



Help Improve Food In Australian Schools

Advocacy Kit

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Executive summary

Currently in Australia, there is no monitoring or reporting of the food available in schools. Unhealthy food and drink that is nutritionally poor is still freely available to children at canteens, fundraisers and athletics carnivals.

The Fresh Tastes @ School NSW School Canteen Strategy was rolled out in 2004 in an effort to address the issue of nutritionally poor, energy dense food in NSW schools. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that currently less than 50% of NSW schools have canteen menus that meet this strategy.

The food literacy of Australians has decreased, which is frightening given the constantly changing food environment. It can be argued that poor food literacy has contributed to our epidemic of overweight and obesity. Unless it is improved, poor diet will continue to contribute to the poor health of Australians and the spiraling burden of diet-related disease.

School is the ideal time and place in which to teach, and practice, the essential life skill of healthy eating. Feeding oneself is a non-negotiable essential task of everyday life. It needs to be given higher priority in school.

The Healthy Kids Association has 25 years' experience in child nutrition and working with school canteens. We have identified four key strategies to help improve both food in schools and the food literacy of children. These are:

- A higher priority placed on healthy food and drink in schools
- Mandatory monitoring and reporting of food in school canteens
- More funding to support canteens
- New national guidelines for canteens

This paper outlines how you can help Healthy Kids advocate for healthy change in schools. Join us and help raise the profile of food, and food literacy, in schools at a government level.

About Healthy Kids

The Healthy Kids Association is a not-for-profit, health promotion charity based in Sydney, NSW. Our mission is to promote and influence healthy food choices for children. Much of our work is with schools and their canteens, trying to improve the food available at school. We have been operating in this area for 25 years. Most of our work is in NSW, but we also provide services to schools in other states and territories.

While there have been changes to the food available in schools over the past 25 years, as well as changes to the guidelines regulating this, the current situation regarding obesity and chronic disease rates is alarming. We need your support to advocate for better standards for kids' nutrition in schools. We need change now.

About this kit

This kit, and the tools within it, is for anyone who is interested in improving food in schools. We'd love students, parents, teachers, school staff, food companies, food distributors, nutrition industry organisations, associations and peak bodies to join us in advocating for better food in schools.

No matter who you are, you can help us advocate for change to improve the food available in schools across Australia.

The current system

Some schools in Australia have a health promoting focus and do a great job of ensuring health is considered across all activities. Such schools only provide healthier foods during the school day. They also provide healthier foods during activities involving the wider school community such as sporting carnivals, fetes, camps and fundraisers. Based on the limited data available, these schools are unfortunately in the minority. However, we cannot be sure of the figures because comprehensive data is not collected. It might be even worse than we think.

Currently, each state in Australia has its own guidelines that determine what food is permitted for sale, or provided, in government schools. Catholic and independent schools may have their own guidelines or advise adoption of government guidelines – this is by Diocese for Catholic schools, and school by school for independents. See <http://healthy-kids.com.au/school-canteens/government-policies-regulations/> for more details of government guidelines and strategies by state and territory. In NSW, the guidelines are within the Fresh Tastes @ School NSW Healthy School Canteen Strategy (FT@S).

In NSW, government schools are also required to promote and model healthy eating and good nutrition under the Nutrition in Schools Policy. The policy states that:

- implementation of FT@S is mandatory;
- principals are responsible for ensuring requirements of the policy are met;
- principals will ensure canteen operations are reviewed at least every two years; and
- personnel within the NSW Department of Education will monitor implementation of the policy.

There is no publically available data from the NSW Department of Education on its monitoring of the Nutrition in Schools policy in government schools. Anecdotal evidence suggests less than 50% of NSW schools meet the FT@S guidelines and hence have implemented the Nutrition in Schools policy.

Why is nutritionally poor food available in schools?

Many school canteens across Australia sell food of poor nutritional value despite the guidelines and systems currently in place to prevent this.

Old guidelines

FT@S was developed in 2004 with the thinking that it would be periodically reviewed. The only amendment to the strategy was in 2007 with the introduction of the 'sugar sweetened drinks' ban. These guidelines are in need of a review and should be updated to bring them in line with more recent evidence and to reflect the updated Australian Dietary Guidelines released in 2013.

