



Developing Nourishing School Food Programs

Measuring our
Collective Impact



Flourish!
— School Food Society —

Outcome Evaluation Report 2025/26 School Year

Table of Contents

3 Introduction

7 Provincial and National Context

9 Establishing Goals and Outcomes

Sooke School Food Program - Multi-Year Plan	10
Strategic Framework	10
Strategic Priorities	11
Flourish Theory of Change	13
Three key issues our work aims to address	13
Outcomes we aim to achieve	13

15 Our Approach to Evaluation

Methods	15
Interviews	16
Focus Groups	16
Observations	17
Surveys	17
Student Feedback	17
Survey Overview at a Glance	18

19 What We Found

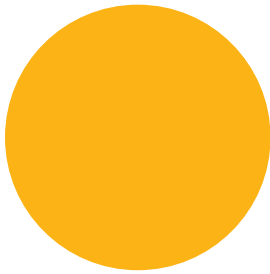
Waste and Sustainability	19
Access to Food	20
Student Food Experience	22
Student Wellbeing	23
Food Literacy and Garden-Based Education	26

28 Recommendations

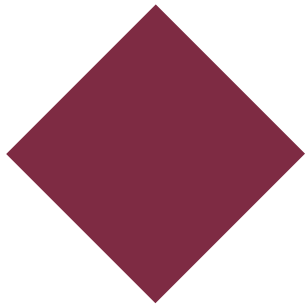
29 Moving Forward

33 References

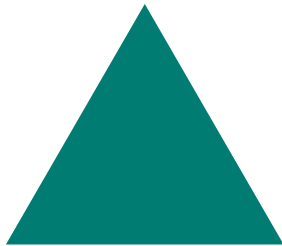
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Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the hundreds of partners who have contributed to and supported the growth of our work over the past 3+ years. The work described in this report would not have been possible without significant contributions of time, insight and love from many people. Flourish is forever indebted to the care and kindness shown by many, without which our work would never have been possible. Thank you to everyone who has gone out of their way to add love to the menu at school. Thanks also to the many people who contributed to our outcome evaluation by attending meetings, speaking with us, filling out surveys, or taking the time to reach out and share your feedback.

Introduction

Flourish! School Food Society (Flourish) was established as a not-for-profit society in the Province of British Columbia, Canada in May, 2023. The organization's purposes are to relieve poverty and advance education by providing healthy, nourishing meals, access to healthy food and workshops and programs on the subject of healthy eating to elementary, middle and high school students, and their families, in the Capital Region in and around the City of Victoria. Flourish imagines a region in which all students can access nourishing food and learn through immersion in all aspects of food (growing, harvesting, preparing, sharing, composting). Our mission is to support: efficient, nourishing school food services; hands-on food literacy programming, and; development of nourishing food environments in schools.

During the 2025/26 school year, Flourish provided four services to schools in the Sooke and Victoria School Districts, as well as two independent schools (total 33 schools¹):

FOOD LITERACY

Flourish supports school gardens and hands-on food learning. The organization employs two full time staff to offer garden workshops, maintenance and care in 21 school gardens. They also have developed and curated a diversity of resources for teachers to support hands-on food learning in classrooms and run a summer garden work experience program for high school students in which they care for school gardens. In the 2025/26 school year Flourish hosted 603 workshops.

HOT LUNCH

Flourish prepares a hot entrée and cold salad that are delivered and served buffet style in participating schools. Flourish creates seasonal and youth friendly monthly menus and prepared and distributed an average of over 1200 home cooked meals 176 days of the 2025/26 school year.



FOOD AGGREGATION & DISTRIBUTION

Flourish sources breakfast staples, snacks and other grocery items to support school breakfast, lunch and snack programs. Schools order food through an online portal and Flourish distributed an average of 2600 snack servings of food per day, every day of the 2025/26 school year (180 days).



FAMILY FOOD SUPPORT

Flourish partners with the Mustard Seed Street Church, Capital Region Food Share Network, Backpack Buddies and Food Banks Canada to access free food resources, which are delivered to schools to support Family Food Markets at three schools during the school year. Flourish also runs Family Food Markets at four school sites throughout the community during winter, spring and summer breaks. Flourish has also recently begun preparing and distributing ready-made frozen meals in microwavable containers, which schools can order for free through their online grocery portal to share with families in need. In the 2025/26 school year, Flourish shared 26,444 lbs of free food with families (valued at \$84,009.24) and began sharing ~200 servings of ready made frozen meals each week starting in April, 2026.

¹ Sooke School District: Belmont Secondary, Centre Mountain Lellum Middle, Colwood Elementary, Crystal View Elementary, David Cameron Elementary, Dunsmuir Middle, Ecole Poirier, Edward Milne Community School, Hans Helgeson Elementary, Happy Valley Elementary, John Muir Elementary, John Stubbs Elementary and Middle, Journey Middle, Lakewood Elementary, Millstream Elementary, PEXSISEN Elementary, Royal Bay Secondary, Ruth King Elementary, Sangster Elementary, Saseenos Elementary, Savory Elementary, SCIANEW STELLITKE Elementary, Sooke Elementary, Spencer Middle, Westshore Secondary, Westshore Sooke Campus, Willway Elementary, Wishart Elementary. Victoria School District: Mount Douglas Secondary, Oak Bay Secondary, Reynolds Secondary. Independent Schools: Saint Andrews Regional High School, Westmont Montessori.

Flourish has a contract with the Sooke School District #62 to provide food to its schools. 28 of the 33 schools served by Flourish in the 2025/26 school year were in the Sooke School District.

Since our inception Flourish has sought to collaboratively identify key goals and outcomes of school food programming. This report explains the development of the Sooke School District's forward looking School Food Program Plan and the creation of Flourish's Theory of Change. These documents have helped structure the design and implementation of an outcome evaluation framework for Flourish's work in schools. This report describes the first year of this outcome evaluation, detailing our approach to evaluating Flourish's school food programs and what we found.



WHO “NEEDS” FOOD AT SCHOOL?

