

Opportunities for Innovation: A Student Nutrition Program Pilot Project in Windsor-Essex



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Student Nutrition Programs in Ontario

In schools across Ontario, Student Nutrition Programs (SNPs) aim to provide nutritious snacks and meals to children and youth. The Ministry of Child and Youth Services supports SNPs by providing approximately 30 million dollars in annual funding, which is administered by 14 lead agencies across the province. These agencies typically work with “Community Partnerships” to ensure that Ministry funding for SNPs is delivered within a community context. The exact make-up of these partnerships may differ from region to region, but most include representatives from local school boards and public health units, along with a variety of other private and public sector partners. Together, the Community Partnerships create a network of support for SNPs in their communities. Most lead agencies fund a team of one or more coordinators to work collaboratively with Community Partnerships, the lead agency, and local schools to coordinate support for programs.

Community Partnerships are a key component of the SNP model. They typically include representatives from:

- ✓ local school boards
- ✓ local public health units
- ✓ the private sector
- ✓ the public sector

The Southwestern Ontario Region

In the Southwestern Ontario region – which stretches from Windsor-Essex to Grey-Bruce – the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) is the lead agency responsible for managing the Ministry-funded support for SNPs. This involves flowing 2.5 million dollars in grant funds each year to the more than 460 SNPs operating in the region.

Student Nutrition Partnerships in Southwestern Ontario

County	Student Nutrition Partnership
Windsor-Essex	Jumpstart Student Nutrition Program
Chatham-Kent	Chatham-Kent Student Nutrition Program
Sarnia-Lambton	Lambton Student Nutrition Advisory Committee
London-Middlesex	Children’s Nutrition Network
Oxford County	Oxford County Nutrition Partnership
Elgin County	Elgin Community Nutrition Partnership
Huron-Perth	Huron-Perth Eat & Learn
Grey-Bruce	Grey-Bruce Eat & Learn

Jumpstart Community Nutrition Partnership in Windsor-Essex

In Windsor-Essex, the local Student Nutrition Partnership is Jumpstart. Jumpstart supports 85 SNPs that feed approximately 24 000 students on a regular basis. It is committed to working collaboratively with schools and community organizations in Windsor and Essex County to improve access to nutritious foods for children and youth. A number of years ago, the VON and Jumpstart began looking at innovative

ways to centrally purchase and deliver healthy food to schools. That work led to the development and implementation of the pilot program presented in this report.

Challenges Facing SNPs

Within the current SNP model, each individual school is responsible for managing funds received from the lead agency, planning menus, purchasing food, and

Key Challenges With Current SNP Model

- ❖ Heavy dependence on volunteers
- ❖ Most food bought at retail stores (for expensive retail prices)
- ❖ Difficult for individual schools to connect with local farmers
- ❖ Many schools lack adequate food preparation facilities
- ❖ Lack of control over nutritional quality
- ❖ Challenging to track use of funds
- ❖ Limited opportunities for research & evaluation
- ❖ Limited potential for broad-based community collaboration and investment

preparing meals and snacks. This work requires a significant investment of time and effort from school administrators, teachers, and/or other volunteers, who must navigate grocery stores, stretch limited budgets, find ingredients that meet Ministry nutrition guidelines, and prepare food in whatever facilities are available on site. Challenges such as these led Jumpstart to begin thinking about ways to increase efficiency by creating a more centralized SNP system.

Innovations in Student Nutrition: A Central Procurement Pilot Project in Windsor-Essex

Through the summer and fall of 2012, the VON engaged in conversations about SNP challenges and opportunities with a variety of partners in Windsor-Essex, including Windsor's Unemployed Help Centre (UHC) and the local public and Catholic school boards. Those conversations led to the implementation of a 14 week pilot project that was launched in February 2013. Supporting 114 classrooms across 6 schools (3 in Windsor and 3 in Essex County), the pilot project partnered with an innovative high school co-op program based out of the UHC, and focused on using central procurement as a way to streamline food purchasing for school nutrition programs.

The main objectives of the pilot project were to:

1. Make the limited food budget for SNPs stretch further through bulk purchasing;
2. Reduce the amount of volunteer time and stress involved in food purchasing through central procurement;
3. Support the local food movement by prioritizing local produce;
4. Engage youth as active participants and leaders in SNP delivery; and
5. Contribute to community development by building relationships amongst many different stakeholders.

Pilot Project Partners



Photos (clockwise from left): High school co-op students prepare food at the UHC community kitchen; Chef Robert Catherine, who runs the UHC-based Specialist High Skills Major high school program, and the VON's Stephanie Segave, who manages Student Nutrition Programs for the Southwestern Ontario region; the UHC's industrial grade community kitchen; tomatoes that have been frozen and vacuum packed at the UHC for later use; high school students display meals they have prepared.

