



Every child can be a chef



***In the garden,
in the classroom,
in their own life.***

Case For Support

Food is more than fuel

Think about your earliest food memory; cooking with a grandparent, a celebratory meal, a smell that still takes you somewhere. Food does that. It connects us to family, culture, memories, emotions, and belonging.

Every person has moments and memories like that. A dish that carries an entire relationship inside it. A taste that still exists somewhere in the body, long after the occasion is gone. It is art, togetherness, history, culture – a thing that tethers us to the people and places that shaped us.

That connection is what Growing Chefs! helps children build: where foods come from, how they grow, what it means to prepare something with your own hands and share it with someone else. These experiences shape not just what children eat, but how they learn, how they connect, and who they become.

Not every child has the chance to build that type of relationship with food. And when that chance disappears, something essential is lost – not just for the child, but for the community around them.



Growing Chefs! Ontario Board of Directors

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The life skills too many children are missing

Our Mission is to change the way children, youth, families and the greater community learn about and develop healthy relationships with food!

If you ask a child, 'What gives food its value?' the answers are almost always the same: food is fuel, and food costs money. Rarely does a child describe a food memory the way you just did. Rarely does their answer carry culture, or connection, or joy.

That gap didn't occur accidentally. Over the past 50+ years, food education has been steadily removed from homes, schools and community institutions. The rise of convenience food, the industrialization of the food system and the deliberate marketing of processed and prepared food as a social advancement all contributed to a generational unravelling of the everyday skills and rituals that once connected people to food. Two and three generations later, we are living with the consequences.

Today, too many children are growing up without the everyday experiences of cooking, growing, interacting with and understanding food. That disconnection has real consequences for their health, confidence, learning and sense of belonging in ways that ripple outward far beyond the dinner table. Household resilience weakens. Confidence erodes. The connection between people and the food system that sustains them begins to fade. While emergency food supports are critical, they cannot fill this gap. Addressing food insecurity over the long term requires more than access. It requires a generation of young people who understand food, value it, and feel empowered to use it. That is what is at stake when food education disappears.

Food security is about access: having enough food to feed your family. Food literacy is about having the knowledge and confidence to make your own food decisions. A healthy community needs both. Food education is a preventative measure that makes both possible long-term.

Food literacy: An urgent local need

In 2022, the Middlesex London Food Policy Council released an updated Community Food Assessment for the region: a comprehensive study drawing on environmental data, stakeholder interviews and community conversations.

Its findings were clear: access to food is essential, but access alone is not enough to create lasting food security. Food literacy – the knowledge, skills and confidence to make one's own food decisions – is equally critical, and the region is falling short.

The report identified a lack of knowledge about food and the agriculture that sustains it as one of the key challenges facing London and Middlesex County. It found that younger generations are simply not getting the knowledge previous generations had about food and agriculture, and that many school curriculums lack food education entirely. It called directly for more food literacy programming for youth and children.

London-Middlesex's 2022 Community Food Assessment recognized Growing Chefs! Ontario as a unique community asset with the scale and experience to help address the food education gap in the region

A follow-up report on long-term food security in the region went further still, finding that food insecurity among children and families in London-Middlesex has worsened substantially since 2022. Local public health and community organizations now describe the issue as a major public health concern affecting nutrition, child development, mental health, and educational outcomes.

The report also concluded that grant funding cannot solve a systemic problem. The region needs sustained, long-term investment in work that addresses the roots of food insecurity.

The need in our community - London & Middlesex

1 in 4

Children arrive at school without having eaten breakfast that day or dinner the night before

5% above

The provincial average for child food insecurity in our region

1 in 3

Households in Middlesex-London experienced food insecurity in 2024, up from 1 in 4 just one year earlier

Highest

Reported food insecurity rate of any public health unit in Ontario

Alarmingly, all of this is happening in a region surrounded by some of the richest agricultural land in Southwestern Ontario, where 6.2% of all of Ontario's vegetables are grown.

The London area is home to more than 2,300 farms, and abundant with food in ways most communities can only dream of. The gap between what this land produces and what our children know about food – not just how to access it, but how to grow it, prepare it, understand it, and value it – is exactly the gap Growing Chefs! exists to close.



Community Development projects that transfer food literacy skills to individuals could help people overcome their own food insecurity.

Growing Chefs! Ontario: Bringing food education back

At Growing Chefs!, "Chef" doesn't mean a career path. It means a life skill. It means a child who feels confident, curious, and capable – not just in the kitchen, but in life. That is exactly the relationship with food that Growing Chefs! exists to restore.

There's a reason we named it *kindergarten*: children in the garden. Before there were structured classrooms, children learned about food by doing: growing it, preparing it, sharing it, asking questions about where it came from. Growing Chefs! is bringing that instinct back. Through joyful, hands-on programs in schools, gardens and community spaces, children learn by chopping, cooking, growing, tasting, asking questions and sharing food with others. Kitchens and gardens become classrooms. Food becomes a way of understanding the world.

Growing Chefs! connects with approximately 10,000 - 12,000 children and youth annually, delivering programs across three interconnected areas: in-school food education, garden and urban farm programs, and community programming for children, youth and families. Programs are backed by 20+ years of evidence, linked to real curriculum taught in the classroom, and deeply rooted in the community. Programs are developed in partnership with schools, school boards and community organizations to meet children where they already are.