In the Sooke School District, the Ministry of Education and Child Care Student Learning Survey reports that only 47.5% of Grade 4 students and 60.2% of Grade 12 student “never” or “almost never” felt hungry because there was not enough food to eat (BC Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2026). The same survey shows that 73.8% of Grade 4 students in the Sooke School District reported eating breakfast 5-7 days per week; that number drops to only 39.4% of students by Grade 12. The BC Adolescent Health Survey shows that on Vancouver Island, 11% of respondents reported that they “sometimes went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home,” compared to 9% provincially (McCreary Centre Society, 2024). Round 3 of the BC Centre for Disease Control's Survey on Population Experiences, Action and Knowledge (2023) showed that only 30.6% of respondents in the Vancouver Island Health Region reported that they'd eaten a homemade meal “some days” in the last week. This data clearly indicates that a substantial number of students in the Sooke School District consistently lack access to nourishing foods and highlights the local need for school food programs.

47.5%

of Grade 4 students reported they never or almost never felt hungry due to not having enough food to eat

11%

of Vancouver Island youth reported that they “sometimes went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home”



Flourish by the Numbers: 2025/26 SCHOOL YEAR

211,200

Meals served (21,120 per month)

468,000

Snack / breakfast servings served
(46,800 per month)

3,000+

Students regularly fed

2,400

Frozen meals shared.

603

Hands on workshops to support food literacy and garden engagement

33

Schools receiving Flourish services

FREE FOOD SHARED



4,194 lbs



\$15,559.74

For making soups and other foods in high schools



14,580 lbs



\$54,091.80

At school markets (during summer, winter & Spring breaks)



3,870 lbs



\$14,357.70

At school markets (after school)



Provincial & National Context

Until recently, Canada was one of the only member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) without a national school food program. However, in recent years, both provincial and federal government agencies have advanced initiatives in an attempt to fill this gap. BC's Ministry of Education and Childcare now distributes provincial and federal school food funding directly to school districts through the **Feeding Futures** program.

Feeding Futures sets out the following guiding principles for school food programs in the province:

Students have access to food daily in an equitable, accessible and non-stigmatizing manner.

Programs support BC foods to grow local communities, economies and food system resilience.

Programs are flexible, adaptable and respectful of local contexts and needs.

Students have access to nutritious and culturally preferred foods to support healthy development and learning.

Programs centre and include students, families, local First Nations, Rightsholders, Indigenous partners and community members in decision-making and program delivery.

Despite these broad and ambitious goals, Blais and colleagues (2025) point out significant gaps in the government's commitments, including insufficient levels of funding to achieve stated goals and a lack of both enforceable standards or structured frameworks for monitoring and evaluating school food programs.



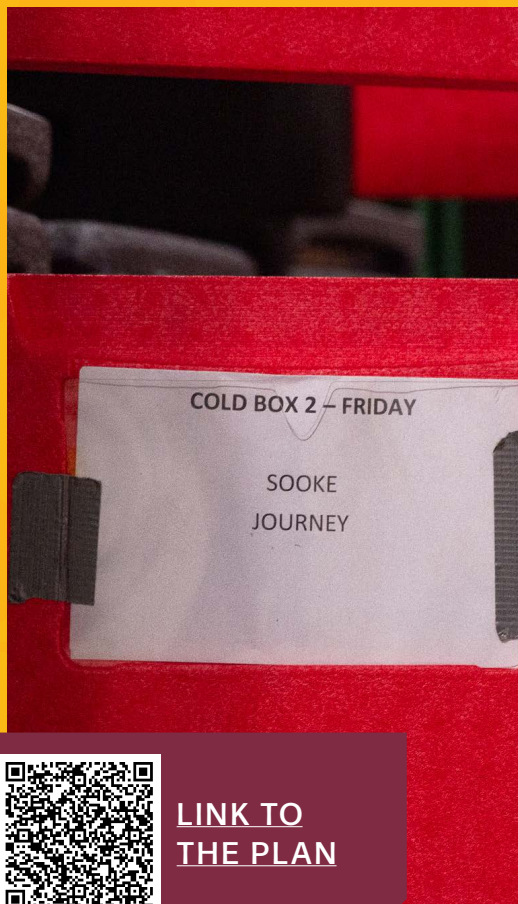


As a laggard in the development of policies and programs to support child and youth food security (Brazier, 2017), Canadian research has often aimed to highlight the potential of food security programming in schools (Everitt et al, 2022) by illuminating positive economic benefits (Ruetz et al., 2023); nutritional knowledge, dietary behaviour, and food intake (Colley et al., 2019); student participation, attendance, academic performance and diet quality (Cohen et al., 2021); and broader ecological impacts (Pastorino et al, 2025). Other research efforts have sought to define the characteristics of school food programs across the country (Ruetz & McKenna, 2021; Ruetz et al, 2025). There is little research looking at the outcomes and effectiveness

of specific school food programs in the Canadian context. This gap was highlighted in Employment and Social Development Canada's Engagement on school food data and research priorities (2025), which found that individuals "noted a general lack of school food data and research in Canada, which limits opportunities to make evidence-based decisions about program delivery. They expressed a strong interest in local or region-specific research that showcases the diversity of school food programming across the country." We hope that our efforts to define goals and outcomes and collect, analyze and report data will support and continue to inspire the nascent effort to develop and refine school food programming in BC and Canada.

Establishing Goals & Outcomes

Flourish has worked closely with the Sooke School District to design and develop a comprehensive School Food Program Multi-Year Plan.



The contents of this plan were informed by a facilitated gathering of educational and community partners, where over 30 people from different departments and unions within Sooke School District, as well as key leaders from community health, food and youth service organizations, came together to discuss the vision, mission, guiding principles and strategic priorities for school food program development in the district. Discussions from these meetings were further synthesized by a small committee, which included the Associate Superintendent, Flourish's Executive Director, the coordinator for the Coalition for Healthy School Food's BC Chapter, the facilitator of the meeting (who acted as a guide and note taker throughout the process), and the school district's Healthy Schools Coordinator. This committee drafted a School Food Program plan and shared it with the larger group for feedback and input, which was included to create an amended plan that was again shared and approved. Another recommendation that was actioned from this process was for the district to create an advisory committee that could oversee the implementation of the School Food Program Multi-Year Plan. Terms of Reference for this group were drafted, and a School Food Program Advisory Committee was struck in the Fall of 2024.



