to students from a nutritional standpoint, how to determine prices, and how to operate profitable businesses. As well, the coordination of food services—phoning in orders, contacting suppliers, negotiating delivery times, handling money, personnel issues, inventory, food safety, etc—was said to be a real chore when combined with numerous other competing school priorities. For this, and other reasons, many mentioned the desire to hand over school food services to outside companies.

What Key Informants Had to Say About Schools Being Equipped to Serve Food...

“There is pressure from all sides saying that schools must serve healthy, nutritious safe food, but they are not supported in doing so. How can they do this without adequate resources and tools?” - Program Director

“I basically have a closet that I use to sell junk food.” - Elementary School Principal

“How much work goes into writing grant proposals asking for items and to do what should already be there for everyone? The school should be a safe place to eat that has proper equipment and facilities to serve food.” - School Board Consultant

“It is hard to store fresh fruit and vegetables when you do not have any storage space or cold storage. So it is actually easier for schools to store Twinkies!” - Program Director

“There is not much space to prepare or even heat and hold foods ahead of time. It really limits what we can serve.” - Elementary School Principal

“Cafeterias are too small to accommodate the number of students—even the new ones! Provincial policies for building schools still assume that one-third of the student body will leave the campus to eat.” - Program Director

“Two sittings for lunch are needed to get the kids through. We had to shorten morning recess to accommodate lunch. We need to be able to serve items quickly and clean up before the next group arrives to eat.” - Elementary/Junior High School Principal

“The Health Inspector said we still have to comply with safety, etc. We had to raise money to install a proper vent.” - Elementary School Principal

“Schools would like to be able to offer a more nutritious and varied menu, but are unable

to because they cannot afford to hire full-time staff.” - Program Director

“We are understaffed now and last year. Only so much can be done with limited staff in terms of food services. We have two volunteers that help the food service staff and they go full tilt. Without them helping out, we couldn’t manage.” - Elementary/Junior High Principal

“We’re trained to be educators, now we have to make decisions regarding food?! It’s not my forte. I need help to figure out the money and the food. How am I to figure out prices? How much is too much? What is a reasonable portion of food? It’s one more thing added to my plate, and I don’t feel qualified to deliver it.” - Elementary School Principal

“You have to understand that feeding children is not in our job descriptions at the board nor in the schools. We lack the expertise here.” - Program Director

“Being in charge of all this [school food service], I should have gotten a business degree. And should have taken nutrition/health courses!” - Junior High Principal

“I was not hired as a canteen supervisor, but now I have to be. This role has been forced on principals with no training and little advice on how to do it!” – Elementary School Principal

DECISIONS FOR FOOD IN SCHOOLS

Key informants shared detailed information about the kinds of food and beverages served in schools, as well as the factors that influenced the selections. During interviews, informants were asked about the decision-making processes schools used to determine which foods and beverages would be served to students.

Current Food and Beverage Choices in Nova Scotia Schools

All key informants stated that students were offered white milk as part of the Nova Scotia School Milk Program. The majority stated that school canteens typically stocked a high proportion of packaged, processed snacks - chips, chocolate bars, candy, cookies, fruit-flavoured beverages, ice cream and other frozen novelties. Some canteens were said to offer more nutritious items such as cheese, crackers, muffins, yogurt, fresh/canned fruit, juices, vegetables and dip, popcorn, pretzels, rice cakes and bagels. Generally, hot lunch programs presented fast-food from popular establishments: Burger King, Dairy Queen, McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, KFC, Subway, as well as hot dogs, chicken burgers and similar items ordered and delivered same-day from local restaurants.

Some food programs were committed to healthier choices and offered subs, wraps, baked potatoes, soup and salads. School-operated cafeterias provided more opportunity for “from scratch” choices, depending on staffing situations, because of more adequate preparation and service facilities (e.g., made-to-order sandwiches, soup, chicken nuggets, macaroni and cheese, hot dogs, mini pizza and burgers). Outside companies were said to provide the greatest variety of choices due to coordinated menu

designs, consistent paid food service staff and more elaborate storage, preparation and delivery facilities. Choices from contracted in-school food services included salads, stir fries, soups, ethnic foods, sandwiches/subs, fruit/vegetables trays and pizza but also much more daily availability of popular fried items, e.g., fish and chips, burgers and French fries.

Guidelines and Policies

The consultation with principals and school board program directors revealed that very few schools in Nova Scotia used written guidelines or policies to establish which foods and beverages would be served to students. The exceptions to this were school breakfast programs. Key Informants involved with these programs commented that they often followed food and nutrition guidelines established by funded coordinators who had expertise in food and nutrition.

