Can Food Culture Influence Student Perceptions of School Food?
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**INTRODUCTION**
- School food systems are embedded within complex institutional frameworks with significant impacts on human health and the environment.
- 48% of schools in WA participate in some form of the farm-to-school approach, where a percentage of school food is acquired from local farmers or school gardens.
- However, the extent to which students are interested in these sustainable foods varies on a case-by-case basis and may be influenced by how the school engages students with school food culture (Figure 1).
- Food culture refers to the practices, attitudes, and beliefs encompassed by the networks and institutions that surround the production, distribution, and consumption of food.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**
- What elements of food culture influence student’s enthusiasm towards farm-to-school or locally-sourced school food?

**INTERNSHIP & METHODS**
- Interned with The Northwest School on their Urban Farm/Garden (Figure 2).
- Developed an interdisciplinary curriculum that fully incorporated the urban farm/garden into school operations.
- Conducted a literature review on key elements of successful farm-to-school programs and visible aspects of food culture.
- Administered a survey sent to over 50 schools within WSDA’s Farm-to-School Network (continued).

**METHODS CONTINUED**
- The survey consisted of 6 “Yes” or “No” questions and had a 26% response rate (13 participants).
- Participants were first asked if students were enthusiastic about farm-to-school food served at their schools.
- Participants were then asked to check “Yes” or “No” in response to which elements of food culture were present in their schools.
- Elements of food culture included on the survey were presence of school garden, food-based curricula, cultural foods, staff support, and knowledge of where food comes from.

**RESULTS**
- The factors that had the most positive correlation with student enthusiasm towards locally-sourced school food were strong support from staff and knowledge of where food comes from (Figure 3).
- Schools that reported strong support from staff checked yes in all categories.
- Schools who reported lack of support from staff checked no in all categories, indicating that support from staff is a significant factor in student reception of farm-to-school food.
- While only a small percentage reported having a farm/garden, those that did responded yes to all categories.
- Due to sample size, it is difficult to say there is direct correlation between these factors with certainty.

**SIGNIFICANCE**
- Schools represent a unique medium through which issues of crucial social change can influence the youngest members of society.
- Even with a small survey sample size, anecdotal observations of The Northwest School make it evident that the presence of food culture is a significant influence on student’s enthusiasm towards locally-sourced school food (Figure 4 & 5).
- These results are significant because they demonstrate changes that schools may implement at little to no additional cost in order to foster healthier and more sustainable eating habits in children.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**
- More robust policy interventions at the faculty, administrative, and school board level that support farm-to-school program infrastructure.
- State-wide implementation of a food-based interdisciplinary curriculum.
- A more in-depth study spanning across schools who implement food education initiatives, followed by an analysis of information retention and impact.

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“We want students to think about where their food comes from, who grows and picks it. Our goal is to connect what the students eat to their values.”
- Bethany Fong, Director of Food Services, The Northwest School.