[LINK TO
THE PLAN](#)

Sooke School Food Program

MULTI-YEAR PLAN

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Vision

A nourishing, culturally appropriate, comprehensive school food system for the Sooke School District.

Mission

To work collaboratively with community to provide integrated school meal, snack and food literacy programs for all students in the Sooke School District.

Guiding Principles

Inclusive and Student Centred

Students have access to food daily in an equitable, accessible and non- stigmatizing manner.

Sustainable

Programs support BC foods to grow local communities, economies, and food system resilience, while working to reduce waste and be climate sensitive.

Health Promoting and Evidence Informed

Programs are guided by good practice and are in line with Canada's Food Guide, foster a nutritious food environment, and promote overall health and wellbeing.

Integrated

Food programs are integrated into pedagogy and curriculum and enable food literacy and food skills education.

Collaborative

Working in partnerships, recognizing that this work is situated across many partners, systems and communities. Building synergies with broader food system initiatives.

Food Sovereignty

Programs centre and include students, families, First Nation Rightsholders, Indigenous partners and community members in decision-making and program delivery.

Evaluation

Committed to evaluation and evidence-based practice.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Teaching and Learning

GOAL

A school-based food system that creates opportunities for student involvement, supports nutrition education, and develops student's food preparation skills and food literacy.

OBJECTIVES:

- Support teachers' professional practice in the area of nutrition education.
- Further support integration of Indigenous food and diverse cultural food practices into classroom and school wide practices.
- Support continuity of learning through engagement of parents/caregivers and community partners.

Relationships & Environments

GOAL

Establish school environments that foster strong relationships between students, staff, families and the wider community and have appropriate infrastructure for students to grow, cook and eat together.

OBJECTIVES:

- Identify needs and address opportunities to provide the time and support for the school community to come together to enjoy nutritious foods.
- Based on identified needs, enhance food production and service spaces in schools, including: infrastructure, equipment requirements and appropriate human resources within schools.
- Continue to support the development of school food gardens and composting, in partnership with key

District departments (e.g. Curriculum, NATS'A'MAHT Indigenous Education, Facilities) and the greater community.

Community Partnerships & Services

GOAL

Enhance access to nutritious food for students and families in the Sooke School District.

OBJECTIVES:

- Continue to scale up the existing school food service programs to provide cost effective, sustainable, nourishing breakfast, lunch and snack programs in schools.
- Partner with local food security, food distribution organizations and other interested parties and networks to support efforts to increase regional food security for families.
- Work with and support parents through school Parent Advisory Committees to build alignment with other food related initiatives.
- Partner with local First Nations and NATS'A'MAHT Indigenous Education to engage Elders in providing opportunities for the school community to learn about the cultural meanings around traditional foods/diets.
- Partner with ethnocultural communities in providing opportunities for the school community to learn about cultural meanings and traditional foods from diverse communities.
- Connect students to farms by serving farm fresh food and raising awareness about food and local food systems.

School Policies

GOAL

Develop an overarching school policy framework that supports a comprehensive school food system across the Sooke School District.

OBJECTIVES:

- Conduct a policy review and integrate best practice policies and connect to the larger Safe and Healthy Schools Plan to ensure that this work is embedded into the overall work of the Sooke School District.
- Support and monitor the implementation of federal, provincial and local guidelines and recommendations around food provision in schools.

With an ambitious multi-year plan created for the Sooke School District, Flourish wanted to refine its approach to evaluation and begin to assess the outcomes that were being achieved by the organization's work in the district. A research team at UBC's Faculty of Education was brought on to support the development of an outcome evaluation strategy. To begin, the team asked the newly formed School Food Program Advisory Committee to provide their input into the key outcomes they thought we should be aiming to achieve. Detailed notes were taken during this meeting. This was done by asking 3 simple questions and gathering rich notes from the group during a one hour meeting. The three questions were framed by asking: if you imagine realizing the breadth of the Sooke School Food Program Plan:

WHAT WILL WE FEEL?

WHAT WILL WE SEE?

WHOSE LIVES WILL BE CHANGED AND HOW?

Flourish's Executive Director then went on to interview 12 partners in 10 meetings (2 meetings were with 2 people at the same time), asking the same simple 3 questions, as well as additional follow up questions (interviews were recorded and notes were kept). People were selected to be interviewed based on their level of engagement with and knowledge of different aspects of Flourish's work in schools, with a focus on speaking with people with intimate knowledge of different aspects of the organization's work. Snowball sampling was used by asking those we spoke with who else we should make sure to speak with. In this period we also collected worksheets from over 100 students which asked them to draw (or describe) their perfect school lunch and provide input into their existing school food program provided by Flourish. Additionally, we conducted a survey, which was completed by 13 school food coordinators, 4 teachers, 3 administrators and 1 parent, which asked for input into our existing programs, as well as feedback on the above three questions and recommendations for the most important outcomes we should seek to evaluate. We also used input and feedback from the development of the Sooke School Food Program Plan to inform our approach.

Data collected was recorded, transcribed and thematically coded. Themes were refined and enhanced using data from student and staff surveys. An analysis of all data was used to create a draft theory of change, which aimed to describe the core issues our community felt we should be trying to address and the key outcomes we should focus on trying to achieve to alleviate these issues. We shared the preliminary results with over one hundred contacts in schools (including everyone who contributed to the process) and two follow up meetings were held to further refine the theory of change (one with the advisory committee and another with an interested teacher). Supportive conditions that were seen as important in achieving identified outcomes were added and refined through this process of review and feedback.



