

School healthy eating agendas: A delicate balance

As educators of the next generation, schools are constantly under pressure to help change societal norms and push for progress on many issues. Schools, for example, can play a role in normalising a healthier food culture. But with so many competing demands, how well equipped are schools to tackle this? And can there be other unintended consequences?

As part of our Nillumbik Healthy Schools initiative, healthAbility set out to explore this issue, aiming to support the efforts of local primary schools with the latest evidence and advice.

What are the issues?

There is a clear need to create healthier eating culture in schools (and elsewhere) to support children's learning and physical and mental wellbeing

- Supporting kids positive eating behaviours during childhood can set them up with healthy eating habits for life.
- Dietary patterns are strongly influenced by food environments around us, food and drink marketing and food cultures in the places and spaces which we live, learn, work and play (including schools).ⁱ
- Dietary intake accounted for 8% of the total burden of disease in Australia in 2015 and is the largest cause of disease burden due to any one risk factor (its overtaken tobacco).ⁱⁱ
- There are increasing rates of diabetes, heart disease, cancer, dental carries, obesity, and mental illness, all which can have links back to poor dietary patterns, which are worsening in Nillumbik.ⁱⁱⁱ
- On average, Australian school-age children consume more than one-third of their daily energy intake at school. This includes a combination of foods purchased from canteens and food brought from home.^{iv}

Avoiding increased body dissatisfaction and/or disordered eating

- Developing a positive relationship with food, as well as a balanced approach to eating, can lead to better health outcomes in the long run.
- A large number (41%) of children are specifically worried about the way they look with 35% concerned about being overweight (44% of girls and 27% of boys) and 16% being too skinny (global study).^v
- Poor body image is associated with an increased probability of engaging in dangerous dietary practices and weight control methods, excessive exercise, substance abuse and unnecessary surgery to alter appearance.^{vi}
- **Orthorexia** is a term that describes an obsession with eating healthy food. Orthorexia, a form of disordered eating, is a serious mental health condition that can cause irreversible health complications.^{vii}

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Expectations from government, teachers, the parent community

Promoting a healthier food culture in schools can be a challenging topic for school leadership with many mixed views and approaches.

Best practice government initiatives for schools

- The Department of Education and Training website links to the Achievement Program and the Healthy Eating Advisory Service.
- The Achievement Program for schools provides a framework, resources and whole of school healthy eating benchmarks (schools can register for full access to these).
- The Healthy Eating Advisory Service specialises in helping schools (and other organisations) provide and promote healthier foods and drinks. They have the online FoodChecker tool, which enables schools to review entire menus, as well as individual recipes and branded products, with support from local health professionals.
- Eating Disorders Victoria provides practical tips and information on being a 'body-positive school' and delivers body-positive education within schools.

Stakeholder views

Across the literature, there is variability in stakeholder views with respect to healthy eating and specifically the role of school canteens (the Table below shows an Australian review), indicating need for broad engagement with school community when making changes to the school canteen.^{viii}

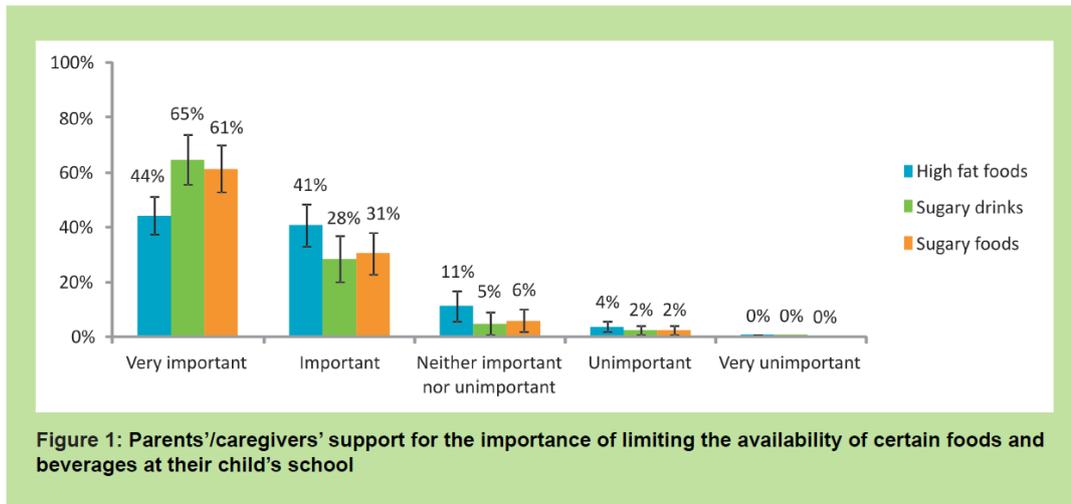
Table 3 Stakeholder perceptions and the role of school canteens