Respondents held divergent views regarding the role of provincially mandated food and nutrition policies. There were those who felt policy and guidelines would serve as an incentive to make schools accountable for their choices where there was currently none. Of this group, some expressed a desire to limit choices at school to those that were exclusively healthy, while others called for some allowances for less nutritious items. Some respondents felt strongly that given the wide range of school facilities, staffing and unique situational issues, no policy would be able to be accommodated in all cases.

Consideration for Nutritional Quality

Almost all informants commented that schools tried to offer the best food and beverage choices they could under their individual circumstances. In many cases, informants commented that the nutritional quality of food and beverages served was not a consideration when factored in with all of the other challenges and priorities schools faced. A minority of informants insisted upon offering exclusively healthy choices to students. In some but not all of these cases, schools were bound by written food and nutrition policies.

Influences on School Food and Beverage Choices

Most key informants commented that decisions for school food and beverage choices were primarily based upon convenience (i.e., what was feasible to prepare or serve given the school facilities and staffing situations). Decisions were also said to be governed, to a greater or lesser extent, by a combination of student demands, parental concerns, school advisory councils or home and school groups, school food committees, food service staff, contracted food service companies, “common sense”, ideas from other schools and advice from those with food and nutrition expertise (i.e., public health nutritionists, community dietitians and school-based home economics, family studies, physical education and guidance staff). With the exception of two school boards, boards were not traditionally involved in setting any school food and beverage guidelines.

Differences Between Elementary and Junior/Senior High Schools

Respondents acknowledged that the food and beverage choices differed in elementary schools compared with those in junior and senior high. Specifically, it was stated that most elementary schools restricted student access to pop and candy, compared with very few junior and senior high schools. Many key informants felt that the same restrictions could not be imposed upon students in the junior and senior high school grades because of increased personal freedom for choices and ability to access food offsite.

What Key Informants Had to Say About Decisions for Food in School...

“When I started in the system as a vice principal, I was at a junior high that was selling junk. When I couldn’t seem to get support to make the change to better foods and drinks, I went looking for guidelines - from the board, from the Department [of Education]. It really seemed strange that there weren’t any.” - Elementary School Principal

“There needs to be some assurances that what will be served in schools is healthy and will be offered at a reasonable price.” - Board Consultant

“Guidelines would motivate schools to become accountable for what to serve. They could offer much needed consistency and overhead direction.” – Board Program Supervisor

“There has been a conscious effort made by schools to include healthy foods. There seems to be more awareness. But it hasn’t gone so far to only serve healthy meals. They are not there yet.” - Program Director

“It is amazing to see kids line up for fresh fruit, vegetables and popcorn.” - Elementary School Principal

“Kids go for “other” foods traditionally. They would choose the less healthy items if they were available. Our healthy choices are very limited, but they are still the only choice. - Junior High Principal.

“What is served in elementary, junior and senior high school is different and dependent upon many things - space, time, facilities, school leadership, profit needs. Generally speaking, there is a greater variety of choices and less nutritious offerings as you move up to the higher grades.” - Board Program Supervisor

*“If they don’t like what is there [at the school] they go to McDonald’s or Sobeys.
– Principal Junior High School*

SOLUTIONS SUGGESTED BY KEY INFORMANTS

As part of the consultation, key Informants were asked to describe the supports and resources they required, as well as to make recommendations for what they thought had to happen next in order to address or make improvements to the food and beverage choices available in schools. During the interviews as issues were discussed, frustrations were voiced and success stories were shared, key informants often ended up presenting other solutions that could improve school food. As well, some passed on advice and suggestions that had proved successful in their own situations. It is important to note that some key informants felt that their success with school food was

precarious, at best. This group called for specific supports to help them sustain the good work that had already been done.

The following represents solutions suggested by provincial school key informants to address the provision of healthy, safe and affordable school food for Nova Scotian students.

Suggested Solutions: Feeding Children in School

Promote Consistent Nutrition Messages for Children

Informants called for consistent nutrition messages for children that were reinforced in a variety of environments-schools, home and in the community.

“We need to use media messages more to promote health. Youth are impressionable. These messages need to be reinforced outside of the school system. Otherwise, students will tend to see them as a product of the school system. We need to think like them and tap into where they are and their interests and connect the messages there.”
- Senior High School Principal

Provide Supports for Parents

All respondents identified the need for parental education and support regarding healthy food choices for children. It was suggested that provincial departments work together on programming to support families, parenting and affordable food.

“We need a provincial strategy that supports parents. How can they support their children in eating healthy? Practical suggestions! They need to know the whys of why nutrition is important.” - Program Director

Support Health and Family Studies Curricula

Some informants called for more resources and supports for the health curriculum and family studies programs. This was seen as supporting students in learning essential skills for life, allowing them to take more responsibility for their health.