In 2015, the NSW Government commenced a review of FT@S. No timeframe has currently been given for the development or release of a new strategy or guidelines. Currently, FT@S has anomalies and is often seen as complicated by canteen workers. School principals and canteen workers need streamlined and easy-to-follow guidelines with adequate resourcing to assist them in making changes.

Additionally, food manufacturers and suppliers say that different guidelines in each state and territory add a level of complexity to supplying food products to the school canteen market. This could be simplified if all states collaborated and adopted a single, cohesive set of guidelines.

No monitoring or reporting

There is currently no publically available data on implementation of the Nutrition in Schools policy, nor on how many canteens follow FT@S or similar strategies/guidelines. There aren't any incentives or consequences for schools that do or do not implement the policy and/or follow guidelines. Therefore, unless someone at a school has taken it upon themselves to ensure only healthy food is served, the food provided or sold may be of poor nutritional value and not meet guidelines.

Knowledge or skills gap

People who work in schools and allow nutritionally poor food to be sold generally don't intend to cause harm. They most likely fall into the following three categories:

1. *They know what to do but don't do it.* Some people know that certain foods are of poor nutritional value but sell them anyway, for various reasons. For example, they believe students should have access to 'treats' at school, or think the canteen should be the same as when they attended school, despite the very different food environment today. They may also believe that healthier foods won't yield profits. These people don't understand the many implications of having unhealthy food available at school.
2. *They don't know what to do.* Others have insufficient knowledge to be able to ensure everything they provide is of high nutritional value. They may not be aware of FT@S or may find it confusing.
3. *They don't know how to make the change.* Creating change in any organisation can be difficult. Having support from all the various sectors of the school community (e.g. the parent body, parents, students, teaching and other staff, principal and canteen workers) is likely to make change easier. Being able to garner support across the school community is challenging and requires skills that many may be lacking.

We also can't forget that two in three Australian adults are overweight or obese (ABS, 2013). That most likely means that two in three principals, two in three teachers and two in three school staff are overweight or obese. Food can be an emotional issue which means many people without any nutrition expertise think their opinions on food and drink are sound.

Unfortunately, if that person is the school principal or canteen manager, their ideas around food have the potential to influence all students, staff and the whole school community and therefore what is available at the school canteen and school events.

Motivation behind the canteen

Schools canteens operate for a variety of reasons including:

- to provide a healthy food service at school;
- to provide a food service at school;
- to raise funds for the school; and
- to make a profit as a food business.

In some schools, the canteen has been operating as it is for many years. In fact, it might be some time since any thought was put into the motivation behind the canteen. With so many competing priorities in schools, it can be easy for a school to get used to the profits generated by the canteen without considering how they are being made.

Is it ethical to be making money by selling unhealthy food at school and contradicting the healthy eating messages that students are being taught in the classroom?

Many competing priorities in schools

The school environment is complicated with many competing priorities for principals and teachers. As a result there may be little or no focus on the food provided in school. This is even despite the many immediate and long-term implications of providing nutritionally poor food at school. Children and teenagers are at school to learn skills and form habits to take them through to adulthood. Poor habits formed in childhood around nutrition and health can last a lifetime and impact long-term physical and mental health (Cooke, 2007).

Food literacy has decreased among Australians, including children (NHMRC, 2013). In research conducted on behalf of Woolworths relating to the Jamie Oliver Garden Collectibles promotion:

- 46% of Aussie 6-17 year olds didn't know what white bread is made from;
- 34% didn't know what butter is made from; and
- many Aussie kids struggled to identify where processed foods come from with many believing they come from the supermarket (Lonergan Research, 2014).

It could be argued that poor food literacy, as well as poor cooking skills, has contributed to the epidemic of overweight and obesity. Unless food literacy is improved and knowledge about food, cooking and healthy food choices is improved, poor diet will continue to contribute to the poor health of Australians.

Increasing the focus and priority placed on food and nutrition in schools will help kids establish healthy habits. Feeding oneself is a non-negotiable essential task of everyday life. It needs to be given higher priority in school.

Why is a new system for food in schools important?

