

To the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People,

I greatly appreciate the fact that this inquiry has been created, and that public submissions have been sought. I have been in education for the last 15 years. My career as a teacher, and now Principal, has taken me all over Western Australia. I have taught in primarily low socio-economic areas such as Meekatharra, Leonora, Kununurra and now in Koondoola (Perth). Every one of these contexts has had large numbers of students who have/are suffering from food insecurities.

In every single location I have been in, I have been required to supply students with food. Early in my career, it was all from my own money. No matter what class, there is always a percentage of students who do not have enough food at home for lunch or recess. In my current role as Principal, I have been responsible for starting breakfast club 5 days per week due to the high numbers of students who have no breakfast at home (we feed approximately 20 students every morning). We also supply students with lunch and recess when they have none. This is approximately 10 students per week (we only have a student population of 65). This is thanks to partnerships we have actively pursued with Woolworths, OzHarvest and local churches.

There are a number of impacts that we have seen from students who have little/no food at home. We see a lot of hoarding behaviours. If we put too much food out for them to choose, they will often put large amounts in their bags or in their jumpers. We also see a lot of embarrassment and also students who appear malnourished. Students do not have the adequate attention span to engage effectively in classrooms and by the afternoon, they are either exhausted or their behaviour is dysregulated due to a lack of nutrition at home. We find that students who have a lack of food at home, rely on processed food when they can purchase it as it is cheap and requires little preparation. This means that the students are not getting the nutrients they need to grow their bodies. This leads to a lack of energy and behaviour issues. This can also lead these students to have a preference for sugary/salty foods which are high in calories but low in nutritional benefits. This is leading to high levels of obesity in our young students. This then has a negative effect on their willingness to participate in physical education.

At the school I am currently at, thanks to our partnerships, we have weekly "shops" where parents are able to come and take fruit, vegetables, bread and other items no questions asked. We have found this to be extremely successful. More than half of our parent cohort take items from here. They have said that they are able to take items that they normally are unable to afford from the grocery shops. Many of them are initially embarrassed at having to take, or ask for food. However, once they see others are in the same situation, they feel more at ease.

Our families in this context are struggling financially. Many of them have had their rent increase after COVID. A large number of them say they are unable to pay basic bills and we often have students tell us that their water/electricity has been cut off. Unfortunately, many of them do not have stable employment due to disabilities, or because they are a single parent family with little support. Many of them have mental health issues, which compounds the difficulty of budgeting for a family and being organised. We have found that the mental health system for these families is shocking. There is extremely little support or services available. The waitlists are extremely long and many of them give up asking for help or trying to get support.

One thing that would assist us in the food insecurity issue is more support for schools like ours with Chaplain time. We have a school chaplain who is amazing at liaising with families to find out where she can assist. She visits Woolworths and also sources things like shopping vouchers when she can. We have her for 1.5 days per week, and some of this comes from government funding and the other

is paid for by the school. Any extra funding for that program would be extremely beneficial to assist. She wants to be able to help parents more with food preparation, shopping, creating lists etc. but she does not have enough time.

Another helpful suggestion is an increase in the amount of child health nurses in the areas. We have a fantastic nurse who sees as many children as she can, however she is extremely time poor and the amount of schools she needs to cover is unsustainable. These professionals are often the first ones to recognise issues in families around food and nutrition and they can be best placed to discuss these issues with families. They have very little time to do this due to being under staffed. Our low socio economic suburbs need more human resources in this area to provide early intervention and support. This is a preventative measure as by the time they get to school, habits have been established and it can be difficult to change lifestyle habits.

One more area of concern which could also help with this issue is CPFS (Child Protection and Family Support) capabilities and resources. They are severely understaffed. If we put in referrals for neglect (food neglect) they are rarely followed up on. Very little support is given to the families when they are contacted. In the scheme of things, food neglect is seen as low on the priority list, due to their unmanageable workload. If they had more human resources, they could follow up on these cases and be in a better position to provide support.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my experiences and suggestions. Please feel free to contact me if you have anything you would like me to clarify or expand on.

Kind Regards,