“In elementary school, we teach nutrition to children who aren’t responsible for feeding themselves. In junior and senior high school, we teach nutrition to the students, but they do not know how to cook or prepare any food.” - Program Director

“We have to do a better job with the students. The Department of Education needs more emphasis on nutrition and health. We need to help students take more ownership and help them understand that they have the power to change.” - Senior High School Principal

Support Breakfast Programming

Respondents involved in operating school breakfast programs expressed the need for formalized provincial government funding and support for breakfast programs.

“Nova Scotia is one of the only provinces where the provincial government does not fund food programs.” - Program Director

Establish Accountability and Involvement of the Food Industry

It was agreed that food service companies should have some accountability for the food and beverage choices provided to children. Some key informants considered food service providers sources of guidance and information, which could assist schools with making positive changes to the foods and beverages provided. It was also recommended that food service companies and food service staff be consulted as future stakeholders.

“Schools are now responsible for organizing or running food services. Unless the government is willing to take it over or provide the funds to so do, they need to be in contact with the [food] industry and change what they [i.e., the companies] provide to schools.” - Program Director

Consult With Students Regarding School Food and Nutrition

Informants acknowledged that many assumptions were made about the food and beverage preferences of school-aged children and youth. Many suggested that students be asked for their thoughts and solutions regarding school food, given that they are the ultimate consumers of school food and beverages.

“Kids are making healthier choices. Many ask for specific items to be included like salads and fruit.” - Senior High Principal

“Students have a powerful voice. It would make more sense to encourage them to share their thoughts on what needs to be done. How often are they consulted? Not often enough! Yet it is decisions that directly affect them.” - Senior High School Principal

Suggested Solutions: Health and Education

Provide High-Level Leadership

Key informants wanted priorities for serving healthy food be set at higher levels to support school-based decisions for providing healthy, affordable food to students. Respondents called for government departments to work together on a shared vision and common goals and language to support the health and education of children and youth. They saw this occurring under the leadership of the provincial government.

“If I leave the school, the next person coming in might think ‘she’s nuts for trying to do all this!’ If it is not a priority in the board and the department, it is easy for it to be gone when I leave!” - Elementary School Principal

“We need leadership at this level. We need for the provincial government to make it clear that they are concerned. We need a longer commitment and plan in place.” - Board Consultant

“What we need is for the government to be a ‘real’ partner in the issue - not merely download this on the schools. We will need things like more funding for the Department of Education, supports for parent buy-in, provincial funding for food programs like breakfast.” - Program Director

“The government, the Department of Education and the Department of Health need to work together. They all need to make this a priority.” - Board Consultant

Share Information Linking Health and Education to Support Common Goals

It was recommended that research linking a healthy mind and body with school success be shared with principals, parents, students, school boards and communities to help build understanding and support for the mutual goals and priorities.

“We know food affects mood, learning and behaviour. We need to share this information with schools, teachers and parents.” - Program Director

Position School Food and Nutrition within Larger Lifestyle Initiatives

It was suggested that school food and nutrition be linked with larger health and lifestyle initiatives, i.e., healthy living through healthy eating, active living and not smoking. With this approach, informants felt school food and nutrition would not be viewed as an “add-on,” nor a competing priority, but rather as a natural element of a healthy school environment. Some expressed the need for consideration of all of the various factors that determine health when deciding the next steps for school food. They were aware that this would require longer-term solutions.

“We need to look at the bigger picture - a safe, caring school. What does it look like? Recognize that food is part of it. Healthy food means less violence, behaviour problems. We need to think about school food in the larger context - peer mediation, physical activity and healthy food together for a healthy caring school.” - Elementary School Principal

“If school food and nutrition is an add-on, it becomes a barrier. It is railroaded before it even begins because schools are already overloaded. But if school food and nutrition programs are embedded in existing programs and priorities, they have to be addressed on a daily basis like other dues.” - Board Curriculum Facilitator

“If we want a healthy population in Nova Scotia, it starts at the top. Every decision made has to keep the determinants of health in mind - in economic policy, laws, industry decisions, etc. Leadership is needed at all levels, but especially at the top. This government needs to make it clear that they are concerned about health and nutrition and commit to a longer-term plan to make things happen. They can’t just throw some money at it and hope it will go away.” - Board Coordinator

Suggested Solutions: Revenue Versus Health

Provide Adequate Funding to Schools

Key informants agreed that schools were currently stretched to their limits in terms of funds, staff and other essential resources and were in need of assistance. Many were adamant regarding the need for more funding for education. In order for schools to improve the nutritional quality of food and beverage choices of students, funding supports were seen as a necessary first step.

“We had a local business donating day-old bagels and muffins to our school on a regular basis. One of our staff would go over with a Tupperware bin on Mondays to collect food donations for our breakfast program. One Monday, there was another staff person from another school there with a bin. My staff worker told the other school person that Monday had always been the collection day for our school. Well, with resources being stretched, things were pretty tense!” - Elementary School Principal

“We need the people with the power to make decisions about support and funding to be involved - the Department of Health, Education and Agriculture. We can’t take money from the classrooms to do this! But we need more funding to assist with healthy food in school.” - School Board Consultant

Create Subsidies to Support Affordable Local Foods in School

Subsidization was seen as contributing to the availability of healthy affordable food for children. Subsidies for local foods were also suggested to ensure they were affordable for all students.