The core partners involved in the pilot project were the VON (both its School Nutrition and Meals on Wheels programs), the Greater Essex County District School Board, the Unemployed Help Centre, and the UHC-based Plentiful Harvest food rescue program and community kitchen. With leadership provided by Executive Director June Muir and the organization's Board of Directors, the UHC involvement as a partner was vital to project success. It provided significant amounts of in-kind support – including staff and volunteer time and use of physical resources such as space and electricity – without which the pilot project would not have been possible.

Other actors and organizations that played a role in the work included the staff and students participating in a Specialist High Skills Major co-op program based out of the UHC community kitchen, the Windsor Essex County Health Unit, St. Clair College, and a number of local food suppliers.

Central Procurement

Although it quickly developed into much more, the initial concept for the pilot project focused primarily on using central procurement as a way to address some of the challenges of the existing SNP structure. Rather than each individual program being responsible for its own food purchasing and preparation, Chef Robert Catherine worked with the VON's Southwestern Ontario Food and Logistics

Coordinator to procure food for all six of the participating schools. After purchase, the food was stored at the UHC facility, and prepared by high school co-op students using the UHC’s community kitchen. This system of bulk purchasing, streamlined food preparation, and youth engagement created significant potential to save both time and money.

Engaging Youth

While the time and cost efficiencies of the centralized model may have been the primary drivers of the initial concept, one of the most unique and inspiring elements of the pilot project was the way it engaged young people – particularly youth at risk – by partnering with the Specialist High Skills Major co-op program hosted by the UHC’s community kitchen. Under the guidance of professional chef and teacher Robert Catherine, high school students in the program prepared all the snacks for the SNPs. Using ingredients sourced through the central procurement system and recipes created by Chef Robert, the students were able to earn four high school credits, a college credit, and a number of additional certifications, while making healthy snacks for the SNP pilot project. In addition to those snacks, the students also prepared meals for the VON’s Meals on Wheels Program, a UHC-based mobile food bank, and a number of community events.

Building a Social Enterprise

When the pilot project began in February 2013, the VON decided to switch service providers for its Meals on Wheels program from a for-profit catering company to the UHC. Partnering with the UHC, and the high school program it hosts, created significant cost savings for the VON’s Meals on Wheels program, and formed the foundation for a budding social enterprise. The money that is saved by removing the third party profit is now being reinvested into the community. Although the SNP pilot project was completed after 14 weeks, the UHC has continued to serve as the provider for Meals on Wheels, with the high school students preparing, on average, 200 meals per day for the program. In addition, Chef Robert and the students have also taken advantage of the donated UHC facilities to make meals for a number of community events.

At a Glance: How does the SNP pilot project differ from the traditional model?

	Traditional SNP Model	Pilot Project
Who purchases food?	Volunteers at each individual school	Chef Robert and the VON’s Food and Logistic Coordinator
Where is food purchased?	Primarily major retail outlets such as Costco or Zehr’s	Emphasis on sourcing from local producers and wholesalers
Who prepares food?	Volunteers at each individual school	High school students in the Specialist High Skills Major program at the UHC

Focus on Local Food

Another important element of the pilot project was its focus on increasing the use of local food within the SNP system. By purchasing food in bulk, it became easier to work with local produce distributors rather than relying only on major retail outlets, and the costs savings associated with bulk purchase from non-retail sellers created opportunities to buy higher quality, in many cases local, food. The potential to buy healthy local produce was further increased as a result of connections that key program stakeholders had to local food and farming operations. Finally, the facilities offered by the industrial grade UHC community kitchen had a much higher capacity to store and process fresh, local food than the average school kitchen, making it easier to manage the intake of healthy, local produce.

Pilot Project Benefits

Increasing Efficiency & Saving Money for Reinvestment in the Community

The pilot program demonstrated how a central procurement model can create a number of efficiencies in the SNP structure. The model saved money, which allowed for the purchasing of higher quality food, and it also saved time and stress as volunteers at individual schools were no longer responsible for sourcing and preparing food. Recognizing the success of programs like the Windsor-Essex pilot, in October 2013 Minister of Child and Youth Services Teresa Piruzza announced \$3 million in new funding for SNP programs, which included an annual investment in 14 food distribution and logistics coordinators (one for each lead agency administering provincial grant funds for SNPs). These new positions are designed to help SNPs across the province increase the efficiency of their food procurement programs, and offer unique opportunities to increase the amount of local foods sourced and served in schools.

The potential exists to earn up to **\$3 per meal in social profit** if the pilot project model is scaled up.

That money would make it possible to **feed more children and youth** and support other community initiatives.

