

food for thought

This is one of four summaries of the latest research on key issues affecting our access to safe, nutritious and affordable food.



Bridging the Gap: Improving the Food Environment for BC Students

BC schools have made great strides in creating healthier food choices for students. Lesson plans on nutrition, school gardens, nutritious lunch and snack programs and junk food free vending machines are some of the school-based actions that are improving student's food environment.

Now it's time to look outside the school grounds – at the neighbourhoods around our schools. The benefits of in-school programs can be undermined by students' access to junk food, at convenience stores and fast food restaurants close to schools.

In tackling the epidemic of childhood obesity, this summary of recent research can help parent advisory committees, schools, businesses and local governments working together to find solutions beyond the school.

"It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers."

James Thurber



What's Happening Inside the School

The research is clear: if school-aged children are provided with unhealthy food options in schools, they will choose them. Several US-based studies and one comprehensive BC study show:

- when unhealthy food choices, such as fast food, candy and soft drinks are available in schools, students tend to choose these foods
- students exposed to unhealthy food choices in school do not compensate by making healthier choices away from school.

Taking this research to heart, BC has become a leader, supporting a range of healthy eating actions in schools, including regulations to govern the sale of all food and drinks in BC schools. (Follow the links on the next page for details.)

Looking Outside the School Yard

While much has been done within schools, research points to a need for attention to the food environment surrounding schools. Several US studies reveal a high concentration of convenience stores and fast food restaurants near schools, and how this concentration varies according to socio-economic status of the neighbourhood.

- One US study found three to four times as many fast food restaurants clustered within 1.5 km of schools than if these had been distributed randomly.
- A higher likelihood of convenience stores and fast food restaurants being located near schools that have higher proportions of students eligible for free school meals and from lower income families.
- Food outlets offering “unhealthy choices” were more frequently located in lower-income neighbourhoods.



Although the majority of these studies are based in the US, they do provide insight into the availability of junk food near schools. Access to unhealthy foods near schools could negate the work underway to improve the nutritional environment within schools. Studying the environments surrounding our schools could be the first step to ensuring a healthier food environment overall.



Food for Thought

Encouraging children to eat healthy is no easy task. However, the increasing epidemic of childhood obesity should make healthy food environments a priority issue for action.

Local governments, working closely with schools, parent advisory groups, local businesses and other agencies, can play a key role in reducing the availability of unhealthy foods surrounding our schools. Land use planning tools such as neighbourhood plans and negotiating with the business community could help to create healthier “food zones” around schools.

For More Information

This information sheet provides a summary of evidence drawn from current published studies and research papers. Please refer to Chapter 7 of the document *Food for Thought* for detailed information, available on the Provincial Health Services Authority website at www.phsa.ca/PopulationHealth (under Food Security), along with the following research summaries:

- *Planting Seeds for Solutions: Building Communities with Food in Mind*
- *A Sustainable Harvest: Weathering the Impact of Climate Change on BC's Food Supply*
- *New Ideas for Healthy Communities: The Link between Food, Health and Prosperity*

Here are some additional resources for local governments, including ideas for action.

- Action Schools! BC: A best practices program designed to help schools create individualized action plans to promote healthy eating and physical activity for their students. It also includes

information on a variety of other programs including School Fruit and Vegetable Nutritional Program, Farm to School Salad Bar and School Community Connections.

www.actionschoolsbc.ca/content/home.asp

- Assessment Tool: For evaluating healthy eating practices at school. www.healthyeatingatschools.ca/wp-content/uploads/school-healthy-assessment-tool.pdf
- Brand Name Food List: Offers nutrition ratings for a wide variety of packaged and franchised foods and beverages. www.brandnamefoodlist.ca
- Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools: The guidelines are designed to improve the food options offered in schools to make it easy for students to make healthy choices. www.bced.gov.bc.ca/health/guidelines_sales.pdf
- HealthLink BC's Dietitian Services: Offers free nutritional information by phone. www.healthlinkbc.ca/dietitian
- Healthy Eating at School: Supported by ActNow BC and devoted to improving nutrition for students in BC schools. www.healthyeatingatschools.ca