“The subsidized milk program has encouraged students to purchase milk daily.” - Program Director

“The cost of a burger and fries should not be less than a healthier meal choice.” - Senior High School Principal

Establish Cost Controls to Ensure Affordability and Availability of School Food

Some respondents advocated for cost controls to ensure healthy, affordable food is available to all students. They stressed that decision-makers need to be aware that a percentage of the population cannot access food, and that food costs need to have more consideration for this.

“Provide suitable funding support to sustain [food] programs in areas where many families cannot afford to pay for their child’s meals.” - Program Director

“Tax breaks could be given for educational facilities - for example no taxing of items bought for schools.” - Program Director

Create Responsible Partnerships with Food Companies and Business

Informants suggested the need to develop more partnerships and sponsorships with food-related and other business as a means of community building and securing loyalty pricing. However, they also called for guidelines to protect children from unethical marketing practices that could result from contracts and transactions from business.

“We have to be careful of marketing to kids in school. They are an impressionable and captive audience. We need to really think about the business aspects of ‘if you let me put an ad for Joe Louis across your wall we will give you money’.” - Elementary School Principal

“We have Coke machines in the schools full of juice but ‘Coke’ is still there on the large machine - flashing its brand. Companies are in schools selling the brand logo and building familiarity with their products.” - Program Director

“Part of this problem is pop company sponsorship and ready access to pop. The beverage machines are placed in free access places. It is hard to monitor their use. Plus monitoring is just one more task for the school to try and do when it is already stretched. Students need to know that some pop is okay when part of a larger healthy diet, but not 4 to 6 cans per day! There is a real concern that this is replacing other foods. Kids are well-educated and know better but because the choice is so available they are tempted all the time. When you walk into the cafeteria the pop is the first thing you see - it is a quick and fast grab.” - School Board Consultant

*“School food service staff are often local people who have great relationships with local farmers and businesses. They can get deals.”
- Program Director*

Provide Recognition For School Food Efforts

Some key informants wanted recognition to go to schools that decided to sacrifice profit in order to promote the health of students.

“Being healthy equals being poor. We do not have the extras other schools do - the trips, supplies, classroom supports - because of the decisions we’ve made. I’d like to suggest some kind of recognition for those [schools] that choose to sacrifice profit for health.” - Junior High Principal

“Perhaps there could be supplemental funding or bonuses for schools that promote healthy eating plans.” - Program Director

Suggested Solutions: Educator or Restaurateur

Provide Funding to Resolve Inequities Among School Facilities

Respondents described the need for minimum building requirements for food services in schools, as well as the resolution of existing inequities in older Nova Scotian schools. If schools are to serve safe food, informants say appropriate equipment that complies with provincial commercial foodservice regulations is needed. Informants made the request that committed funds be dedicated for these purposes.

“They need to define an absolute minimum physical need for facilities if schools are to offer food. This would require subsidized renovations to include kitchen facilities to enable schools to function for basic food services.” - Program Director

“We need to get the facilities up to standard and adequate equipment that is up to code. This would be a one-time investment with lasting effects.” - School Board Consultant

“It’s a simple thing. Schools need some funds for toasters and fridges in schools that do not have them.” - Program Director

Revise Dated Provincial Policies for Building Schools

Key informants suggested that the Department of Education revise its building policies for food services to better reflect the numbers of students staying for meals.

“The cafeteria was built to accommodate one-third of the population of the school. This was a provincial guideline and policy of the Department of Education. The problem is that almost all of the kids stay for lunch now. The kitchen was only built to handle 200 students and we have 600 moving through the service. More kids are staying for lunch now because they are bused, there is no time to go home or there is no one at home during the lunch period. The Department of Education policy is based on historical data. They need to use new data to reflect today’s lifestyles and to support the needs of schools.” - Senior High School Principal

Subsidize Food Service Staff

Respondents mentioned the need for adequate food service staff who are paid a fair wage, and that food could not continue to be served without some sort of subsidy for the workers.

“You do not need to subsidize the cost of the food. You need to subsidize the service. Allow schools to control what is offered and who offers it. But help offset the cost of training staff in menu planning, nutrition, food handling and safety.” - School Board Consultant

“We need subsidies for service in schools. But these funds cannot be taken out of the classroom, either. We need monies to hire and train our own food service staff in schools and to adequately pay them. We need to show them they are valued and respected for the service they provide.” - School Board Consultant

Support Training for Food Service Staff

Key informants saw a real need for support for food handling and safety training for food service staff in schools. Trained staff were said to reduce the potential liabilities schools face.

