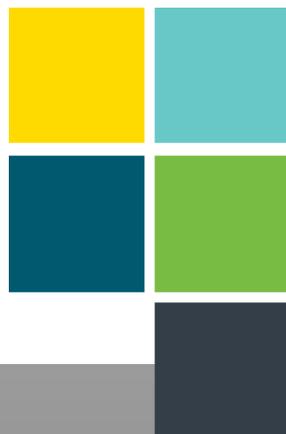




CREATING A SUPPORTIVE FOOD ENVIRONMENT AT SCHOOL



School Nutrition TOOLKIT

Creating a Supportive Food Environment at School

The purpose of this toolkit is to support teachers and school staff in creating a positive, inclusive, and respectful food environment where all students feel safe, supported, and able to develop a healthy relationship with food.

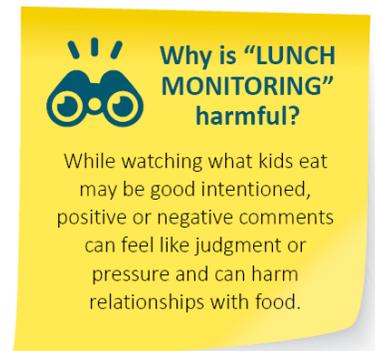
This resource provides practical guidance, shared language, and realistic actions that help reduce food pressure and stigma, respect student and family diversity, and align everyday school practices with evidence-informed, food neutral approaches.

Roles in School Eating

A positive and supportive eating environment supports student well-being, belonging, and helps them to build a healthy relationship with food. Every member of the school community plays a role. Understanding roles helps reduce food pressure and supports student autonomy.

Follow these roles for eating at school from the [Ellyn Satter’s Division of Responsibility \(English only\)](#)

SCHOOL	Decides when and where students eat Determines which foods are offered , if food is sold or provided
STUDENT	Decides whether to eat Decides how much to eat Chooses the order in which they eat food
CAREGIVER	Decides what food is available



Why is “LUNCH MONITORING” harmful?

While watching what kids eat may be good intentioned, positive or negative comments can feel like judgment or pressure and can harm relationships with food.



Actions for Schools:

Ensure staff and volunteers understand and respect these roles during meals and snacks.



Resources to Support:

- [Teaching Canada’s Food Guide: Roles around Food and Eating; Français](#)
- [Teach Nutrition: Reducing Mealtime Stress with the Division of Responsibility](#)
- [Tips for Lunchroom Monitors; Français](#)
- [Roles and Responsibilities Related to Food & Eating - Elementary; Français](#)
- [Roles and Responsibilities Related to Food & Eating - Secondary; Français](#)

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Supporting Positive Food Experiences

Teachers and staff play a key role in creating respectful and inclusive food environments.

Key Principles:

- Honour students' individual food choices
- Recognize that families make food choices for many reasons (culture, budget, access, preferences, allergies, religion, seasons)
- Be sensitive to food insecurity and access to water

Avoid:

- Labelling foods as “good,” “bad,” “healthy,” or “unhealthy”
- Commenting on, comparing, or judging student lunches or snacks
- Pressuring students to eat or try foods
- Making comments about your food choices and your body while at school



Action for Staff:

Use non-judgmental language and model respect for all foods and bodies.

Review [Elementary School Food Scenarios/ Secondary School Food Scenarios](#) to learn more about how to navigate situations related to eating at school in a positive, supportive way.

Evaluate your biases regarding food and eating practices [with this tool](#) from Health Canada

Consider adding food literacy programs such as You're the Chef or school gardens/growing towers.



Resources to Support:

- [Nurturing Healthy Eaters in Elementary School; Français](#)
- [Nurturing Healthy Eaters in Secondary Schools; Français](#)
- Nourish Nova Scotia [Positive Food Environment Toolkit](#)

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Providing an Appropriate Eating Environment

The school environment shapes how and where students eat — whether it's in the classroom, cafeteria, or outdoors.

Best Practices

- Provide **at least 20 minutes of actual eating time** (unrushed, not including transitions)
- Create a **calm, welcoming space to eat**.
- Keep eating areas **screen-free** (no TVs, tablets, or smartboards)
- Encourage **handwashing or hand sanitizing** before meals and snacks
- Ensure garbage and recycling bins are **visible and emptied** regularly



What about BEVERAGES in the classroom?