Flourish Theory of Change

Three key issues our work aims to address:

Food Insecurity:

Lack of access to and appreciation of nourishing food

Unsustainable Food System:

Agriculture is a leading cause of climate change and ecological degradation

Social Isolation & Anxiety:

Need to create caring relationships and connection at school

Outcomes we aim to achieve:

Community building

- Strengthen relationships with farmers, chefs... food systems
- Create opportunities to connect with families
- Create opportunities for everyone at school to participate together

Support learning

- Support educators to:
 - » Integrate food literacy into pedagogy
 - » Support applied physical health education in: gardens, kitchens and classrooms

Sustainability

- Reduce waste and support composting
- Enable land based learning
- Support local food
- Inspire future growers and advocates

Access to food

- Meaningfully address food insecurity
- Students enjoy and want to eat our food
- Food is open to all (barrier free)
- Food is distributed without judgement
- Food is culturally relevant

Support students

- Support learning (ability to show up fully in classroom)
- Empower students to set and achieve goals
- Improve connection and sense of belonging at school
- Improve mental health and reduce anxiety
- Reduce dysregulation

Key Supportive Conditions:

STUDENT CENTERED: students involved in design and delivery

CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE: equity, caring, open

QUALITY FOOD: the food is actually good

SYSTEMS SUSTAINABILITY: infrastructure: physical, financial, social, HR



Our Approach to Evaluation

Our research team has taken a participatory action research (PAR) approach to developing and evaluating the above theory of change. PAR engages community members and key stakeholders through all stages of the research process. PAR aims to help people investigate their lived realities in order to change them and can be used for improving practice or problem solving (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). This makes PAR appropriate for our study of investigating alongside people who are most implicated and impacted by Flourish's food programs in schools. Our approach has been to work with these many partners in order to improve food service practices, student's access to food and food literacy educational practices.

PAR involves recursive cycles of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and re-planning. This iterative, evolving process is a collaborative act, in which local knowledge is essential to understanding the needs of those involved. Our shared goal is to generate solutions that will benefit the community. As a recursive, evolving process, this work remains unfinished, and open to partner input and feedback. This report itself is a tool for sharing our preliminary findings, calibrating our future approach, and inspiring conversations, critique and feedback.

Methods

The research team has made two rounds of visits to schools. The first round took place in October, 2025. The second round was in April, 2026. We visited 7 schools in total to conduct interviews, observations and focus groups. All interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. Data from interviews, focus groups and observations were used to identify "key themes" which were then cross referenced with survey and student feedback data to flesh out and amend what follows in our findings.



Interviews

The research team designed interview questions and conducted semi-structured interviews with 8 administrators (principals and vice-principals), 8 teachers (including resource teachers), 5 EAs, and 7 food service staff in total across 7 schools.

Focus Groups

The research team coordinated with school administrators and teachers who organized student focus groups by selecting students who regularly access the food program. We conducted 6 focus groups with students to solicit their feedback on the nature of the food services provided at their schools pertaining to access, food literacy learning, sense of belonging, and wellbeing.

Role	# of Interviewees			Description
	Elementary	Middle	Secondary	
Food Coordinator	4	4	1	Prepares and serves breakfast, and/or lunch. Some food coordinators held different roles such as school psychologist and student engagement facilitator
EA	3	1	1	Support individual students. Some of them also prepared and/or served food if there was no food coordinator position
Principal/ Vice-Principal	4	3	1	Oversees the food program, communicates with families, knows which students access the program
Student (Informal conversation)	n/a	10	n/a	During meal times, the research team chatted with some students about the food program
Student (Focus Group)	15	7	4	Admin and teachers organized and scheduled student focus groups
Resource Teacher	2	1	n/a	Diverse roles, some ran the garden club at school, some supported Indigenous education
Teacher	1	3	1	Classroom teacher, some were subject-specific such as foods teacher at a high school

Table 1. Detailing the number of interviewees at elementary, middle and high schools and their roles.

Observations

At the schools, the team observed breakfast, snack, and lunch services. During meal observations, the team held informal conversations with food service staff and students; they took detailed notes and conducted discourse analysis on school food service through the school day. The team also observed garden and food literacy workshops offered by Flourish. The observation focused on the following aspects:

- How food is being offered by staff and volunteers (understanding accessibility, respectfulness, stigmas, cultural relevance)
- How the food is talked about (understanding enjoyment/preferences)
- Student sociality during mealtimes (understanding connection/belonging)
- Food literacy and land-based education (understanding educator support needs)
- Student engagement in the classroom prior to and after meals (understanding performance, health/wellbeing and empowerment)
- How much waste and how it is wasted (composted?) (understanding enjoyment and sustainability)
- How is food being served (e.g., in plastic wrap?) (understanding sustainability)

Surveys

Flourish also administered surveys to staff (44 responses) and parents (8 responses). These surveys were designed to collect feedback on the foods we serve, and seek input into the outcomes and impacts of Flourish's work.

Student Feedback

Flourish distributed student feedback forms via email to all schools served. These were printed and returned with student input from 6 schools. These forms asked student's comfort accessing foods at schools, what foods they liked and disliked and what their ideal school food program would look like.

PLEASE CONTACT FLOURISH IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN REVIEWING OUR INTERVIEW, SURVEY AND/OR STUDENT FEEDBACK FORMS AND QUESTIONS.



STAFF SURVEY OVERVIEW AT A GLANCE

Date Open: March 3 – March 18, 2026

Distributed to 198 contacts (staff in schools)

44 Responses Received

27 Unique Schools

26 responses from Elementary Schools (15 unique schools)

7 responses from Middle Schools (5 unique schools)

11 responses from High Schools (7 unique schools)

13 Principals/Vice-Principals

12 Food Coordinators (CUPE)

1 Education Assistant (EA)

13 Teachers

1 Student Advocate

1 SEF

1 Admin Assistant

1 School Counsellor

1 Unknown

Recipients were asked to rate the following from 1-5 (1 is low, 5 is high).