“Kitchens are either operated by schools or outside companies. The staff needs more training in menus, nutrition. They have a lot of influence over what is served.” - Elementary/Junior High Principal

“We need to connect with the Department of Agriculture to get more Nova Scotia products in school and to promote them more. The Department of Agriculture may also be able to offer some food handlers training—they used to do this for free. The Departments of Agriculture and Health could work together on information on food handling and menu planning and food preparation for economical, safe and healthy food.” - School Board Consultant

Provide Information on How to Operate Healthy School Foodservices

Key informants desired basic information to inform decisions and help them deliver healthy, affordable food in school. This need includes basic nutrition information and menu ideas designed for schools that are nutritionally sound and age-appropriate, as well as information on basic food costing and pricing. They also described the need for research information supporting the role of good nutrition and the benefit to student learning to justify decisions made to serve healthy foods in school.

“It would be nice to have information to inform our decisions, because right now I could be selling something I think is nutritious but is really not!” - Elementary School Principal

Provide Networking Opportunities So Schools Can Share Knowledge and Resources

Respondents requested information on key contacts, available resource people and funding sources that could assist schools wanting to improve their food services or offerings. Networks were also said to provide valuable opportunities for schools to share authentic experiences and successes (e.g., “collection of experiences/success stories”) that could serve as inspiration for change or improvement.

“Principals network with each other. We ask, ‘what are you doing?’...Get ideas on what to serve and how, because there are no real resources for us. What I know, I have learned from experience over time as I have had to take on school foodservices.” - Elementary/Junior High Principal

“We need to maintain networks and contacts with schools. The Departments of Health and Agriculture need to maintain communication and update schools with information. They may even create a new newsletter with menu ideas, menu costing tips, sources of information, product ideas and uses.” - School Board Consultant

“We need to learn about healthy options at other schools. We would be more willing to experiment.” - Program Director

Provide School Access to Nutrition Expertise

Informants expressed the desire for resource people that could provide expertise and advice to schools when it came to food and nutrition, e.g., a school food specialist to work with boards, schools, parents, students and the community.

“A position is desirable because you need someone to spearhead the issue - a dedicated position with the responsibility of cost analysis, assessing financial limitations of individual schools, who is knowledgeable about food and nutrition.” - Board Consultant

“I don’t want more paper. I want a live person to assist me, the cafeteria staff, and help us as a school to troubleshoot.” - Elementary School Principal

Coordinate School Food Efforts

Many respondents mentioned the need for coordinated school food efforts: consistency in contract information, bulk purchasing options, supplier information, suitable delivery scheduling and accessibility for rural schools to make the job of providing school food easier and more efficient. This was also mentioned in relation to increasing school use of Nova Scotia food and beverage products.

“It is such a chore to get food! The board could set up contracts to have foods delivered or some kind of bulk purchasing. Why does this not exist already? It would be easier for schools if had consistent supplier, pricing and products set up.” - Elementary School Principal

To make positive changes to school food, we would need vendors who could deliver to outlying areas on a frequent basis.” - Program Director

Provide Direct Funding to Schools for School Food

Some key informants felt quite strongly that more funds needed to go directly to schools to help them provide healthy affordable choices to students and to help schools with their basic needs.

“It is unreasonable to expect schools to serve healthy affordable food with their current resources. If we want children to eat nutritious food at school, we need to get serious about it. It is unfair for the Department of Health and the government and others to in effect say: ‘your job is to serve nutritious food but we are not going to give you any money to do it.’” - Program Director

“Over a four-year period of the project, the total funding provided will have been over \$240,000. The actual monies that went to the schools was only \$1,000 per school for eight schools. Schools only had \$1,000 to figure out what would make a difference to healthy eating and physical activity in their school. Schools were told how the funds could or could not be used. They were told by the funders that the money could not be used to pay for staff, equipment or food - the things they really need - as they investigated what their problems were. The schools problems are: ‘I cannot afford to buy healthy food. I don’t have staff to prepare and serve food. I don’t have equipment or a kitchen.’ If this board had \$240,000 to invest in school food and nutrition, we could make a difference.” - Program Director

Support Nova Scotia Food Entrepreneurs

Informants saw the need for more support for local businesses and entrepreneurs to encourage them to help schools fill voids and niches.

