



# FOOD FUELS LEARNING

## August 2018

A Portland Public Schools Food Security Needs Assessment



Portland Public Schools  
Food Security Task Force

*Overview & District-wide Recommendations*

*Charitable Food Programs*

*Federal Nutrition Programs*

*School Gardens*

*Nutrition Education*

*Sustainable Practices*

## Letter from the Superintendent and Executive Director

In the summer of 2017, Portland Public Schools (PPS), Cumberland County Food Security Council (CCFSC) and the Portland Food Council launched the Portland Public Schools Food Security Task Force. This coalition of organizations is united in the beliefs that food fuels learning and that all students have the right to the nutritious food that will enable them to attain their full potential.

Many children and families in our school district struggle with access to nutritious food. Of the 6,796 students enrolled in Portland Public Schools in the 2017-18 school year, more than half, 3,560 students, were from families whose low income qualified them for free school meals. For a family of four, this designation means they lived on less than \$32,000 a year.

Educators observe daily how inadequate food affects student behavior, readiness to learn, and educational outcomes. The Task Force worked with district staff and stakeholders to collect information on what is currently happening to build food security in the schools, identify gaps, and determine how we can collectively address this concern.

The Portland Public Schools Food Security Task Force has mapped out which schools have food access programs, as well as where they could be implemented and where they can be improved. This assessment is reflected in this executive summary, as well as in the full report. From the results of our studies, we have extracted recommendations for sustainable solutions to end student hunger. Through our report, we also hope to share opportunities for anyone in the community who wants to join us in ensuring all Portland students have adequate, nutritious food to fuel our shared future.

As we work to build food security with students and their families, PPS and CCFSC are grateful for the community interest and involvement in programs and policies to reduce hunger in our City. Thank you for reading this report.

Sincerely,

Xavier Botana, Superintendent, Portland Public Schools  
Jim Hanna, Executive Director, Cumberland County Food Security Council



For more information, and to access the full report, please visit:

[www.ccfoodsecurity.org](http://www.ccfoodsecurity.org)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

*Overview & District-wide Recommendations [3]*

*Charitable Food Programs [4]*

*Federal Nutrition Programs [5]*

*School Gardens [6]*

*Nutrition Education [7]*

*Sustainable Practices [8]*

# *Maine has the highest rate of child food insecurity in New England.<sup>1</sup>*

## OVERVIEW

The Portland Public Schools Food Security Task Force was established in 2017 to increase food security. To this end, the Task Force assessed the need for and scope of activities related to food security in PPS, where more than half the students qualified for free or reduced-price meals during the 2017-18 school year. This needs assessment explores the presence and impact of food security–related activities in five areas: charitable food, federal nutrition programs, school gardens, nutrition education, and sustainable practices.

Through qualitative semi-structured interviews and a series of surveys, the Task Force gathered program information from a total of 212 members of the school community. Data collection included 57 interviews with youth leaders, social workers, school garden affiliates, principals and assistant principals, nutrition educators, program directors, food service workers, nurses, teachers, school staff, coordinators and parent-teacher organization members.

This Task Force finds a persisting need for increased access to, and availability of, nutritious food in Portland Public Schools. This Task Force presents a set of recommendations for the district that build on the programs and policies currently in place. Adopting these recommended strategies and practices will enable the strengthening and institutionalization of existing programs, thus supporting consistent and lasting access to healthy food for all students.

## DISTRICT-WIDE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Develop and implement district-wide and school-specific strategic plans based off of the PPS Food Security Needs Assessment*
- 2. Develop a yearly monitoring and evaluation plan to track progress implementing the district-wide and school-specific strategic plans*
- 3. Institutionalize and maintain a PPS Wellness Coordinator position who acts as a food security advocate on the PPS District Wellness Committee*
- 4. Designate at least one “food security champion” on each school Wellness Team*



<sup>1</sup>Higgins, Amy. (2016). Mapping New England: Child Food Insecurity. Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. Retrieved from <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/communities-and-banking/2016/fall/mapping-new-england.aspx>.