In addition to helping SNPs save time and money, the pilot project also created a unique opportunity for social enterprise development. With the UHC donating facilities for Chef Robert and his high school students to make meals for the Meals on Wheels Program, the cost per meal is now less than with the previous for-profit provider. Cost savings are reinvested in the community, and the UHC and VON have established a steering committee to oversee that social investment process. The potential for future profit is even greater, as it is estimated that the program has the capacity to prepare up to 1000 meals per day. These meals could be sold to a variety of community agencies and programs, and contracts could be developed to service special events. In addition to making prepared meals, there is also significant potential to scale up the food processing that is currently being done

through the UHC community kitchen, creating further opportunities to generate revenues for social investment.

Improving Food Quality & Strengthening Local Food Networks

In addition to generating savings, the partnership with the UHC and the high school program it hosts has substantially improved the quality of food being served through the participating SNPs and Meals on Wheels. Unlike the previous Meals on Wheels supplier and many SNPs, the UHC does not purchase any processed foods. The UHC and Chef Robert also make a concerted effort to buy local and, although price point and seasonality sometimes makes that impossible, they are able to source locally-ground flour, a significant amount of local produce, and Ontario beef, pork, chicken, and eggs.

Using high quality ingredients as a starting point, Chef Robert and the students make everything – including items like bread and pickled vegetables – from scratch. “Everything is nutritious,” he explains. “There’s no sodium. We make all our [soup] stocks from scratch. There are no preservatives. Everything is freshly made.” For students in the pilot project SNPs, this means being treated to creative snacks like sushi hand rolls, spinach muffins, and homemade granola, and at least one Meals on Wheels client has credited the shift to healthier meals for saving her life.

“Everything is nutritious... There are no preservatives. Everything is freshly made.”

- Chef Robert Catherine

Empowering Youth & Building Community

One of the most powerful components of the new program has been the active involvement of youth from the UHC-based Specialized High Skills Major co-op program. For the students who participated in the pilot semester, which ran from February to June 2013, average rates of absenteeism decreased from 30 days to 12.5 days, and the range of grades increased from 60% and below to 60% and above. In some cases, program participation made the difference between getting a high school diploma or not. One student – who was on the verge of dropping out of school but now plans to attend St. Clair College to become a chef – explains that “ever since I came [to the UHC program] I just haven’t really missed any school...I was skipping every day before, but it’s just fun here...and [the Meals on Wheels volunteers] are always telling us how it’s wonderful that we’re doing this for all those people.”

That student’s experience is not unique. The UHC’s Plentiful Harvest Manager Mike Turnbull explains that “a lot of the kids...are going through pretty bad times in life, and coming from pretty rough environments, and when they come through [the UHC community kitchen] door...they feel very comfortable, very welcome, very needed.” He goes on to note: “The work experience they get here is tremendous, and they work really hard. The social skills that they’re developing just working in this

“The work experience they get here is tremendous... These kids walk away with some serious skills, and a really good outlook on what community is all about.”
- Mike Turnbull, Plentiful Harvest Manager

during the semester half the students showed up to help prepare meals even though it was not required. Many have also become regular volunteers for the UHC’s food rescue program and mobile food bank. One student declared: “I love this program! If I could, I’d come back next semester...even though I will have graduated, I’ll probably come back and volunteer.” Like a number of the students who have come through the program, she plans to attend St. Clair College for culinary training.

environment, seeing the clients, working with the VON volunteers...these kids walk away with some serious skills, and a really good outlook on what community is all about.”

The impacts of program participation on youth are so strong that many choose to volunteer their time outside of school hours to help support Plentiful Harvest. For example, on a PD day

“I love this program!”
- student in the Specialist High Skills Major co-op program based out of the UHC community kitchen