Your impact

*What children take away from **Growing Chefs! Ontario** programs...*

 Food skills	Children learn to cook, prepare, taste, grow and understand food – developing a practical, hands-on relationship with food that most of their generation has never had the chance to build.
 Confidence	Children become more willing to try new foods, cook at home and participate in new experiences. The kitchen is one of the most powerful places to discover what you're capable of.
 Learning	Food becomes a vehicle for engagement across math, science, literacy, geography, health and culture. Early evaluation shows strong impacts on academic engagement and behaviour.
 Connection	Food connects children to family, culture, community, land and the food system around them – creating a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves.
 Long-term resilience	Children build a foundation that supports lifelong health: the skills, confidence and connection to feed themselves well – and to carry that forward into their families and communities.

These outcomes don't stay with the individual child. Food literacy is a multiplier. A child who learns to grow, cook, and understand food carries that knowledge into their home, family and community. Over time, communities with higher food literacy are more resilient, more food secure, and less dependent on emergency supports. **The work Growing Chefs! does with children today is an investment in the health and self-sufficiency of this community for a generation to come.**

Built on evidence, built to last

The evidence behind Growing Chefs!' 20+ years of experience is real and growing. Early evaluation shows strong near-term impacts on behaviour, academic engagement, and teacher integration of food education across subject areas. Evidence shows children gaining confidence, cooking at home, trying new foods and forming positive food memories that stay with them.

Longer-term dietary and food behaviour outcomes are more complex to measure. The relationship between food education in childhood and food behaviour in adulthood plays out over years, not months, but those outcomes are beginning to emerge through ongoing research. Growing Chefs! is one of the few organizations in Canada with both the experience and the track record to keep studying and strengthening this work.

Behind the programs is a mature, financially disciplined organization. Growing Chefs! employs more than 30 staff and operates a significant social enterprise – a thriving catering and events business that helps to offset the cost of charitable programs. The cost per participant in Growing Chefs! food education programs sits at \$55 to \$65 – a figure offset by the social enterprise model, and one that allows donor support to reach as many children as possible.

~\$2M

Growing Chefs' total
annual operation budget

~\$1.2M

Social enterprise annual
revenue
(catering & events)

\$800K–\$900K

Annual donor support
needed
to sustain and grow the
work

"Our students had a wonderful experience participating in the Growing Chefs program. It was a fun and memorable experience that combined learning, collaboration, and, of course, delicious food."

– Nicole S., parent of program participant

How you can help:

Three pathways, one purpose

The need is urgent and the gap is real. But so is the opportunity. Growing Chefs! is already doing this work – in classrooms, gardens and community spaces across London and Middlesex – reaching up to 12,000 children a year with food education programming this region has specifically identified as essential to its long-term health. There is no other organization in Canada doing this work at this scale, with this depth of experience, in a community that needs it this much.

The impact of this initiative has the potential to shape a new national model for how communities across Canada respond to these challenges – one centred on compassion, innovation, and measurable outcomes.

Growing Chefs!' capacity to reach significantly more children is within reach. What makes the difference between Growing Chefs! reaching more children or fewer children, year after year, is you.

Every harvest begins with a seed. Whether you **Sow**, **Grow** or **Harvest** alongside us, your support makes all the difference.

"I have been observing GCO activities for over 5 years now and highly commend the novel and important work that the Growing Chefs! team are doing, as I believe they are filling a vital gap in food literacy education for our community."

*Dr. Jason Gilliland, BA (Hon), MA, MArch, PhD Director,
Human Environments Analysis Laboratory (HEAL)*



Sow - make an annual gift.

Every year, Growing Chefs! directs donor support to three core funding priorities: Food Education Programs, the Food Education Subsidy Fund, and The Learn to Grow; Grow to Give project. An annual gift puts your support to work immediately, reaching children and families in the current program cycle. Ask us for this year's annual giving guide to learn more.



"Honestly, GCO is the one extracurricular activity that my kids will consistently, happily attend. It takes no convincing because they know GCO staff are awesome humans, and they will have fun and learn, no matter what they are cooking."

— Selena H., parent

Grow - make a multi-year pledge.

A commitment of two to three years changes what Growing Chefs! can do — and how efficiently we can do it. Knowing what funding is coming allows us to hold program spots, make commitments early and deliver more to the children who need it most. Over three years, a multi-year pledge can mean the difference of thousands of additional children reached, simply because we can plan ahead instead of react.



"It's exciting to open the bags, it's like a present! I thank you for all the love and care that you put into the vegetables. I feel lucky to receive them."

— Food box recipient

Harvest - invest in the long-term.

For those looking to make food security part of their long-term financial strategy, Growing Chefs! offers a Philanthropic Investment Program in partnership with SPM Financial — a model that plants your capital once and lets it yield sustained impact, year after year. Ask us for the investment model guide to learn more.



"The students really enjoyed seeing how the garden was set up. They enjoyed tasting and sampling different things that were growing. We felt very welcomed with a sense of instant community."

— Kim A., secondary teacher

Help children understand food, for life

Think back to the food memory that surfaced at the beginning of this story. The smell, the kitchen, the person beside you. That memory exists because someone made space for it. Someone took the time to cook, to grow, to share, to teach.

That is what Growing Chefs! does for children who might not otherwise have that chance. And that is what you make possible.

Every gift helps ensure that more children in London and Middlesex grow up with a relationship with food that is joyful, confident and lasting. That more families have access to fresh food and the knowledge to use it. That the long-term work of addressing food insecurity in our community, at its roots, continues.

You are doing more than supporting a program. You are helping build a community where every child has the chance to make that memory – the one they'll carry for the rest of their life.



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