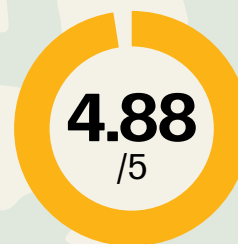
Quality of food



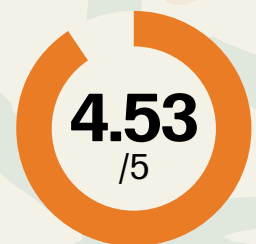
Cultural diversity/
relevance of food



Student enjoyment
of food



Customer service
(your experience working
with Flourish staff)



Overall, how would you
rate the success of your
school's food program?

Average food waste reported

12.6% OR LESS

What We Found

Our findings are organized according to themes that emerged from interview transcripts and survey responses. There are five overarching themes and sub-themes that non-sequentially connect to the outcomes identified in Flourish's theory of change.

Waste and Sustainability

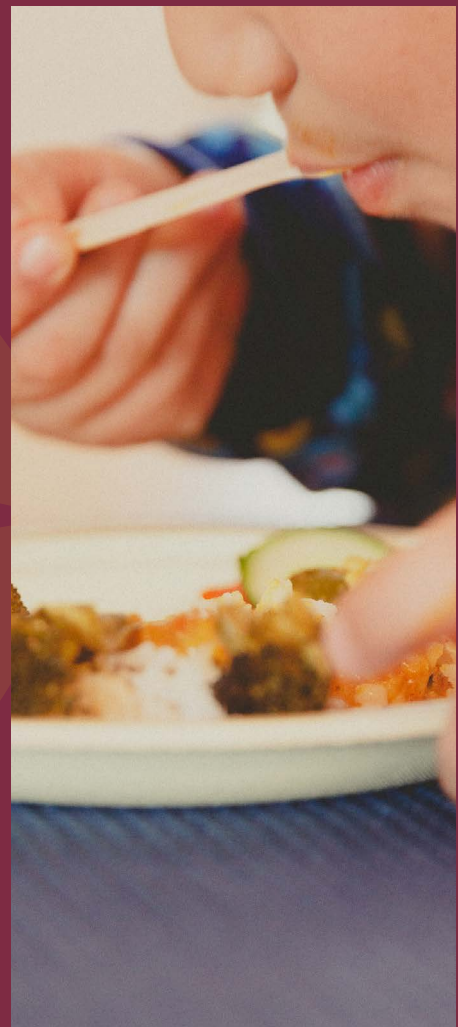
Food waste is generally low (“Access to Food” and “Sustainability”)

All schools reported relatively little food waste. Leftover food is often offered during a second call, shared with staff, frozen or—in one instance—used as feed to a teacher's chickens.

The most commonly identified cause of student food waste is insufficient time to eat. When a bell rings or recess begins, students are required to stop eating in middle and high school. Students largely seem to enjoy Flourish's food and do not waste much.

Sustainability/waste challenges (“Sustainability”)

Paper plates, paper bags, and cutlery were repeatedly identified as the largest waste stream. These items may not be disposed of correctly because some schools lack organics collection.



Access to Food: Distribution Models, Stigmatization, and Challenges

Open access reduces stigmatization (“Access to Food”)

One of the clearest findings across school cases was the importance of allowing all students in a school to access food in some form. Schools had their own models set up for food access. Most of the schools had an open access model where all students can access the food program. An open or broadly available model reduces the distinction between students who are considered “in need” and those who are not. This helps prevent students from being singled out and not feeling comfortable to access school food.

Schools use different approaches to balance open access with limited food supplies. In some elementary schools, students known to rely on the program are served first. We saw that priority is given to students “in need”, allowing them to receive lunch first before everyone else. Administrators, teachers, counselors and EAs recognize which students need the food based on knowing which students often come without a lunch as well as their family dynamics and socio-economic status. The principal or vice-principal in charge of the program keeps a confidential list of students who are “in need”. Families can also request to have their children added to the list of students who need the food.

Other students may then access remaining fruits, vegetables, or second meal servings. In other elementary settings, breakfast is openly available while lunch access is more closely managed. Some schools (mainly middle and high schools) have an entirely universal-access model.

One middle school had a partial access model, where only students defined by the teachers and staff as “in need” would receive the hot meal. Teachers would actually discourage students from getting the food if they knew that the student already had brought their lunch. However, the rest of the students were able to access the salad bar and fruit. In this way, everyone has access to some food. One student commented on the necessity of the program because their friend accesses it: “I have a friend who kind of relies on the programs to get his food. So I say it’s quite important.”

Although these models vary, interviewees consistently indicated that access should be open in some form. Universal availability reduces social tensions or stigmatization and makes it easier for students to seek food when they need to.

Open access also creates a sense of security for students who may not require food every day but know it will be available, need be. Students know that forgetting a lunch, experiencing a rushed morning, or facing a challenge at home does not mean that they will go without eating.

“I feel really taken care of because I know if I forgot my lunch today, then I don’t have to not eat.”



The importance of open, flexible, far-reaching access (“Community Building” and “Access to Food”)

Student food needs are not set in stone. Teachers, educational assistants, food coordinators, and administrators are able to recognize evolving and changing needs through their daily relationships with students. They are aware of when students repeatedly seek snacks, do not bring lunches, or are experiencing changes in their home lives, and invite them to participate in the school food program.

Flexible access allows schools to respond to these circumstances without requiring parents or students to formally identify themselves as food insecure. Sometimes students who have forgotten their lunch can access the program. It also enables schools to include students whose need may be social or emotional rather than nutritional. In several schools, students are invited into breakfast or lunch programs because the setting offers an opportunity to connect with an adult and other students and/or allows for a calmer transition into the school day. Flourish programs also occasionally support school staff and families. Leftover food is sometimes

shared with educational assistants (EAs), teachers, or students’ families to address broader community needs and reduce food waste. Some schools go above and beyond and operate family food markets, distribute packaged food, or connect families with community resources. These practices show how school food security is connected to the broader school community.

“Kids are not wandering the halls looking for food anymore. They know it’s here. They know they’re going to have lunch, and they know where to get it.”