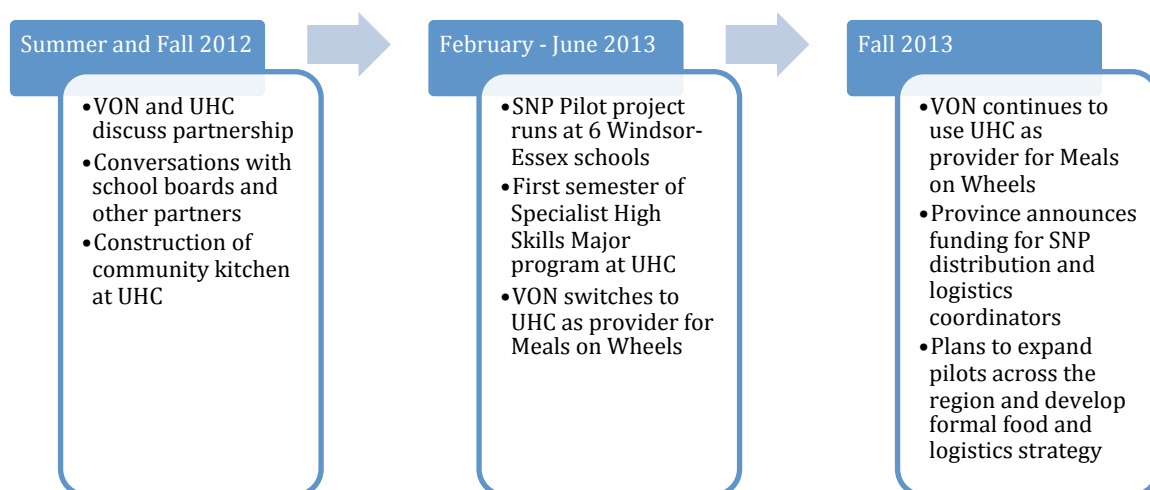
Beyond the Windsor-Essex Pilot

Expansion in Southwestern Ontario

Motivated by the success of its 2013 pilot project, the VON plans to conduct a second round of SNP pilots in Southwestern Ontario in 2014 and 2015. While the new projects would be guided by the same overall objectives as the initial one, each would be developed to suit its own local context and address locally-identified priorities. The projects would also be informed by a number of opportunities identified through the first pilot experience:

- ❖ There is significant potential to further increase the efficiencies of central procurement by partnering with other municipal agencies that purchase food. Efforts to **purchase food in bulk with other agencies** would increase the scale of purchasing, thereby further reducing costs and making it easier to work with local wholesalers.
- ❖ Gaining a **deeper understanding of the role that SNPs can play in social enterprise development** will facilitate the ability of programs in other areas to contribute to this local economic development opportunity. In Windsor-Essex, there is capacity to increase the number of meals being prepared at the UHC by up to fivefold. If community-based buyers can be found for these meals, the amount of money available for social investment could be substantially increased.

- ❖ There is potential to **increase the amount of local food being used in SNPs**. Increasing the scale of purchasing would help make this possible, as will the implementation of the new SNP distribution and logistics coordinators. There is also interest in integrating food production into the programs. This would allow students to gain experience growing their own food, reduce the amount of food purchased, and provide a supply of healthy, local produce.
- ❖ There are opportunities to **build new community partnerships and strengthen existing ones**. For example, there is interest in creating more ways for participating high school students to engage directly with Meals on Wheels volunteers and clients. Everyone involved in the work recognizes that maintaining open lines of communication with all partners will be essential to future success.



Timeline: A Brief Summary of Pilot Project Development and Implementation

Research and Evaluation

As the work to innovate SNPs expands beyond the pilot project presented in this report, the VON is making a concerted effort to engage in research and evaluation to help assess the impacts of its programs and clarify lessons learned. For example, the organization partnered with the University of Waterloo in a study that examined how serving fruits and vegetables in the classroom influences children’s food preferences. In addition, Dr. Sarah Woodruff of the University of Windsor’s Kinesiology Department is collaborating with the VON to design an evaluation framework that would support food and logistics programming for SNPs across the region. Amongst other things, that framework will include a focus on how to measure the impacts of using local foods in SNPs.

Working at the Provincial and National Levels

In conjunction with the work it is doing at the regional level, the Windsor-Essex VON is also involved in efforts to innovate student nutrition at both the provincial

and national scales. To that end, it sits on the Advisory Committee for the Ontario Edible Education Network and is an active partner in Food Secure Canada's Raising the Bar on Student Food Programs initiative. It is supporting efforts by those organizations to develop a research strategy to map where SNPs are operating, track how funds are being used, and assess what impacts the programs are having. The VON is also sharing the lessons it has learned through the pilot project experience as widely as possible. For example, the project was profiled as an exciting example of SNP innovation on a recent webinar organized by Sustain Ontario's Farm-to-School Challenge, and was highlighted at Sustain's 2013 Bring Food Home Conference. As Ontario Edible Education Network Coordinator Carolyn Webb explains, the Windsor-Essex SNP pilot "is a great example that can inspire others."

The Windsor-Essex SNP Pilot "is a great example that can inspire others."
- Carolyn Webb,
Ontario Edible
Education Network
Coordinator

Summary

The 2013 pilot project run by the VON in Windsor-Essex demonstrates that Student Nutrition Programs have the potential to serve as powerful catalysts for local food system innovation. They can provide healthier foods to students, while at the same time saving both time and money. They can also support improvements in food quality for other programs and services, and facilitate the development of food-based social enterprise. By establishing multi-stakeholder partnerships as they do this work, SNPs can also extend the scope of their impact, playing an integral role in the development of thriving local food networks, the empowerment of youth at risk, and the strengthening of local communities.

With the recent provincial investment in Food and Logistics Coordinators for SNPs, it is clear that momentum for innovation is growing. By working closely with organizations such as the Ontario Edible Education Network and Food Secure Canada, as well as its local and regional partners, the VON aims to take advantage of this momentum to ensure that the potential demonstrated by the Windsor-Essex pilot project can be achieved in other communities across the region, the province, and the country.