Help students to stay hydrated throughout the day. Encourage them to bring a reusable water bottle and allow access to water at their desks.

Community Connection

- Create opportunities for staff and students to eat together
- Use food-related events to build connection and belonging (family engagement events, shared meals)



Action for Administrators:

Review schedules and supervision plans to ensure adequate, unrushed eating time.
Ensure handwashing signage is available throughout the school.



Resources to Support:

- [Healthy Eating at School](#); [Français](#)
- [Canada's Food Guide Toolkit for Educators](#); [Français](#)
- [Creating Positive Food Environments to Nurture Healthy Eaters](#); [Français](#)
- [Eating at School](#); [Français](#)

School Nutrition TOOLKIT

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Talking About Food at School: Food-Neutral Language

Food-neutral language supports body trust and reduces shame or pressure. Food neutrality doesn't mean all foods have the same nutritional value - a cupcake and an apple offer different nutrients. Instead, it means creating a positive, judgment-free environment where students can enjoy a variety of foods without guilt or shame.

Avoid	Support
Labeling food with words like: good, bad, healthy, unhealthy, junk, treat, etc.	Students eating at their own pace
Praising or rewarding students for eating certain foods	Students choosing the order of foods they wish to eat
Criticizing or commenting on student food choices	Students stopping when full or eating more when hungry
Talking negatively about your own body or food choices	Hands on learning experiences

This approach supports students' mental health, wellbeing, and their ability to build healthy, lifelong relationships with food.



Action for Schools:

Provide training on food-neutral language for teachers, lunch monitors, and support staff.



Resources to Support:

- [Creating a positive food environment in schools; Français](#)
- [Mindfulness and Mindful eating in the classroom; Français](#)
- [Canada's Food Guide; Français](#)
- [BANA - Health Promotion \(English Only\)](#)
- [Elementary School Food Scenarios; Français](#)
- [Secondary School Food Scenarios; Français](#)

School Nutrition TOOLKIT

Creating a Supportive Food Environment at School

Connecting Food to the Curriculum

Food can support learning without focusing on weight or health labels. For example, growing and preparing food builds skills, confidence, and connections.

Bring food into the classroom through:	
Procedural writing: listing out steps in a recipe	Science: growing a garden
Reading: reading a recipe, nutrition facts tables	Social studies: learning about food across cultures
Math: graphing favourite foods, measuring ingredients, doubling a recipe	Health and Physical Education: discuss how advertising, marketing, and social media influence the food choices

Cook up some fun! Cooking gives students opportunities to:

- Try new foods
- Practice working together
- Develop food preparation skills
- Form positive memories of cooking and eating together



Action for Teachers:

Integrate food activities into existing curriculum expectations.



Resources to Support:

- [BrightBites \(Français\): In the Classroom \(Français\); Cook it Up! \(Français\); Green Thumb! \(Français\)](#)
- Cooking or food skills programs – [You're the Chef](#) cooking program
- [Canada's Food Guide Toolkit for Educators; Français](#)
 - [Ages 4-6; Ages 7-8; Ages 9-11](#)
- Freggie Tales [Resources for Teachers; Français](#)
- Sustain Ontario lesson plans for [Children and Youth; Français](#).
- Explore [Grants and Funding Opportunities](#) or partnerships to support hands-on food programs.
- WECHU - [Nutrition Social Media, Newsletter, and Announcements](#)

School Nutrition TOOLKIT

Creating a Supportive Food Environment at School

Rethinking School Celebrations, Rewards, and Fundraising

Using non-food options helps create inclusive experiences for all students.

School Celebrations Français	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dance parties• Extra recess or gym time• Dress-up or theme days• Classroom games• Special roles (e.g., “Class Leader”)
School Rewards Français	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• School supplies (pencils, stickers, bookmarks)• Certificates, notes, or announcements• Extra playtime or special activities
School Fundraisers Français	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dance-a-thons, yoga events, bowling• Family movie nights or bingo• Raffles for gift cards or local services• Bracelets or small non-food items• Fun challenges involving staff participation



Action for Schools:

Review current practices and identify at least one non-food alternative per category.



Resources to Support:

- [Rethink School Celebrations](#); [Français](#)
- [Rethink School Rewards](#); [Français](#)
- [Rethink School Fundraisers](#); [Français](#)

School Nutrition TOOLKIT

Creating a Supportive Food Environment at School

Policies and Guidelines

Schools are responsible for foods sold or provided on site.