Studies	Findings
Cleland <i>et al.</i> ⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 66.8% of girls agreed the canteen provided healthy foods (55% boys)• Stakeholders believed the canteen was important in:<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Promoting healthy choices-Being a role model for healthy eating-Reinforcing nutrition education-Developing good eating habits• 52.5% of teachers believed schools did not encourage healthy choices, 53% of parents believed schools did
Drummond and Sheppard ³¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Healthy foods were successful in the canteen when there were:<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Specific food items on special days-Variety-Promotion/marketing of products-Recognition/appreciation of volunteers (rural only)-Students involved (rural only)
Drummond and Sheppard ¹⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Canteen managers worried about profit• Principals worried about foods available and breaking even• Secondary students believed the canteen did not reinforce nutrition education• Principals supply foods similar to nearby outlets so students remain on campus• Teachers believed the canteen should provide healthy options• Students would like more variety of healthy foods for cheaper
Pettigrew <i>et al.</i> ³⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parents/stakeholders supported the policy• Stakeholders believed the main roles of the canteen are to:<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Educate about healthy eating-Assist parents by providing a service-Provide healthy foods• Primary schools were less likely to agree that the canteen should provide treats

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Parents and caregiver views

- Parent backlash in the media has predominantly been around some school's nutrition education providing specific feedback on individuals' and family's' food choices or policing what children bring to school. For example, see articles: [Lunchbox shaming at schools](#) and [Stay out of my child's lunchbox](#).
- There is no equivalent national survey in Australia; however a national survey in New Zealand found high parents' and caregivers' support for limiting availability of certain food and beverages in schools, particularly support for limiting sugary drinks in school canteens.^{ix}



Current status of school healthy eating agendas in Nillumbik

- There has been limited uptake of the Achievement Program in Nillumbik schools, with participating schools yet to formally meet the Achievement Program healthy eating benchmarks. However a couple of schools may be eligible for recognition and others are working towards this.
- Many schools are fostering food literacy skills and a positive connection to food through kitchen-garden programs
- According to the Healthy Eating Advisory Service, 2/30 schools in Nillumbik have been assessed against the current School Canteens and Other School Food Services Policy, with 0/2 of these schools meeting guidelines.
- A rapid audit of a sample of 11 Nillumbik-based school canteen menus (accessed online by healthAbility in Term 4 2017), specifically looking at drinks availability, revealed that school canteens continue to sell sugary drinks.

Positive practice, resources and examples

- There are several case studies of school canteens offering and promoting healthier choices. See [here](#).
- The philosophy of [Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden](#) program, which many schools have adopted in their own kitchen-garden versions, focuses on pleasurable food education, teaching Australian children positive food habits through fun, hands-on learning.
- Glen Katherine Primary School is using FoodChecker tool to provide nutrition education within the kitchen-garden program – see [full case study here](#).
- FOOST is a Melbourne-based provider of healthy eating education for schools with a fun, hands-on approach
- Eltham North Primary School's approach including improving access to healthy food and water <http://www.elthamnorthps.vic.edu.au/healthy-eating/>

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- There are many nutrition education resources available to classroom teachers to support their efforts:
 - http://www.healthpromotion.com.au/Documents/HPSPS/Nutrition_Resources_Classroom.pdf
 - <http://www.lunchboxblitz.com/teacher-resources/> (note this is general lunchbox education – and does not audit school kids own lunchboxes)
- Also see advice for schools, teachers, and in particular PE teachers on creating a **body positive school**.

Concerning practices

- The explicit shaming of children’s lunchboxes (or other food choices) by providing feedback directly to young children (see above mentioned article: [Lunchbox shaming at schools](#) written by both a parent and dietitian perspective.), or conducting food inspections at the school gate, prohibiting 'junk food' from entering the school grounds.
- Teaching kids food is 'good' or 'bad', or reinforcing moral judgements of other peoples food choices



Image credit: Foost ^x

“Framing food as inherently good or bad sets our children up to judge themselves and others. It also reinforces social hierarchies and classism, since so much of what this style of eating celebrates is out of reach for so many. It lets the real culprits of poor health – namely, poverty and an increasingly shady food industry – off the hook.” ^{xi}

Other guidance

- Current advice to parents is that actions speak louder than words when it comes to role-modelling positive eating behaviours (i.e. enjoying all foods in moderation, not 'dieting' or binging on the 'occasional' or 'extra' foods).^{xii}
- Schools can also head this advice by role-modelling positive food behaviours and ensuring the school’s food provision is in line with current government recommendations, starting with meeting guidelines for drinks available.
- The focus should to be on environmental/structural changes to include healthier food and drinks available to students. Schools should avoid practices which blame or shame children or parents for unhealthier food choices – this is widespread societal issue that affects many, and disproportionately affects those most unfortunate.
- Reinforcing that every family has different preferences, different cultures, different priorities, and different access to food, and that there is no one way to eat that works for everyone
- Teach nutrition basics in a fun way, without demonising certain foods.
- Schools can also provide guidance for parents supporting their children – here’s some guidance you may like to share with your parent community if appropriate.
 - <https://healthy-kids.com.au/parents/developing-positive-eating-behaviours/>
 - <http://www.healthyfoodguide.com.au/articles/2009/april/special-report-right-way-handle-childhood-obesity>
 - <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/15/health/healthspecial2/15eat.html>
 - <https://everydayfeminism.com/2017/01/teach-kids-food-choices-arent-moral/>

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- xi Everyday Feminism (2017) Teach kids food choices aren't model. Available from: <https://everydayfeminism.com/2017/01/teach-kids-food-choices-arent-moral/>
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