



Schools as hubs of community: Making healthy food accessible for all families

By Sunjum Jhaj (she/her), Editor, *Teacher* magazine

WHAT COMES TO MIND when you think of a food bank? A lot of people picture shelves packed with mismatched non-perishables collected from food drives and donations. In reality, food banks look more like your local Costco.

The Greater Vancouver Food Bank (GVFB) has a warehouse in Burnaby filled with pallets of fresh fruits and vegetables, walk-in fridges and freezers to store dairy and meat, and of course, shelves of nutritious non-perishables like grains and legumes. Food banks offer fresh, nutritious ingredients for wholesome meals that enable families, seniors, and all members of our communities to access a balanced diet.

The need for food banks has been higher than ever in recent years. In 2021, food bank visits across Canada increased by over 20%, with more than 1.3 million visits just in the month of March.¹ The GVFB supported 16,133 people throughout the year, 25% of whom were children.²

Food banks sourced additional food to meet the greater demand for services. However, there are still thousands of people living in food insecurity who do not or can not access the food bank because of accessibility challenges, the

ongoing stigma associated with food bank use, or other cultural and personal reasons. Increasing access to healthy food throughout our communities is one of the GVFB's key goals.

Community agencies play an important role in helping establish connections between food banks and community members who need them. Community agencies are organizations that receive food, and sometimes resources such as fridges and freezers, from the food bank and in turn prepare and distribute hampers, meals, and snacks to community members. Schools' well-established relationships with hundreds of families and students make them ideal community agencies.

Community agencies have the flexibility to set up a food distribution program that works best for the staff involved and the community they serve. Across the city of Burnaby, the community agency program looks different at different school sites.

Mavis Anthony, a home economics teacher in Burnaby, got her school started as a community agency in 2020. Mavis's home economics students use food from the food bank to cook and prepare large quantities of freezer-ready meals. The

meals are stored in a family support freezer in the school, where students and families can pick them up anytime they need. Future plans include high schools reaching out to address food security in nearby elementary schools as well.

"There's a lot of stigma, uncertainty, and shame associated with food insecurity," said Mavis. "The family support freezer allows students to take what they need without drawing attention to themselves. It's done with dignity."

No matter what a school's food distribution program looks like, the theme of ensuring dignity is always present.

Gayle Beavil, President of the Association for Community Education in BC, noted that community schools are uniquely positioned to provide community supports, including food.

"Every community school is different because it's responsive to the needs and interests of the specific community," said Gayle. "We try to bring the community into the school and the school into the community through partnerships and involvement."

1 www.hungercount.foodbankscanada.ca
2 www.foodbank.bc.ca/about

To respond to unique needs, some community schools have a community school co-ordinator on staff. Some co-ordinators, like John Nanson, are teachers seconded from the classroom to work on community programs. The co-ordinator's role includes organizing community programs at the school, finding and securing funding and partnerships to keep the programs running, and building capacity with parents and the community.

"One of the community co-ordinator's most important jobs is building relationships," said John, referring to relationships with community partners, volunteers, community members, and families.

Relationships are what allow the programs to thrive. The food program in Burnaby's community schools is called the South-East Food Hub. It is one of nine food hubs across Burnaby run by community agencies. Thanks to well-established relationships, the South-East Food Hub was able to pivot quickly in March 2020 when the pandemic began.

The families who relied on the Food Hub were quick to volunteer and keep the program running in uncertain times. Families volunteered to sort and package food and deliver it to other families in the community. This shift to a community-run food hub turned out to be so successful it became standard practice. Every other Tuesday, several parents and volunteers meet at Edmonds Community School to co-ordinate the food hub and ensure families in their community have access to

nutritious ingredients and food staples. "Many of the people running the food program are the people receiving the food. They are models for us all. They're addressing needs of the communities they live in," said John.

The Food Hub program supports families through the summer months as well, even when school is not in session. Food delivery continues for families that need it most, and resources are made available to all other families so they can access food from various pick-up locations around the city.

Partnerships between Burnaby schools and the GVFB highlight how effective and important schools are in supporting their communities.

"We want to make this happen across the province," said Cynthia Boulter, the Chief Operating Officer at the GVFB. "There's so much surplus, healthy food ending up in landfills. We want to get this food to school districts so kids and families can easily access it."

Schools have always served as hubs of community where students can access supports that extend far beyond academic learning. Food programs are just one example of the many supports schools provide.

"There are so many caring teachers in every school and the kids trust them," said Mavis. "We support kids in so many ways. Making sure they're fed and healthy is important to address if we want to help them learn and grow." 🍎

What happens to unused food?

In landfills and compost facilities, the surplus food from the food bank would produce greenhouse gases, further contributing to the current climate crisis. For a more environmentally friendly approach to food recovery, the GVFB has partnered with ReFeed Farms.

ReFeed Farm's Langley facility recycles tens of thousands of pounds of healthy, surplus food from retailers and recovers what it can for food banks first. What isn't safe for people to eat is sent to local farms as nutritious livestock feed.

The food that cannot be recycled into animal feed is instead used to create a perfect environment for worms. The worms recycle the food waste into nutrient-rich castings that can replace synthetic fertilizers. This circular nutrition model ensures zero waste and benefits food security efforts, farm animals, and the soil in which our food grows.

Opposite: Bal Dhillon, John Nanson, Sheri Brattston, and Gayle Beavil (L to R). **Below:** Community members and volunteers Ikhlas, Ahmad, and Fatima (L to R) help assemble packages for delivery. Despite having moved out of the community, Fatima still buses in every other Tuesday to volunteer.



Sunjum Jhaj photos