“There was a school that had no cafeteria. A rolling canteen was brought on site. Wheeled on to the site. This is not such a crazy idea! If schools were close by and had staggered lunch periods, a rolling canteen could come by and serve lunch at one school at 11:30 and the next at 12:30. We need to think differently and support creative solutions.” – Program Director

Suggested Solutions: Decisions for Food in Schools

Establish Guidelines

A majority of key informants were supportive of guidelines for food and beverage choices in schools and saw the need for guidance to be directed from higher levels. Some stated that the time was ripe for change, as students were asking for healthier choices and large food chains were also marketing healthier options. Others cautioned that “one size does not fit all” when it came to policy or guidelines, reinforcing the fact that schools were individual communities, unique in their issues and problems. Informants saw the need for general guidelines to be set so schools knew what decisions needed to be made, but then recommended that school boards and schools be allowed to work to develop specific policies, due to the need to accommodate a wide range of facility challenges and situations. Informants stated that guidelines for choices would need to consider the differences in elementary compared with junior and senior high schools in terms of personal responsibility for choices and accessibility to other foods.

“I have concerns that a third party will dictate what can and can’t be served ... that they will require standards that have to be met without much consideration for the circumstances of schools. If the department says our menus must be healthy and this is too much trouble, we will be forced to close our cafeteria. The school will have to do without the money for trips, equipment, etc. We will just have a lunch room available to eat food brought from home.” - Elementary Junior High School Principal

Kids can go to the canteen with 50¢ and make their own choices. They are not told what to buy. They still have a choice, even though it is a healthy choice. We do not put them in a position of choosing a hot dog OR a veggie wrap.” - Elementary School Principal

“The problem is that kids want some of these less healthy choices in high school. They can get in their car and go to Wendy’s. You can’t dictate to 17-year-olds what they can and can’t eat.” - Program Director

“You probably think I am a great guy for offering only nutritious foods to the children at a good price. But if I were in the junior and senior highs, I would be basing food and drink choices on a totally different set of principles. I would be selling the junk - the chips, chocolate, pop. I would have to. Unlike an elementary school with its closed campus, the kids in the upper grades can leave the school and buy whatever they want. If they are going to buy it anyway, the school might as well sell it and get the profits. In junior and senior high, more [money] is needed to support sports, teams, trips and all of the extras that support physically active lifestyles. So the circumstances will dictate the principles applied. And a food policy would have to reflect these differences.” - Elementary School Principal

Create Closed Campus Policies

Some informants thought that restricting student access to foods outside of the school during school hours might help change what students consumed.

“It may require a change in the lifestyle for the students - but we may need to confine them to the school property.” – Program Director

Increase Access to and Marketing of Nova Scotia Food Products to Schools

Respondents called for the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries to be more involved in the promotion and marketing of local items. They suggested policies to support the preferential use of local products in schools. Respondents felt that the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries needed to communicate with food service companies about using more local products in schools.

“In order to use more Nova Scotia products in schools I would see this being done on a board level. Perhaps having a policy for use of local suppliers first, and if they cannot match prices, etc., then go outside for suppliers.” - Senior high School Principal

“We need to promote our farmers more - offer fair price for products locally grown and produced. Nova Scotia is an agricultural base. We do not promote enough of our own products. We haven't partnered well - and this is a real shame.” - School Board Consultant

“We need to connect with the Department of Agriculture to get more Nova Scotia products in schools and promote them more.” - School Board Consultant

Keep it Simple

Key informants did not view the provision of safe and nutritious foods and beverages in schools as a quick fix. They stressed that change took time and that long term planning would be required.

We can create longevity and change by having the right people involved. It took one year to write our [food] policy with participatory approaches - providing opportunities for people to share their knowledge and advice. Not every one was equally patient! Time needs to be seen as an ally, not as an enemy. I have to be okay with the fact that it took one year to write the policy and that it will take a few years to change.” - Junior High Principal

CLOSING REMARKS

In spite of extremely busy schedules and the demands of many for their time, school board program directors and principals from across the province made time to share their thoughts, experiences and perspectives about school food. The information provided and the candor with which they shared it was greatly appreciated. Regardless of whether their school or board had struggled with providing healthy affordable food or had experienced great success, what was most apparent was the incredible level of dedication, sacrifice and effort made for the students in their care. For this they are duly commended.

The information provided by these provincial school key informants will be considered as the provincial government, community partners and other stakeholders move toward addressing the school food and nutrition environment for all of Nova Scotia's students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

MEMBERS OF THE HEALTHY FOODS IN NOVA SCOTIA SCHOOLS STEERING COMMITTEE

Janet Braunstein Moody

Senior Director, Public Health

Nova Scotia Department of Health/Office of Health Promotion

Cathy Chenhall

Core Program Coordinator, Public Health

Nova Scotia Department of Health/Office of Health Promotion

Natasha Warren

Outdoor and Physical Activity Consultant

Sport and Recreation Division, Office of Health Promotion

Frank Covey

Acting Assistant Director, English Language Programs

Nova Scotia Department of Education

Linda MacDonald

Executive Director, Industry Development and Business Services

Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture and Fisheries

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE: PROGRAM DIRECTORS

Introduction

- ✓ Thank individuals for agreeing to participate.
- ✓ Review purpose of interview.
- ✓ Remind participants that comments will remain confidential and will be consolidated.
- ✓ Restate how the information will be used.
- ✓ Inform participants that they will receive a copy of the final report.

