

Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People

Inquiry into the most effective ways for Western Australia to address food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty

Department of Education submission

The Department of Education welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee's inquiry into food insecurity.

The Department aims to deliver a high-quality education to every student in all learning environments. The Department's vision is to ensure all students in Western Australia, regardless of background and across all schools and learning environments, fulfil their learning potential. *Building on strength: Future directions for the Western Australian public school system* explains the thinking and rationale behind the commitments made in our strategic directions for public schools, and acknowledges the need for students and teachers to be at the centre of our efforts. The Department recognises that encouraging healthy eating habits is an important element in promoting optimum health and wellbeing in children and young people.

Breakfast programs

There is evidence in the research literature that school breakfast programs have a positive impact on students' educational outcomes. At the classroom level, school breakfast programs are seen to have a positive impact by supporting students' transition from home to school, reducing incidents of disruptive behaviour, and contributing to a greater sense of calm.

Since 2002, Foodbank WA has been engaged to deliver the School Breakfast and Nutrition Education program (Breakfast program). The current Service Agreement to deliver the program was established in 2014 under the *Delivering Community Services in Partnership Policy* (2011).

The 2018 evaluation by Curtin University and the Telethon Kids Institute (Curtin and TKI evaluation) and the 2021 external review by AOT Consulting Ltd (AOT review) of the Breakfast program concluded that the need and demand for school breakfasts is increasing and has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Curtin and TKI evaluation included an analysis of national and international literature relating to school breakfast programs, and concluded that the Breakfast program is both necessary and effective, and recommended continued support for the program. Case studies demonstrated that teachers, parents and students report strong benefits in terms of readiness for learning, focus and on-task concentration, attendance and punctuality, productivity in class and improved behaviour and social skills.

The AOT review stated that children who live in or attend schools in areas of Western Australia that have a low Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) and/or a significant student sub-group at high risk of disadvantage are susceptible to poor health and wellbeing, which has an impact on their ability to attend and participate to the best of their ability at school. In view of this, the Department's Service Agreement with Foodbank WA prioritises delivery of healthy breakfasts to Western Australian schools assessed as having low ICSEAs and/or significant student sub-groups at high risk of disadvantage.

Outcomes of providing a nutritious breakfast and nutrition education at school include improved health and wellbeing of children vulnerable to poor nutrition, improved educational, social and behavioural outcomes, and opportunities for the modelling of positive attitudes, behaviours and policies to healthy eating. In the longer term, the program aims to increase human capacity and community cohesiveness in targeted schools and communities.

In 2021, the breakfast component of the Breakfast program serviced 477 public schools and 20,334 students throughout Western Australia. Over the life of the Breakfast program, the number of schools registered has increased. Consistently over the past few years, the number of schools registered and accessing the Breakfast program exceeds the number specified in the Service Agreement. Additionally, the service provider receives funding from BHP to deliver the Breakfast program at 14 schools in the Pilbara region. While the service provider does not incorporate these schools into reporting for this Service Agreement, it does offer exactly the same program to these schools.

Schools can (and many do) optionally deliver a locally sourced and managed program to provide meals to students in their schools if a local need is identified using their one-line budget. The number of schools doing this is not held centrally.

Promotion of healthy food choices in schools

The Department recognises the importance of students making healthy food choices and having an understanding of good nutrition, which can in turn have a positive impact on their learning and educational outcomes. Healthy eating, nutrition and physical activity is promoted to students through teaching and learning programs, policy and procedures, and programs and agreements with external providers.

Schools promote nutrition and physical activity through classroom lessons and activities based on the Health and Physical Education curriculum. Schools also play an active role in working with parents and the community to provide consistent messages to children, as well as actively supporting them in developing healthy eating habits for life.

Healthy eating is promoted in schools by:

- adopting the [Health Promoting Schools Framework](#), which is a planning framework for schools that includes the physical, social and emotional needs of all members of the school community
- organising whole-school events such as health/nutrition campaigns/events, theme days or school breakfasts
- inviting appropriately qualified guest speakers to address students, parents and staff.

The Department's *Healthy Food and Drink in Public Schools* policy and procedures require principals to adopt a whole-school approach to healthy eating within the school community. This includes a requirement to develop and implement school-based policies on the provision of healthy food and drinks in all school settings, including the canteen/food service menu, classroom rewards, classroom cooking activities, school camps and excursions. Schools also respectfully encourage families to provide lunches and snacks that are consistent with the Department's *Healthy Food and Drink* policy and procedures. A mandatory annual survey is conducted to monitor implementation of the *Healthy Food and Drink in Public Schools* policy, through which the Department of Health provides an annual report containing key findings and recommendations to support policy implementation and services to schools.

Food literacy is included as part of KindiLink, which operates at 56 school sites across Western Australia. KindiLink is a play-and-learn initiative facilitated by an early childhood teacher and an Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer for Aboriginal children who are not old enough to enrol in school. Children and their parents attend KindiLink for 6 hours per week in a safe and welcoming space. Schools provide a range of opportunities to work alongside Aboriginal families to build relationships and promote healthy eating and drinking, in line with the *Healthy Food and Drink in Public Schools* policy and procedures. Food literacy programs are also a component of the services provided by the 22 Child and Parent Centres.

Schools have flexibility within their funding to provide local responses that may support the needs of students, which may include engaging external organisations. For example, EON Foundation delivers a nutrition-focused, healthy lifestyle and disease-prevention program. The work of the Foundation includes building edible gardens in remote Aboriginal schools and communities for a secure supply of fresh fruit and vegetables, partnering with schools and communities to deliver hands-on gardening and nutrition education, and providing training and local employment opportunities to build long-term, healthy lifestyle change in community. During 2020/2021, EON Foundation delivered its Thriving Communities Program in 11 Western Australian public and independent schools in the Pilbara, Kimberley and Midwest education regions.

Many public schools in Western Australia are engaged with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program, whose vision is to support children to form positive food habits for life. The mission of the program is to provide the inspiration, information, professional development and support for educational institutions to deliver pleasurable food education in conjunction with educators, partners and the wider community.

School canteens can play an important role through support for healthy eating and life skills taught in class. School canteen and food services also support families who are becoming more reliant on school canteens for at least one meal a day, including breakfast programs, supporting a whole-of-school approach to healthy eating. School canteens can be run by schools' Parents and Citizens' Associations, licensed businesses or contracted services.

In 2021, Hon Roger Cook MLA, then Minister for Health, announced a grant to the Western Australian School Canteen Association Inc. (WASCA) of \$883,861 to deliver services aimed at creating healthier food and drink environments in community settings across Western Australia. Community Nutrition Support Services are being delivered by WASCA over 3 years in partnership with Healthway to allow eligible community organisations access to the Fuel to Go & Play™ accreditation program and online hub. WASCA is a not-for-profit, non-government health promotion charity organisation, formed in 1994. WASCA assists school canteens and other food services to provide and promote healthy choices and operate economically viable and professional businesses through empowering food services with training, practical tools, information and advice, as well as working in partnership with schools and the wider community, government, food industry, workplaces and other non-government organisations.