



Feeding Futures

Reimagining school food in Australia for health, equity and learning

CSIRO Food System Horizons Webinar

Friday, 29 August 2025

12:00–1:00 PM AEST

Acknowledgement of Country



Outline

Setting the Scene

- *The Current School Food Landscape*
- *International Perspectives*

Why Change is Needed

- *The Benefits of Doing School Meals Differently*
- *Political Momentum*

Our Contributions So Far

- *Progress to Date*
- *Where to From Here?*

Blue Sky Visioning

- What do the audience see as the main barriers to universal school meals?
- What do they see as the critical next steps to overcome these?



The Current School Food Landscape

- Australian children consume ~1/3 of their daily food intake at school
- Parents and carers provide packed lunches for children
- Most meals don't meet dietary guidelines and are stored in school bags posing food safety concerns.
- Inequities in access to food and nutrition - food insecurity
- Food matters for many reasons including physical and mental health, wellbeing, academic success and child development



School Canteens and tuckshops in Australia

- Canteens were once a staple institution supplementing home-provided food
- Many canteens are being outsourced, closing or privatised impacting access, affordability and regularity.
- National roundtable (2025) identified canteen food provision is at risk due to:
 - Staffing and volunteer shortages
 - Financial instability with rising food costs and limited funding
 - Outdated infrastructure and inadequate equipment
 - Complex regulations and compliance requirements that differ across each jurisdiction.



SOURCE: <https://www.focis.com.au/focis-national-consensus-statement-2/>

Patchworked food relief and food meal programs in Australian schools

School Food Breakfast Programs

- Provided by not-for-profits like Food Bank, individual partnerships and generous donors
- Provides breakfast foods such as cereals, toast, spreads and fruit
- Only available to certain schools who meet the criteria and have resourcing

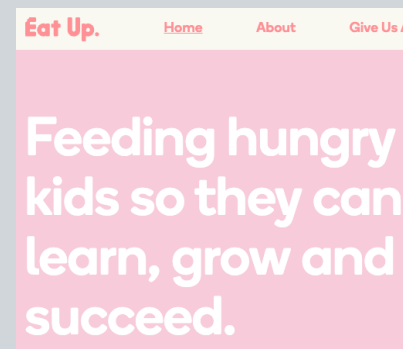


Food Literacy: gardening and cooking programs

- Educational initiatives involving food growing and cooking
- Curriculum connections
- Supplements meals or provides vegetables and fruit for consumption at home
- Grant/partnership dependent
- Provided by organisations like OzHarvest, Food Ladder, Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation and Farm it Forward

Eat Up: Food Relief lunches

- Free cheese sandwiches, fruit and snacks provided every three weeks to partner 1100+ partner schools



School Meal Projects

- Pilot programs such as Tasmania project, School Food Matters and others
- School meals provided
- Nutrition education and curriculum development
- Many being evaluated and supported by research by the Caring Futures team at Flinders University



What are universal school meal programs?

Universal school meal programs provide **all children in schools with access to a nutritious meal every day**, regardless of family income, background, or circumstance.

- **Equitable access** – every student is included, no stigma of “*free meals*” for some and not others.
- **Nutritious meals** – guided by dietary standards to support health and development.
- **Delivered at school** – meals are provided on-site (canteens, kitchens, or catering), removing the burden from parents/carers.
- **Government-supported** – funded through public investment, sometimes with a mix of means-tested contributions in certain countries.
- **Co-benefits:** Potential for sustainable procurement and food waste reduction programs



Example Tasmanian School Food Pilot: Australia

- **Coverage:** Launched in 2022 in 15 schools, expanded to 44 schools by 2025, with plans to reach 60 schools by 2026.
- **Goals:** Improve nutrition, attendance, and engagement while addressing food security.
- **Implementation Strategies:** Collaboration between government, charities, and local food producers. Healthy, hot meals provided multiple days weekly using locally sourced, dietitian-developed recipes.
- **Outcomes:** Improved attendance, calmer behaviour, and greater willingness to try new foods. Positive evaluation supporting scalability.
- **Challenges:** Long-term funding, logistics, and equitable access as the program expands.



What are other countries doing?