“Families are really important, that they’re part of this community, right? And so I think there’s a feeling that they know they can reach out if they need something ... We look after each other. Yeah, it takes a group. It takes a village.”

“The weekly grocery bags for my families are extremely valuable and appreciated. Many of my students will make those meals for their families, so it also is engaging them in food preparation. Many of them send photos of the meals they have made.”

Inequitable resource distribution impacts access in high school (“Access to Food”)

One high school serves a large number of students, but its budget and systems limit the amount and variety of food that is available. We recognized that this budget can be a barrier to providing healthier food options for more students, as food tends to run scarce towards the end of the week for this high school. The school relies on food rescue initiatives and its culinary program to supplement Flourish’s contribution.

In this high school, long line-ups to receive food are a barrier for accessing food. Long lineups for food can also create inequitable access. Students standing at the end of the line or those who arrive later tend to get fewer varieties or nothing. During our focus group, students voiced that when they perceive the long line, they felt discouraged from getting the food because they think it will take a long time for them to get food. Students at the back of a lunch line may receive limited choices, smaller portions, or no food at all. Some students in our focus group suggested having 2 lines to make the line appear shorter or go faster, encouraging students to line up. Although open access is ideal (especially in middle and high school – children increasingly aware of socio-economic inequalities), it must be supported by equitable funding, adequate staffing, and appropriate serving systems.

Student Food Experience: Enjoyment, Serving Practices, and Cultural Relevance

Students enjoy balanced and familiar foods (“Access to Food”)

Student and adult interviewees spoke very positively about the quality and nutritional balance of Flourish meals. Favourite foods include pasta, macaroni and cheese, chicken, perogies, caesar salad, sushi salad, curry, raw vegetables (especially cucumbers), muffins, and hot breakfast foods.

Fruits and vegetables are regularly identified as especially popular among students. Many adults highlight that for some students, school food may be their primary/consistent source of fresh produce. They also mention that regular exposure to fruits and vegetables make them more desirable, and can help many students overcome a distaste they might have for them. In high school, students highlighted how balanced and simple meals bring people in to try the food.



“I love that there’s a vegetable component to it, because a lot of kids would choose not to eat vegetables.”

“I think I love the idea that it’s, like, nourishing, healthy meals. I love the name Flourish. I think that just kind of epitomizes what the program’s about.”

“It’s so healthy. It’s sourced locally. It’s cooked well ... kids are getting healthy food, and they enjoy it.”

“Having the ability to offer students a hot and nutritious meal has been great for our school community. Families especially have been very appreciative to have this option for students.”

Respectful serving practices and student agency encourages food exploration (“Access to Food”)

From our observations, we came to understand that how food is offered is as important as what is served. Student-centred serving practices (i.e., asking students whether they want a food, allowing them to choose their portion size, and offering small amounts for tasting) encourage experimentation and reduce individual student waste. Serving food like salad with different dressings/sauces was also highlighted as important in encouraging student experimentation.

Students are often encouraged—not forced—to try unfamiliar foods. Interviewees often noted that this approach has reduced extreme food preferences or “pickiness.” Students become more open to new foods because tasting is presented as an invitation rather than a demand.

Culturally diverse foods are celebrated and desired ("Community Building" and "Access to Food")

Interviewees strongly appreciate culturally diverse menus and special food days. For example, salmon and bannock served in connection with National Day for Truth and Reconciliation was highlighted across interviews. Schools also value opportunities for students to learn about foods from cultures other than their own.

Students, staff, teachers, and administration requested more African, East Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Korean, Greek, and Mexican foods. These requests were particularly prominent in more culturally diverse and rapidly growing schools. Administrators at an elementary school suggested a regular (e.g., once a month) "student-choice" day that could be connected to cultural foods.

Culturally relevant food can also enhance belonging by showing students that their families and identities are represented. It was highlighted as providing an easy way for students to learn about one another and connect.

Interviewees identified a need for more halal, vegan, gluten-free, and allergy-aware options. Halal choices were already recognized positively at some elementary and middle schools, but schools noted that dietary inclusion (e.g., allergy awareness in high school or cultural diversity) needs to remain a priority as student populations become increasingly diverse.

Student Wellbeing: Connection, Belonging, and Engagement

School food reduces dysregulation and improves engagement ("Support Students")

School teachers, staff, and administration consistently link access to food with improved concentration, emotional/behavioural regulation, and classroom engagement. Hunger was consistently described as a barrier that affects students' ability to focus, communicate, and manage their emotions.

Staff members observed that when food became consistently available due to the program, students stopped leaving their classroom or visiting school offices in search of snacks. They said that students were more settled during the afternoon, thus teachers could devote more attention to teaching rather than trying to find food for individual students or managing behaviour.

"Kids being fed—that is huge for teaching. Before Flourish and after Flourish, it's a whole different teaching."

"It's kind of like that hierarchy of needs. If they're not fed, then they're not going to learn."

"Behaviours are down, incidents are down, you know, things are calmer."

"The food program impacts students in such a positive way for them to feel a real sense of community and we can see it helps keep them focused and our students may not be getting good meals at home or may not be able to afford food as groceries have gone up significantly in price"

"This program is integral to some students' success at school. They come to school hungry and we are able to provide them with the nourishment they need to learn."

Meals times enhance social connection and sense of belonging (“Support Students”)

Across contexts, food was recognized as a thread that pulled people in the school together. Dedicated food spaces were repeatedly described as relational spaces. Breakfast clubs, lunchrooms, serving lines, gardens, and food-preparation areas give students opportunities to connect with peers and adults outside of the classroom.

The mixed-age nature of food service can also support relationships across grades. At an elementary school, for example, students talk to one another while waiting in line, and interact with staff members whom they may not otherwise encounter during the day.

“It’s definitely helped me connect more, and then it also gives me more time to spend with my friends, so now we know each other way more better.”

“All of them coming in here, eating together, socializing and all having the same lunch ... I think they want to come here and socialize.”

“You have students chatting in the line, with all different grades together, interacting with staff. So there’s a good chance for connection there.”