Questions

CURRENT SITUATION

Preface: Our schools have a variety of facilities, programs and delivery systems for food and beverages.

1. Can you briefly list the types of food service/delivery systems and programs that currently exist in schools in your board?

DECISION-MAKING/GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL FOOD

Preface: A wide variety of food and beverage choices exist in our schools. We are interested in the processes and resources that schools use to help them make decisions about which foods and beverages will be available within the school setting.

2. Are you aware of any information, resources or guidelines (if any) schools use to make decisions about the food/beverage choices available to students?

Probe: Are you aware of any written guidelines or policies?
If so, please describe.

Is there consideration made for the nutritional quality of foods/beverage? What kind?

Are any foods included because of recognized high nutritional value? Describe.

Any foods restricted or excluded because of poor nutritional value? Describe.

Cafeterias: Are there any guidelines provided for food/beverage choices when requesting tenders? Who has input into what is served/available? Describe.

Is there any other guidance provided for foods, i.e., those brought from home, for fund-raising or special events

Who has input into the choices available?

Whose responsibility is it to select food and beverage items for the school?

What is the background/training of those who work with school food/menus?

3. Are there any other factors that influence the food and beverage selections of schools?

4. How do you feel about the food/beverage choices that currently exist in the schools in your area?

***Probe:* Would you say you are generally pleased, displeased? Why?**

Do you have any concerns with what is served? Explain.

Do you feel the school environment supports the curriculum with respect to what is taught about healthy eating? (Do you feel healthy food choices are promoted?) Why or why not?

AFFORDABLE FOOD

***Preface:* We realize that many factors influence the prices of foods and beverages sold at school. We are interested in the processes schools use and challenges they face when setting prices for foods and beverages offered within the school setting.**

5. What information do schools consider when setting prices for the food and beverage items available?

Probe : Do you feel nutritious foods are competitively priced with those that are less nutritious? Please explain.

Are prices set for revenue or to break-even? Why?

Are prices capped, i.e., upper level for prices? Why or why not?

6. What specific challenges do schools face when determining prices for food and beverages?
7. Do you feel that the majority of the students attending area schools can afford to purchase the food/beverages sold? Explain.

CHANGES TO SCHOOL FOOD: IDEAS, SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

***Preface:** We are interested in any successes schools have had with making changes to improve food and beverages from a nutrition/health perspective. As well, if schools have not been able to make any changes, we are interested in finding out what supports are needed to assist them in doing so.*

8. Have any schools in your board made changes to improve the food or beverages available from a nutrition/health perspective?

If YES, can you describe these?

Probe: Do you know what motivated schools to make these changes?

**Would you say the changes have been successful?
Why or why not?**

What benefits have you encountered or are you aware of?

Do you think the changes made will last? Why or why not?

If schools have NOT made any changes but are in PROCESS of making changes to improve the nutrition/health of school food/beverages ...

Can you describe these?

Probe: What motivated your schools to make these changes?
Have you experienced or are you aware of any benefits?

If schools have NOT made any changes to improve the nutrition/health of school food and beverages, proceed to question #9.

9. What do you think have been the main barriers to improving the nutrition/health of the food and beverage choices offered in schools?

SUPPORTS/RESOURCES

***Preface:** It is well known that many factors, individuals, organizations and environments shape the health of our children and youth. It is important for us to know what supports you need to help you make improvements to school food/beverages.*

10. What or who is needed to help make improvements to the nutrition/health of school food/beverages that can be sustained over time?

Probe: What supports or resources are needed? Please be specific.

11. Who else (i.e., people, organizations, etc.) needs to be involved in school food that currently is not - who else has a stake?

NOVA SCOTIA PRODUCTS

Preface: Our province holds a wealth of local products - fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, poultry, dairy and locally produced foods and beverages.

12. Do schools in your board currently use any locally (Nova Scotia) grown or produced food and beverage items?

Probe: If yes, which ones?
How are they used?
Have there been any benefits? Describe.

Does your board set an agenda to use Nova Scotia products in schools?

If these products are not used, why not?

Probe: What are the challenges/barrier to their use?

Would you consider the use of these products?

Probe: What would be needed in order to do so?

ISSUES/CONCERNS

13. Are there any other issues/concerns you have around the provision of affordable healthy school foods and beverages that you feel need to be addressed? Explain.

Probe: How do you see these being addressed?

OPPORTUNITIES

14. If you could make (3) three recommendations for what has to happen next in order for schools to address/make improvements to the nutrition/health of food and beverage choices available, what would they be?