- Australia one of the last high-income countries not to provide USMPs
- Relevance of how other countries feed children at school?
 - 'legal and policy transplants' are a centuries-old approach to reform
 - Requires adaptation to domestic context of the 'borrowing' jurisdiction
- Delivery models, funding, regulation vary between countries
- Common denominator: **universal access** and meals **provided at school**, not by parents.
- Examples of how Australia can learn from, and borrow law and policy ideas from, other countries ... USA, Finland, Brazil, Japan.

National School Lunch Program: United States

- **Coverage:** Available to over 30 million children daily, with meals provided free, at reduced cost, or full fee based on household income.
- **Goals:** Improve nutrition, food security, and academic outcomes for children.
- **Implementation Strategies:** Federally funded and regulated with mandatory nutrition standards. Meals are prepared on-site or delivered by central 'commissary' kitchens. Some districts seek community input to ensure cultural and local relevance.
- **Outcomes:** Increased food security, better diet quality, and improved academic performance.
- **Challenges:** Issues with meal quality and stigmatization for children receiving free meals; regulatory framework fails to 'fence out' influence of food industry; eroding standards; school holidays (limited programs); budget cuts under current US federal government are reducing who is eligible for free meals.



Universal Free School Meals: Finland

- **Coverage:** All students (approx 850,000) from preschool to high school receive free daily meals; plus before-and-after school care snacks.
- **Goals:** Promote health, well-being, and equity.
- **Implementation Strategies:** Meals are cooked on-site, focusing on equity and inclusion (allergies, ethics, religion), and balanced nutrition. Strong integration into the school curriculum (e.g., food education). Legislation guarantees free meals, sets curriculum and nutrition guidelines, supports inclusion of children with special needs.
- **Outcomes:** High participation rates, improved academic outcomes, and better long-term health indicators.
- **Challenges:** Significant government funding required but sustained through public support and prioritization – longstanding cultural norm.



National School Feeding Program: Brazil

- **Coverage:** Reaches over 40 million children daily in public schools.
- **Goals:** Improve nutrition, support healthy child development, support local agriculture, reduce inequality; accommodate cultural diversity; more recently, tackle overweight and obesity.
- **Implementation Strategies:** Funded by the federal government with strict nutrition guidelines. Legislation requires 30% of ingredients to be sourced from local family farms, promoting local procurement, economic stimulus, employment, sustainability.
- **Outcomes:** Reduced childhood malnutrition, improved school attendance, and strengthened local food systems.
- **Challenges:** Managing supply chains and ensuring consistent quality across regions.



National School Lunch Program: Japan

- **Coverage:** Not available every day in every school; more than 9 million children
- **Goals:** Healthy child development; develop 'good judgment of food choices'; social cooperation; cultural awareness; environmental awareness (legislation sets program objectives)
- **Implementation Strategies:** prepared on site in consultation with a nutritionist/food educator employed at the school; funded by parents; served in the classroom; strong integration with nutrition education and cultural literacy
- **Outcomes:** lowest rates of childhood overweight and obesity in the world
- **Challenges:** inclusivity – allergy and intolerance, and preferences e.g. vegan/vegetarian not catered for (children bring their own *bento* from home)



Political will, political feasibility in Australia

- How to catalyse change in Australia – one of the last wealthy countries in the world not to have school meals programs?
- Commonwealth Government Inquiry into Food Security in Australia 2023 report recommended Australia 'consider the feasibility of introducing a schools meals program'.
- Greens election policy: free school lunches for all Australian public school students (2025)
- Qld Labor election promise: free school lunches to primary school children (2024)
- Victorian Liberals election promise: free school lunches to public school students (2022)
- State pilots showing feasibility – Tasmanian pilot has bipartisan political support
- Advocacy groups and researchers pushing for systemic change
- Lessons from other countries e.g. Wales: bipartisan support; raising awareness of international norms; building public support and demand; advocacy

What are the benefits of doing it differently?



Diet & health: improved diet quality, reduced obesity prevalence.



Equity & security: improved food security, reduced stigma, more consistent access.



Education: improved academic performance, concentration, and potentially attendance.



Social outcomes: calmer behaviour, fewer suspensions, greater willingness to try new foods.



Systems outcomes: supports local procurement, sustainability, and climate goals.



Our Work
So Far...