“I don’t only see it as a food program. I see it as a community and social program. Because some of these kids look forward to coming into that room with their lunch ... there are a lot of vulnerable kids that have tricky home situations, and I feel honoured that I get to be in hold space with those kids ... They don’t get to have not only the amount of food and the quality of food, but the connection over meal time.”

Student leadership creates sense of belonging (“Support Students”)

School food also provides opportunities for students to contribute to their school community. Students may prepare food, serve food, support breakfast clubs, assist in gardens, or help with cleanup. These roles promote a sense of responsibility toward other students and adults and foster a sense of belonging. For some students, food-related responsibilities provide a sense of purpose that might be difficult to achieve elsewhere in the school day.

“It creates, like, connection, not only with the adults in the school, but also peer connections and leadership opportunities. And they have, like, their aprons, and it’s like a big-kid job.”

“Kids sharing meals creates meaningful connections and having our grade 5 students helping with the program has been really positive, they’re building leadership skills and taking a sense of pride in their school.”

Caring adults provide important “touch points” (“Support Students”)

Food coordinators and other adults involved in the programs play a particularly important role. They are not simply distributing food, but deeply connecting with students. These relationships can be particularly meaningful for students who struggle socially.

“A child needs connections with many different adults in the school. It’s just not the classroom teacher; it’s lots of different people.”

“Some of our kids are involved in it because it’s a time for us to develop more important adult relationships in the school ... so they have more touch points.”





The Importance of the Food Coordinator

There's a common theme across all the schools which is that food is served by caring adults - the food service staff have good relationships with the students, have good knowledge of student backgrounds and food and portion preferences. Some of the food service staff would provide small portions to get students to try new foods without producing much waste. This has reduced food waste as well as extreme preferences or pickiness. Students are able to learn about and have come to enjoy different cultural foods. Food service takes a student-centered approach, with the staff asking students how their day is, how much food they want, and if they want something. This is also important for some student volunteers who build a relationship with the food coordinator, creating a sense of belonging and purpose when helping to prepare food. One food coordinator, who is also the school psychologist, described a student who originally did not want to be in class, but when she started volunteering with food preparation in the breakfast program, she started to enjoy school, creating a sense of belonging, empowerment and purpose at school.

"It's been so great to see [students] that I've worked with in the breakfast program come to like life and be happy in school. And so she was really struggling with kind of that defiance, not wanting to follow, like, the group plan of the class and and refusing to join the class. And so it's been really great to connect with her first thing in the morning and have kind of that easier transition."

A principal at the same elementary school observed that it's healthy for students to build connections with different caring adults at school, which increases their sense of belonging at school.

"They'll be skipping into the dining area, and they'll line up and are the person who's over there. She's lovely. She connects with them. She talks to them. You know, it's also the philosophy, you know, a child needs connections with many different adults in the school, or just adults in general. It's just not the classroom teacher, it's lots of different people, and you pick up on that, and they connect with each other. And, you know, it's just connections that we need more of."

Food Literacy and Garden-Based Education

Gardens connect students to food and place (“Community Building”, “Support Learning” and “Sustainability”)

School gardens are recognized as a powerful source of food literacy education, particularly in schools that are fortunate to have and maintain them. Gardens allow students to observe how food grows, nurture plant growth, and understand their food as an ecological system. At one particular elementary school, the principal describes how the garden is incorporated into the school's design and culture.

“The garden was a very important part when we were designing the school. It was something really important to my heart, that kids could access and learn where food comes from—how to grow it, what it means, and how to be a part of that. And so lots of times what we have in the garden is in our food program. The kids are out there learning that it's okay to eat lettuce out of the garden. [...] It's woven into the fabric of the school”

Additionally, at some schools, produce from gardens is sometimes incorporated into school meals, helping students see a direct relationship between growing, harvesting, preparing, and eating food. Teachers and staff mentioned that garden participation can improve students' willingness to taste vegetables.

School gardens can also strengthen relationships with families and the wider community. At one elementary school, community members help care for the garden during the summer. At another middle school, a teacher has connected students with a community garden where they participate in visits, food growing, and family harvesting. Gardens are seemingly important for literacy, along with relationship building between people and place.

Food literacy requires resources (“Support Learning”)

Many educators expressed interest in incorporating food literacy, cooking, gardening, and land-based learning into the curriculum. However, these activities often depend on a small number of passionate teachers who contribute substantial unpaid time and personal resources.

Teachers requested practical resources such as books about food, curriculum-linked lesson plans, equipment, and/or visiting facilitators. They also emphasized the importance of connecting food learning to British Columbia curriculum.

Flourish workshops are viewed as helpful in building teacher confidence. The frequently praised apple workshop demonstrates the importance of hands-on learning experiences for food literacy.

Many teachers also identified the need for careful language when teaching about nutrition. Lessons that divide foods into “healthy” and “unhealthy,” or

“good” and “bad,” can unintentionally create shame or stigmatize foods associated with particular cultures. A middle school educator asked for resources that can help educators discuss food in a balanced and non-judgmental manner.

“There can be food shame that goes along with it. And this age group especially, I think a lot of them are becoming very aware of themselves and their body image.”

“How to talk about food, where it's not just like, ‘This is a good food, this is a bad food,’ but how to find a balance.”

“Teachers want to do the work; they might just not know how ... they will if the resources are provided.”

“If they don't have the knowledge base or they're nervous about doing it, they might not, whereas if they do have somebody that is able to come in and do workshops ... it's a lot more welcomed.”



"I think [the School Garden] has helped their relationship with food and willingness to at least try some stuff."

Recommendations

Equitable Funding

Funding models should account for school enrolment, participation rates, age, dietary diversity, and the higher demand experienced at some secondary schools. High schools may require greater allocations to prevent food shortages and ensure that students at the end of the line receive meals.

Stable staffing

Food coordinator positions should receive dependable funding. Programs should not rely primarily on unpaid labour or staff (e.g., educational assistants). Considering back-up coverage for paid food coordinators for when they are away may also support program sustainability.