Who do you see leading this action or direction?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE: PRINCIPALS

Introduction

- ✓ Thank individuals for agreeing to participate.
- ✓ Review purpose of interview.
- ✓ Remind participants that comments will remain confidential and will be consolidated.
- ✓ Restate how the information will be used.
- ✓ Inform participants that they will receive a copy of the final report.

Questions

CURRENT SITUATION

Preface: Our schools have a variety of facilities, programs and delivery systems for food and beverages.

1. Can you briefly list the types of food service/delivery systems and programs that currently exist in your school setting?

DECISION-MAKING/GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL FOOD

Preface: A wide variety of food and beverage choices exist in our schools. We are interested in the processes and resources that schools use to help them make decisions about which foods and beverages will be available within the school setting.

2. What information, resources or guidelines (if any) does your school use to make decisions about the food/beverage choices available to students?

Probe: Does your school have any written guidelines or policies? Please describe.

Is there consideration made for the nutritional quality of foods/beverage? What kind?

Are any foods included because of recognized high nutritional value? Describe.

Any foods restricted or excluded because of poor nutritional value? Describe.

If you have a cafeteria: Does your school provide any guidelines for food/beverage choices when requesting tenders?

Does the school have any input into what is served/available?

Does the school provide any other guidance for foods, i.e., those brought from home, for fund-raising or special events?

Who has input into the choices offered?

Whose responsibility is it to select food and beverage items for the school?

What is the background/training of those who work with school food/menus?

3. What other factors influence the food and beverage selections for your school?

4. How do you feel about the food/beverage choices that currently exist in your school?

Probe: Would you say you are generally pleased, displeased? Why?

Do you have any concerns with what is served? Explain.

Do you feel the school environment supports the curriculum with respect to what is taught about healthy eating? (Do you feel healthy food choices are promoted in your school?) Why or why not?

AFFORDABLE FOOD

***Preface:** We realize that many factors influence the prices of foods and beverages sold at school. We are interested in the processes schools use, and the challenges they face when setting prices for foods and beverages offered within the school setting.*

5. What information does your school consider when setting prices for the food and beverages available?

Probe: Do you feel nutritious foods are competitively priced with those that are less nutritious? Please explain.

Are prices set for revenue or to break-even? Why?

Are prices capped, i.e., upper level for prices? Why or why not?

6. What specific challenges has your school faced when determining prices for food and beverages?

7. Do you feel that the majority of the students attending your school can afford to purchase the food/beverages sold? Explain.

CHANGES TO SCHOOL FOOD: IDEAS, SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

***Preface:** We are interested in any successes schools have had with making changes to improve food and beverages from a nutrition/health perspective. As well, if schools have not been able to make any changes, we are interested in finding out what supports are needed to assist them in doing so.*

8. Has your school made any changes to improve the food or beverages available from a nutrition/health perspective?

If YES, can you describe these?

Probe: What motivated your school to make these changes?

Would you say the changes have been successful?
Why or why not?

What benefits have you encountered?

Do you think the changes made will last? Why or Why not?

If NOT made any changes, but are in PROCESS of making changes to improve the nutrition/health of school food/beverages ...

Can you describe these?

Probe: What motivated your school to make these changes?
Have you experienced any benefits?

If NOT made any changes to improve the nutrition/health of school food and beverages ... proceed to question #9.

9. What do you think have been the main barriers to improving the nutrition/health of the food and beverage choices offered in your school? Probe for specifics!

If HAVE made successful changes to school food ask ...

10. If you could share some simple advice to others who are trying to improve the nutrition/health of school food and beverages, what would it be?

SUPPORTS/RESOURCES

***Preface:** It is well known that many factors, individuals, organizations and environments shape the health of our children and youth. It is important for us to know what supports/resources you need to help you make improvements to school food/beverages.*

- 11. What or who is needed to help your school improve the nutrition/health of food/beverages that can be sustained over time?**

Probe: What supports or resources are needed? Please be specific.

- 12. Who else (i.e., people, organizations, etc.) needs to be involved in school food that currently is not - who else has a stake in school food?**

NOVA SCOTIA PRODUCTS

***Preface:** Our province holds a wealth of local products - fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, poultry, dairy and locally produced foods and beverages.*

- 13. Do you currently use any locally (Nova Scotia) grown or produced food and beverage items in your school?**

**Probe: If yes, which ones?
How are they used?
What benefits have you experienced?**

Does your board set an agenda to use Nova Scotia products in schools?

If these products are not used, why not?

Probe: What are the challenges, barriers to their use?

Would you consider the use of these products?

Probe: What would be needed in order to do so?

ISSUES/CONCERNS

- 14. Are there any other issues/concerns you have around providing affordable healthy school food, that you feel need to be addressed? Explain.**

Probe: How do you see these being addressed?

OPPORTUNITIES

- 15. If you could make (3) three recommendations for what has to happen next in order for your school to address/make improvements in the food and beverage choices available what would they be?**

Who do you see leading this action or direction?