Visiting International Best Practice: Malmö, Sweden





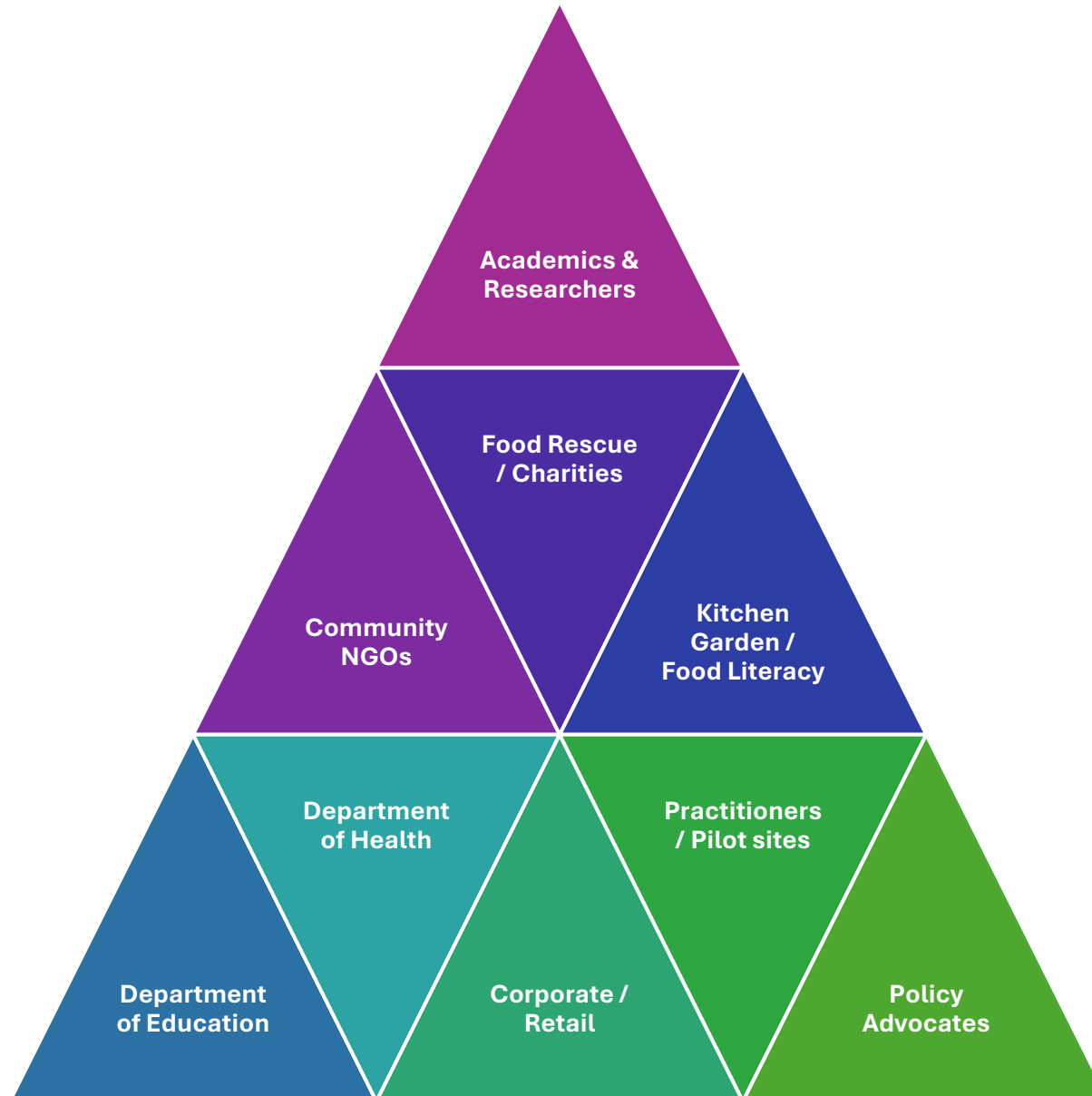
Stakeholder Round Table

School food futures: A universal school meals program for New South Wales

Brought together a diverse group of stakeholders to:

1. Understand the Current School Food Landscape
2. Discuss the Need for a Universal School Meals Program in NSW
3. Design a Vision for a Universal School Meals Program in NSW
4. Develop Actionable Next Steps

Diverse Workshop Participants



Outcomes of the Universal School Meals Workshop

The Current School Food Landscape

- Patchwork of canteens, breakfast clubs, charities, and gardens.
- Uneven, under-resourced, reliant on volunteers and parents.
- Many kids arrive without food; meals often unhealthy.