- **School Food and Beverage Policy (PPM 150)**
 - Requires foods sold in publicly funded schools to meet nutrition standards.
 - For a list of approved vendors, contact your School Board or the Comprehensive Health Promotion team (519-258-2146 ext. 1555 or chp@wechu.org).
- **Student Nutrition Program (SNP) Guidelines** (for OSNP programs only)
 - Supports meal and snack programs that meet nutrition standards.



Action for Teachers:

Ensure food programs align with provincial policies

Have questions?

Contact the Comprehensive Health Promotion team at 519-258-2146 ext. 1555 or chp@wechu.org.

School Nutrition TOOLKIT

Creating a Supportive Food Environment at School

School Food Environment Reflection & Action Activity

Purpose: This activity helps school staff/volunteers reflect on current practices related to food, eating, and body diversity at school, identify strengths and gaps, and determine realistic next steps to improve the school food environment.

Who should participate:

- Teachers/Administrators
- Lunchroom monitors
- All adults who work or volunteer within the school

Time required:

- Individual reflection: 10–15 minutes
- Group discussion and action planning: 30–45 minutes

Part 1: Individual Reflection Ask staff/volunteers to complete this section independently.

Food-Neutral Language & Attitudes: Reflect on language used in classrooms, lunchrooms, and school communications. Select the answer that best reflects your practice.

	All of the Time	Most of the Time	Not at All
Staff avoid labeling foods as “good,” “bad,” “healthy,” or “unhealthy”			
Staff do not comment on or judge student lunches or snacks			
Staff avoid pressuring students to eat or try foods			
Staff model respectful language about food and bodies			
Classroom and school visuals reflect body diversity			

Reflection Prompt: What language or practices might need to change to better support food neutrality?

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Eating Environment & Scheduling: Consider how eating time and spaces support student needs. Select the answer that best reflects your practice.

	All of the Time	Most of the Time	Not at All
Students have at least 20 minutes of unrushed eating time			
Staff do not comment on or judge student lunches or snacks			
Eating areas are screen-free			
Handwashing /Hand Sanitizing is encouraged before meals and snacks			
Garbage and recycling bins are visible and well maintained			

Reflection Prompt: What changes could improve the eating experience for students?

Respect for Student Autonomy: Reflect on how student choice and body cues are supported. Select the answer that best reflects your practice.

	All of the Time	Most of the Time	Not at All
Students decide whether and how much to eat			
Students may eat foods in any order			
Staff respect hunger and fullness cues			
Cultural, religious, and family food practices are acknowledged			

Reflection Prompt: Where might students be experiencing pressure around food?

School Nutrition TOOLKIT

Creating a Supportive Food Environment at School

Celebrations, Rewards & Fundraising: Review how food is used in school culture. Select the answer that best reflects your practice.

	All of the Time	Most of the Time	Not at All
Non-food celebrations are common at the school			
Non-food rewards are used consistently			
Fundraising activities do not rely on food sales			
Families are informed about non-food approaches			

Reflection Prompt: Which practices could be replaced with more inclusive, non-food options?

Staff Knowledge & Support: Consider staff training and access to resources. Select the answer that best reflects your practice.

	All of the Time	Most of the Time	Not at All
Staff are familiar with food-neutral, weight-inclusive principles			
Lunchroom supervisors receive guidance on mealtime support			
Staff know where to find food environment resources			
The school aligns food practices with provincial policies			

Reflection Prompt: What additional support or training would be helpful?

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Part 2: Group Discussion: Bring staff together in small groups or as a full team.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is our school already doing well to support a positive food environment?
2. Where are students most likely experiencing food pressure or judgment?
3. Which changes would have the greatest positive impact with minimal disruption?
4. What barriers (time, space, resources) do we need to consider?

Part 3: Action Planning: As a group, identify 1–3 realistic actions to implement this year.

Guidelines for Action Planning:

- Start small and achievable
- Build on existing strengths
- Assign clear responsibility
- Set a realistic timeline

Use the [Healthy Schools Committee Toolkit](#) to help build your action plan.

Part 4: Reflection & Follow-Up

Reflection Questions

- How will we know this change is making a difference?
- How will we share progress with staff, students, and families?
- When will we revisit this reflection?

Suggested follow-up: Revisit this activity annually or after implementing a new food-related initiative.