The Australian Health Survey conducted in 2014-15 showed that 63.4% of Australian adults were overweight or obese and around one in four (27.4%) children aged 5-17 years were overweight or obese (ABS, 2015). It also showed that the majority of Australians don't eat according to recommendations, with only 5% of children and adults consuming recommended amounts of fruit and vegetables. These statistics clearly show that something needs to change if Australia is to avoid a future of poor health, some of which could be prevented if people had a better diet.

If no further action is taken to curb the growth in obesity, it is projected that there will be a total of \$87.7 billion in additional direct and indirect costs to Australia accumulated across 10 years to 2025. Furthermore, implementing a select set of obesity interventions, including changes to the school curriculum, could save \$1.70 for every \$1 invested (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2015).

School is the ideal time and place in which to teach, and practice, the essential life skill of healthy eating (Rovner et al., 2011). Consumption of healthy food over unhealthy alternatives has been linked to better reading performance and behavior, improved academic scores and better mental health in the short term, as well as better long-term mental and physical health outcomes (Florence, Asbridge & Veugelers, 2008; Overby & Hoigaard, 2012; Brooks et al., 2002; Sorensen et al., 2015). Allowing, or providing, unhealthy food at school contradicts the healthy lifestyle messages being taught in the classroom.

Food is an emotional topic and parents/carers may be defensive about what their kids eat while at school. Some even go so far as to raise a human rights question when regulation of food in schools is discussed.

A good analogy for the tighter control of food in school is the wearing of school uniforms. No one expects a child to be able to wear swimwear and thongs to school, but we all know this is acceptable on specific occasions outside of school. Why then may it not be acceptable to control what food is eaten during school?

What are we asking for?

Based on our 25 years' experience, Healthy Kids believe these four changes will go a long way to improving food in schools and food literacy.

1. Higher priority placed on healthy food and drink in schools

- Ensure health is considered in all activities at school.
- Improved practical food and nutrition education, including cooking, in the classroom.

2. Mandatory monitoring of food in school canteens

- Have incentives and consequences for schools around implementation of policies and guidelines:
 - a mandatory, yearly canteen menu review against guidelines (regardless of canteen operating model) by an external provider with nutrition expertise, plus reporting of results to a central agency; and
 - reporting on any other food available at school, e.g. via fundraising and other events.
- Educate and monitor suppliers to school canteens regarding products that meet guidelines.

3. More funding to support canteens

- More funding to enable better support of school canteens that covers business operations as well as provision of healthy food:
 - training and education from experts;
 - peer support; and
 - easy access to product information and suitability.

3. New guidelines

- A review of the food classification system and state guidelines with the subsequent development of simplified guidelines.
- Adoption of the new guidelines across all states, territories and school sectors to help manufacturers and suppliers provide compliant food products.
- Strong links between the canteen and the classroom to maximise the opportunity for practical food literacy education.

What can you do?

ONE: At your local school – *One school at a time. Every school counts.*

Working to improve the food available at your local school may be a long, hard slog. Healthy Kids hear stories from parents about the months or years it took to effect change in their child's school and the various obstacles they faced along the way. Here are our tips to help you change the food in your local school.

1. Arm yourself with all the required information and make sure you understand it – for example, the NSW Nutrition in Schools policy, Fresh Tastes @ School NSW Healthy School Canteen Strategy and your school's canteen menu. Depending on the type of school (government, catholic or independent) your school may be required to follow certain policies or guidelines on nutrition. Ask your state or territory's canteen association for clarification or assistance if you need it. In NSW and the ACT, contact the Healthy Kids Association on 02 9876 1300 or info@healthy-kids.com.au
2. Talk or write to the principal/canteen manager/P&C committee at school about the current situation and what is required under policy.
3. Join your school canteen committee to try to influence decisions from the inside.
4. Gather support from like-minded parents/teachers/students and advocate for change in your school. For example, as part of a classroom activity, students may write to the canteen manager after analysing the current menu and/or after coming up with new, healthier ideas.
5. Ask the principal/canteen manager/P&C committee to undergo a menu review to find out if it meets state/territory guidelines and where it may be improved. Healthy Kids offer free menu reviews to members.
6. Call or write to your state or territory's education department. In NSW, for general enquiries about school canteens, contact the NSW Department of Education, Student Engagement and Interagency Partnerships on 02 9244 5130 (and refer to <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport/studentwellbeing/schoolcanteen/index.php>.)
7. Celebrate wins, even small ones. For example, removal of all red items from the menu and the promotion and placement of healthier options ahead of unhealthier ones.