Need for a Universal Program

- Universal access removes stigma and levels the playing field.
- Boosts attendance, concentration, and social connection.
- Strong international evidence of health, equity, and learning benefits.

Vision for a Universal Program

- Universal, but locally adaptable to context and culture.
- Integrated with curriculum and food literacy.
- Supports local economies and builds community through shared meals.

Actionable Next Steps

- Consolidate evidence from pilots and global models.
- Secure sustainable funding, governance, and infrastructure.
- Coordinate sectors and communicate benefits clearly.



Australian kids BYO lunches to school. There is a healthier way to feed students

Published: June 5, 2025 6.14am AEST

Getty Images/ courtneyk



Australian parents will be familiar with this school morning routine: hastily making sandwiches or squeezing leftovers into containers, grabbing a snack from the cupboard and a piece of fruit from the counter.

This would be unheard of in many other countries, including Finland, Sweden, Scotland, Wales, Brazil and India, which provide free daily school meals to every child.

Australia is one of the few [high-income countries](#) that does not provide children with a daily nutritious meal at school.

As families increasingly [face food insecurity](#) and a cost-of-living crisis, here's how school lunches could help.

School lunches are important

During the week, children get a [third of their daily food intake](#) at school. What they eat during school hours has a significant impact on their health.

Australian children have [much higher rates of obesity](#) than children in countries with [healthy lunch programs](#).

Authors



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Disclosure statement

Liesel Spencer has undertaken volunteer work for the Federation of Canteens in Schools (Australia).

Miriam Williams has undertaken volunteer work for the Federation of Canteens in Schools (Australia).

Katherine Kent does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

>20,000 reads
Diverse Social Media Comments!

"I love the Japanese and French models where they aren't just providing nutritious food (which they really are) but they are also introducing kids to social and community aspects of meals... It becomes natural to them... It has a huge impact on eating and social habits for the rest of their lives"

"It would be great but since public schools are still not properly funded for the educational purposes then I think meals are at the bottom of the needs of our schools unfortunately."

"So many schools would have to have new purpose-built kitchens that would need to be factored into this cost initially. Some country schools don't have a canteen at all."

<https://theconversation.com/australian-kids-byo-lunches-to-school-there-is-a-healthier-way-to-feed-students-257465>

A case for universal school meals in NSW



Katherine
Kent



Liesel
Spencer



Miriam
Williams

A well-designed, universal school meals program at the state level could help give children the nutrition they need to thrive in their education.



<https://thepolicymaker.appi.org.au/a-case-for-universal-school-meals-in-nsw/>

In summary...

Where are we now?

Patchwork of programs and approaches

Struggling canteens and reliance on volunteers

Rising food insecurity

No universal or system-wide approach

Where we want to be

A universal program, locally adapted to diverse contexts

Meals integrated with curriculum and food literacy

Backed by sustainable funding, governance, and infrastructure

Builds equity, health, and learning outcomes

Environmentally sustainable

Generates economic stimulus and workforce development

What is missing?

Stronger advocacy to secure policy leadership and political will

Clear models for sustainable funding

Investment in school infrastructure and workforce capacity

A whole-of-government framework and regulatory support

Evaluation and scaling of pilot programs

Understanding community buy-in and shaping a positive public narrative

Feeding Futures: Where to from here?

Step 1 – Understand the Current Landscape

Analyse current NSW school food practices; international review of existing programs.

Step 2 – Set Up Advisory & Consultation Groups

Establish an Advocacy Advisory Committee and community consultation groups; gather lessons from international school meal programs.

Step 3 – Listen to Communities

NSW parent survey + co-design workshops with schools, NGOs, canteen providers, First Nations orgs.

Step 4 – Check What's Possible in Schools

Audit kitchens and food preparation facilities across urban, regional, and remote schools.

Step 5 – Test the Economics

Assess costs, benefits, and return on investment.

Model funding and delivery scenarios (government, cost-sharing, NGO partnerships).

Step 6 – Share the Vision

Publish an implementation-ready plan for universal school meals in NSW.



Reflect

We want to hear your thoughts....

- What else is needed?
- What are the main barriers to universal school meals from your perspective?
- What do you see as a critical next step to overcome these barriers?
- How could your sector contribute to a collective vision?

Thank You

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Please contact us to stay engaged in the next stages