*“Schools are becoming a site for food distribution, a social service agency. If that is the direction we are going in, we need to start looking at it more critically and from a systems point of view: how do we resource it, replenish, function so that we are truly meeting needs.”*

*- School Staff Member*

## CHARITABLE FOOD PROGRAMS

Charitable food programs have emerged as a response to food insecurity in PPS and now occupy an essential place in the PPS food system, but do not address the root of food insecurity. Schools provide a combination, one, or none of a variety of charitable food programs: backpack programs (pre-packed food bags), in-school food pantries, produce distribution tables, and community meals. Support for charitable food capacity comes from local organizations, community fundraisers, and private donations. Charitable food programs are almost 100% volunteer run and are usually organized by a social worker, nurse, or parent.

Thirteen out of 17 (76.5%) schools reported having food pantries



## CHARITABLE FOODS RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Enhance consistent resource-sharing within, and among, school communities*
2. *Improve the reliability, efficiency, and sustainability of charitable food programs*
3. *Encourage low-barrier access and high availability of school pantries and food options*



*3,811 out of 6,796 (56%) of PPS students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch in 2017-18. Students qualify for free meals if their family's income is at or below 130% of the federal poverty line for their family size. The threshold for reduced-price meals is 185% of the federal poverty line.*

*USDA Food and Nutrition Service  
Income Eligibility Guidelines*



## FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Federal nutrition programs include all food served through schools' nationally regulated meal programs that are prepared and overseen by Portland's Food Service Department. In Portland, nutrition services available to all schools include breakfast, lunch, and the After School Snack Program. Elementary schools in which more than 50% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch are eligible for the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and universal free lunch and breakfast programs, through the Community Eligibility Provision. The Summer Food Service Program, or summer meals program, provides free meals to kids and teens at 15 Portland sites.



56% free or reduced-price lunch

## FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Increase overall student participation in federal nutrition programs*
- 2. Encourage full participation of all eligible students in free and reduced-price meals*
- 3. Cultivate a school culture of healthy and inclusive food practices*

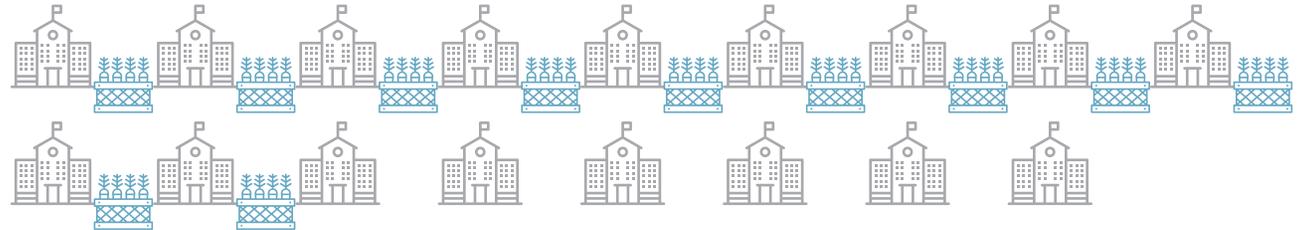
*“[Garden class] gave real life experience in a local garden that they can access anytime.*

*Children take more away when learning about these topics, when they then get to get their hands dirty and practice what they are learning.”*

*- Teacher*

## SCHOOL GARDENS

School gardens support students' familiarity with vegetables, increase access to fresh produce, teach them how to grow their own food, and connect students to food systems through hands-on learning to help them make educated decisions about the food they consume. Involvement with school gardens can lead to healthier diets; seven out of 10 kids who receive 10 or more hours of hands-on garden and cooking education increase their preference for and willingness to eat vegetables.<sup>1</sup> Research also shows that outdoor education can positively influence mood and behavior, which directly supports students' ability to contribute positively to the indoor learning environment.<sup>2</sup> School gardens also increase connection to and stewardship of the natural world.



**11 out of 17 schools reported having a school garden**

## SCHOOL GARDENS RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Develop and implement school garden–based learning goals and integrate with Common Core State Standards*
2. *Create a district-wide School Garden Network*
3. *Increase funding and infrastructure for school garden programs*

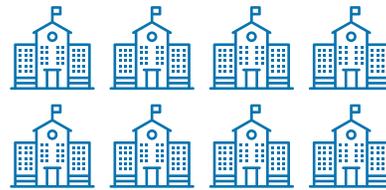


<sup>1</sup>Ratcliffe, M. M., Merrigan, K. A., Rogers, B. L., & Goldberg, J.P. (2011). The Effects of School Garden Experiences on Middle School–Aged Students' Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors Associated With Vegetable Consumption. *Health Promotion Practice* 12(1), 36 - 43.