Dietary and cultural inclusion

Menus should continue expanding halal, vegan, gluten-free, and allergy-aware offerings. Student groups and families can help identify culturally relevant meals for individual school contexts. Recommendations were to add more African, East Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Korean, Greek, and Mexican foods.

Student participation

Schools could establish food committees, more cultural days, monthly choice meals (e.g., through a student survey), and/or more leadership opportunities related to serving, gardening, and/or preparation.

Food literacy support

Teachers would benefit from curriculum-linked lesson plans, workshops, children's books, equipment (e.g., blenders), garden support, and/or resources for discussing food without shame.

Sustainability and waste

Schools should investigate reusable service ware (e.g., bring your own container system), composting, and improve waste-sorting education.

Adaptable meal formats

Portable meals such as sandwiches or packed lunches could support field trips and off-site learning. Schools may also need breakfast foods with more protein and meal options that accommodate field trips (e.g., easily packable lunches).

Moving Forward

Through the research process some important gaps and opportunities appeared to us in our work. Next year, we hope to put more focus on:

Indigenous Education and Traditional Food Systems

While one elder attended the first year of School Food Program Advisory Committee meetings (N=3) held in the 2024/25 school year, the committee was unable to meet in the 2025/26 school year due to turnover in the Associate Superintendent position at the Sooke School Board. Meetings (N=2) with the NAT'SA'MAHT Indigenous Education Elders Circle in the 2024/25 school year to present our work and seek input into our Theory of Change were met with reassuring encouragement. We look forward to presenting our findings here and seeking this group's blessings and advice in the coming 2026/27 school year. Our research team was able to meet with one middle school Indigenous Education teacher (IED), who provided rich input and encouragement; our team felt it would be useful to have a wider diversity of voices bringing uniquely Indigenous perspectives to our evaluation work next year.

In order to increase Indigenous voice next year we will:

- Reach out via telephone and email to seek meetings in person with colleagues at: Metis Nation of Greater Victoria, Native Friendship Centre, SCIANEW, T'SOUKE, Pacheedaht, Songhees, Esquimalt, WSANEC, Others as recommended.
- Send email to all IED teachers in Sooke School District to share this report and invite them to a virtual interview to gather their input.

Caregiver Input and Feedback

We were not able to gather much useful data from parents and guardians. Next year we will have a larger list of parents (~N=400) who have registered using an emerging pay-what-you-can platform on our website (www.flourishschoolfood.ca/signup). We will send these parents two surveys through the year seeking their input (early December / May). We will also share these surveys with administrators and invite them to share the survey with caregivers of children accessing our programs.

Student Voice

As awkward adults we are still fumbling to find the best ways to gracefully give way to student leadership. We feel the best possible future lies in students taking ownership over their food: growing, preparing and sharing it themselves. We are inspired by the work of our friends at Lunch Lab in Vancouver, who have demonstrated how even kindergarten students are capable of this.

In order to increase student voice next year we will:

- Host (N=3-4) cultural food events in high schools, bringing food makers in for a day of sharing knowledge (over lunch and in a few classes). These will be co-organized with partners at Iye' Creative.
- Convene a permanent Youth Advisory to advise our organization's: program staff, board of directors and evaluation and research teams.
- Continue to improve our approach to hosting student focus groups (and host more focus groups with older aged (grades 5-12) students).

Key Supportive Conditions

When outgoing Associate Superintendent David Strange was first presented with our preliminary Theory of Change draft, he wisely commented that the outcomes we hoped to achieve likely required that schools have some key supportive conditions established. He asked the School Food Program Advisory Committee what these conditions might be, and together they came up with the conditions included in the final draft of our Theory of Change.

In our first year of conducting this outcome evaluation, we primarily focused on looking at how our work contributed to achieving the identified outcomes. Next year, we'd like to put some focus on how schools are or are not working towards building these key supportive conditions.

Place Based Learning

Our garden team delivered just over 600 workshops in the 2025/26 school year. We have always envisioned this team's work as a support to help teachers get their class outside, connecting with food and place based learning. We have found that these workshops do not always provide this kind of support for teachers. In the coming school year, we would like to put some more attention to exploring the barriers that prevent teachers from taking their class out into school gardens and to explore opportunities to help them do more hands-on learning outside with their class.

Our evaluation team has a keen interest in the connections between place based learning in school gardens and climate change and sustainability education. We feel that connecting hands on with food in school gardens and kitchens has power to support important, solutions oriented learning about our relationships with place, environment and ecological and climate crises and would like to better understand how we can support teachers and schools in engaging in pedagogical approaches that open and deepen place based learning about food, sustainability and climate change (among other topics).



600+

Garden Workshops
in 2025/26

Broader Research

Flourish has been involved in leading the development of a research proposal grounded in an emerging academic-community partnership including the University of Victoria as well as provincial partners at Simon Fraser University and the Public Health Association of British Columbia. Our research aims to improve our collective understanding of the diverse forces at play in shaping school food programs at the school district and individual school level to identify promising practices and approaches to school food program development in British Columbia's Capital Region. Specifically, the objectives of this research are to identify and explore:

1. The regulative, normative, motivational, and institutional factors that determine how school district and school level administrators distribute school food moneys;
2. The design, development and relative success of individual school food programs in achieving their own goals as well as provincial and national guidelines and policies.

Research objectives have been directly informed by several years of ongoing dialogue between Flourish and other regional organizations, who have been collaborating under a collective impact network known locally as the Capital Region Farm to School Advisory. This Advisory includes representation from all three regional school districts (SD61, SD62, and SD63), Island Health, several non-profit and community service organizations who support school food programming. This group of organizations has identified their need for more information about the diversity of school food programs that exist in our region and the forces that have shaped them.

While this research work has emerged parallel to the outcome evaluation described in this report, there is opportunity for both projects to support and inform the other moving forward. As we come to learn more about the forces that have shaped school food programs outside of Flourish's work and the relative successes of these, lessons about good practice for achieving our stated outcomes may surface and support our ongoing program iteration and evaluation.





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