Tips

- Be persistent
- Be prepared to be unpopular
- Be prepared to compromise
- Use the facts and stick to the evidence and try not to get confrontational, personal or emotional

TWO: Help Healthy Kids advocate for regulatory change – *Every voice counts.*

Tighter regulation and more assistance for schools have the potential to radically improve food in schools and food literacy. Such regulatory controls are administered at government level.

Help Healthy Kids raise the profile of this essential matter with politicians in the hope that they will effect these changes. Following is a list of politicians you may like to write to, plus a letter template. The more people who write, the more likely politicians are to put it on their agenda.

Who to write to (current as of February 2016)

Local government – your local MP

NSW Government

- | | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Hon. Adrian Piccoli Minister for Education PO Box 5341 SYDNEY NSW 2000 office@piccoli.minister.nsw.gov.au | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Hon. Jillian Skinner Minister for Health GPO Box 5341 SYDNEY NSW 2001 office@skinner.minister.nsw.gov.au |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Hon. Linda Burney Shadow Minister for Education Parliament House Macquarie Street SYDNEY NSW 2000 canterbury@parliament.nsw.gov.au | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Hon. Pru Goward Assistant Minister for Health GPO Box 5341 SYDNEY NSW 2001 office@goward.minister.nsw.gov.au |

- Premier Mike Baird
PO Box 5341
SYDNEY NSW 2000
Via the form on:
<https://www.nsw.gov.au/your-government/contact-premier-new-south-wales>
- The Hon. Walt Secord
Shadow Minister for Health
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
walt.secord@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Australian Government

- Senator the Hon. Simon Birmingham
Minister for Education
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
minister@education.gov.au
- The Hon. Susan Ley
Minister for Health
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
minister.Ley@health.gov.au
- The Hon. Kate Ellis
Shadow Minister for Education
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
kate.ellis.mp@aph.gov.au
- The Hon. Catherine King
Shadow Minister for Health
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
catherine.king.mp@aph.gov.au

Letter template

Download the editable version of the letter template from the Healthy Kids website at:

<http://healthy-kids.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Advocacy-letter-template.docx>

Please edit the **highlighted** sections of the letter and feel free to add information about your specific experiences or expertise.

Your address
Your suburb and postcode

The Hon. Adrian Piccoli
Minister for Education
PO Box 5341
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Today's date

Dear Hon. Adrian Piccoli,

I am writing to ask for your support to improve the food in schools and the food literacy of Australian children.

Currently, there is no monitoring and reporting of the food available in schools. Unhealthy food and drink that is nutritionally poor is still freely available at canteens, fundraisers and athletics carnivals.

The Fresh Tastes @ School NSW School Canteen Strategy was rolled out in 2004 in an effort to address the issue of nutritionally poor, energy dense food in schools. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that currently less than 50% of NSW schools have canteen menus that meet this strategy.

The food literacy of many Australians is frighteningly inadequate for our current food environment. It can be argued that this has contributed to our epidemic of overweightness and obesity. Unless food literacy is improved and knowledge about food, cooking and healthy food choices are boosted, poor diet will continue to contribute to the poor health of Australians and the spiraling burden of diet-related disease.

School is the ideal time and place in which to teach, and practice the essential life skill of healthy eating. Feeding oneself is a non-negotiable essential task of everyday life. It needs to be given higher priority in school.

Healthy Kids Association has 25 years experience in children's nutrition and working with school canteens. It has identified four key strategies to help improve both food in schools and food literacy of children. These are:

- Higher priority placed on healthy food and drink in schools
- Mandatory monitoring and reporting of food in school canteens
- More funding to support canteens
- New national guidelines for canteens

Please consider putting these four key strategies on your list of priorities this year. It is only tighter regulation and practical assistance for schools that will radically improve both food in schools and food literacy.

Help Healthy Kids raise the profile of this essential matter with government in order to effect change.

Yours sincerely,

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