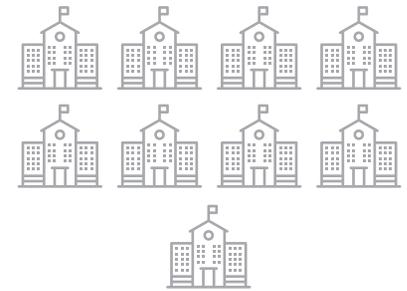
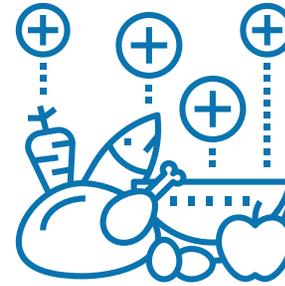
<sup>2</sup>Blair, D. (2009). The Child in the Garden: An Evaluative Review of the Benefits of School Gardening. *The Journal of Environmental Education* 40(2), 15 - 38.

## NUTRITION EDUCATION

Nutrition education exposes students to healthy foods and provides education on why they are important for overall well-being through multiple strategies such as taste tests and cooking classes. The PPS district currently does not have a standard nutrition education curriculum. Less than half of schools surveyed, seven out of 16, reported that nutrition education is part of the curriculum. Across these schools, the amount of content varied from one unit in one class to a comprehensive cross-disciplinary approach to learning about food, nutrition, and cooking. Organizational partners, such as FoodCorps, Cultivating Community, SNAP-Ed, Cooking Matters, and University of Maine Cooperative Extension perform most of the nutrition education at PPS.



8 out of 17 schools  
reported having  
school-run nutrition education



## NUTRITION EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Develop a district-wide comprehensive and equitable approach to nutrition education*
2. *Designate one person to oversee nutrition education in the district*
3. *Prioritize and implement nutrition education in schools*

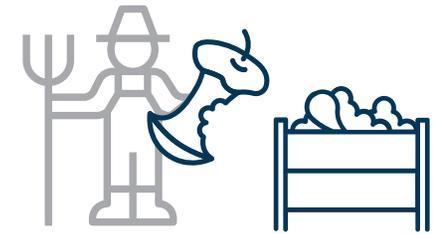
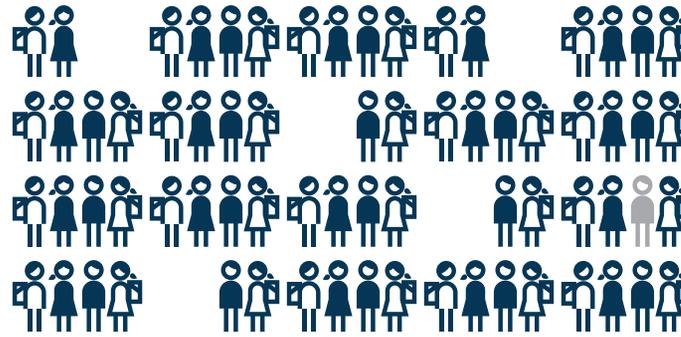


*21% of the 2017-18 food budget is local food (i.e., produced, manufactured, or grown within 275 miles of Portland).*



## SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

*Sustainable practices* include responsible food procurement and food waste management. Local food supports nutritious diets, stimulates regional economies, sustains healthy environments and creates strong social connections. This means that increasing local production, processing, and access can alleviate food insecurity through a variety of strategies while building a resilient and equitable food system!<sup>1</sup> Unwanted items that are still safe to eat can be redistributed to students through methods such as share tables. Unwanted items that are no longer safe to eat can be composted, reducing the amount of waste at schools by upwards of 80 percent.



69 out of 70 students said it is important to compost, recycle, and pick up trash

## SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Develop measurable local food procurement goals for Food Services*
- 2. Follow New England Environmental Finance Center's<sup>2</sup> best management practices for district-wide composting*
- 3. Institute sustainable practices in cafeteria purchases and operations*

<sup>1</sup>Cumberland County Food Security Council (n.d.). Food System Summit. Retrieved from <http://www.ccfoodsecurity.org/cumberland-county-food-system-summit.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Sheils, M., & Webster, S. (n.d.). School Cafeteria Recycling & Composting. Retrieved July 28, 2018, from <http://neefc.org/index.php/projects/school-cafeteria-recycling-composting>.