



Submission to the Secretary, Social Development Committee at sdcc@parliament.sa.gov.au

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the prevalence and effectiveness of programs in preschools and schools to ensure children and young people don't go hungry during the day.

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation was established in 2004 with the sole charitable purpose of improving the health and wellbeing of Australia's children and young people through delivery of our evidence-based national food education initiative, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program.

Grounded in a strengths-based approach, and harnessing the power of positive messaging, our pleasurable food education program inspires children and young people to understand and connect with fresh, healthy food through fun, hands-on learning in kitchen and garden classes delivered at schools and early childhood centres.

The holistic approach of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program delivers significant benefits to children and young people, with evaluations of the program demonstrating impact in all six domains of the Nest, Australia's wellbeing framework for children and young people.

The Kitchen Garden Program is an endorsed program on the South Australian Department for Education External Wellbeing Programs Directory, and has recently been included on the South Australian Office for early Childhood Development Pre-School Boost Menu.

In South Australia, there are 149 schools and early childhood services offering the Kitchen Garden Program, with over 40% located in rural and regional areas, and 10% located in remote and very remote locations. Over half of the schools offering the program have an ICSEA value less than 1,000.

The right to food

As per the Universal Declaration of Human Rightsⁱ and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rightsⁱⁱ, the right to food is a fundamental human right, encompassing not only food access, but also food quality, availability, affordability, and sustainability.

Food security, as defined by the World Food Summitⁱⁱⁱ, stipulates that all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life.

At the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation we believe that every child deserves a healthy start and a nourishing education.



Hungry children face many barriers to learning and thriving

There is much literature confirming the negative impacts of food insecurity on academic, social and health outcomes.

Food relief services are an important emergency backstop for food insecure Australians, and we support the vital part they play in alleviating hunger and contributing to school attendance and improved educational outcomes.

Done well, universal school meals will go even further to ensure equitable food access for Australian children and young people.

However, we believe that food relief and school lunches should not be considered the whole solution to food insecurity, but rather a part of a greater transformation of Australia's school food environment.

Food security is dependent on a robust food system

Food access is just one part of food security, and we must not lose sight of the importance of ensuring that we build the capacity and agency of Australian children and young people during these critical school years.

The adults of the future are the children and young people of today, and they need the knowledge, skills and experience to be part of effective food systems, and to live healthy lives in sustainable and healthy communities.

Children and young people have a right to adequate quality, culturally appropriate, sustainable and nutritious foods.

The home environment has traditionally played a crucial role in shaping children's food preferences and attitudes towards food, with caregivers supplying food and modelling food choices.

However, financial pressures, time constraints, lack of parental skills and motivation, and food insecurity can all contribute to the challenges of providing healthy food and establishing healthy eating habits at home.

Learning to eat healthy food is a critical protective health mechanism

The World Health Organization recognises schools as effective health promotion settings, and evidence suggests that eating habits, lifestyle and behaviour patterns adopted during childhood endure and can have a significant influence on health and wellbeing in later life^{iv}.



Research shows that approximately 10-15 hours of nutrition education is required to show improvement in students' nutrition knowledge, but approximately 50 hours is needed for health behaviour change to occur^v.

In most Kitchen Garden Program schools and services, students participate in approximately 50 hours of kitchen and garden activities in a single year of enrollment.

Impact of the Kitchen Garden Program in schools

With over 21 years of delivery, there is significant evidence^{vi,vii,viii} supporting the Kitchen Garden Program's ability to improve food literacy skills, agency and access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

Key benefits of the program include:

- 🍅 strong evidence of increased child willingness to try new foods
- 🍅 statistically significant increases in child knowledge, confidence and skills in cooking and gardening
- 🍅 fresh produce is grown sustainably on school grounds, with a conservative estimate of 28,000 m² of productive gardens being established at schools and early childhood services, increasing access to hyper-local produce
- 🍅 fresh produce from the kitchen garden is regularly used in kitchen classes where children and young people learn to prepare fresh, nutritious, seasonal meals to be shared by participating students, educators and community volunteers
- 🍅 in some school canteens kitchen garden fresh produce and recipes are utilised to prepare nutritious foods that children already know and enjoy, increasing canteen staff motivation for shifting towards healthier canteen menus
- 🍅 in many schools, kitchen garden produce (fresh, preserved, or prepared) is sold to the local community to support healthy school fundraising, simultaneously increasing food access and supporting Kitchen Garden Program delivery through reinvestment of revenue
- 🍅 at some schools/services, excess kitchen garden produce is given away to the community



- a large proportion of interest in the Kitchen Garden Program from schools in low socioeconomic areas is specifically to address issues of poor access to fresh produce, and the need to build capacity with students and families around food literacy and behaviour
- cultural foods are grown and harvested in many school/service gardens, and prepared and shared in kitchen classes, improving access to culturally appropriate foods, providing opportunities to learn about other cultures, and improving a sense of school belonging for culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families
- growing and cooking cultural foods also provides opportunities for families to have their skills and knowledge recognised and valued, and provides a way for them to be involved in their child's education where they may not be comfortable doing so in the traditional classroom
- the Kitchen Garden Program is credited with assisting migrant families to familiarise with local produce, and how to prepare it
- children and young people are inspired and equipped with the knowledge and experience to start growing food at home, often transferring skills gained at school to the home environment
- children and young people are inspired and equipped with the knowledge and experience to prepare simple, cost effective, nutritious food at home, potentially bridging cooking skills gaps for families
- simple recipes shared by schools/services to families support confidence and motivation to purchase, prepare and serve nutritious meals at home
- recipes used in the Kitchen Garden Program are based on seasonal produce, and therefore assist with cost effective purchasing by guiding families to purchase in season produce which generally represent better value
- families more likely to prepare food they know their children will eat reducing fear of food waste as a barrier to preparing nutritious meals at home
- children and young people understand where their food comes from and the environmental impacts of food choices; they learn to grow their food locally, seasonally and sustainably, nurturing biodiversity, and soil health, and protecting the local environment



- the Kitchen Garden Program embeds the passion, knowledge and curiosity to be part of local, sustainable and regenerative food production and consumption practices and systems

A once in a generation opportunity for change

We see this is an opportune time for the Social Development Committee to consider a holistic approach to shifting systems.

Many other submissions will no doubt address the benefits of school lunches, and describe the many other models operational around the world including Japan, Finland, Italy, and the UK. We are monitoring with interest the various school lunch pilots happening around Australia, including the Eat Well Every Day School Lunch scheme currently being trialled in South Australia.

We urge the Committee to consider how any introduction of a universal lunch program could build on the existing school food landscape to create a more robust system, allowing for flexible, place-based approaches to improving food security outcomes.

Kitchen Garden Programs, school canteens, food relief organisations, families, communities and local organisations all have potential to influence and support the local and broader food systems that wrap around children and young people.

With over 20 years' experience working at the intersection of health, education, sustainability and food systems, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation advocates for a school food transformation that ensures students are not only fed, but that they are given opportunities to develop the practical, life-long skills they need to feed themselves.

To support this aim, we are calling for the inclusion of comprehensive food education in the school curriculum.

We also suggest that all new school builds include the following infrastructure which can be utilised for school meals, food education programs, and learning across other subject areas:

- accessible gardens for growing food
- outdoor learning spaces
- accessible teaching kitchens
- communal dining spaces

Infrastructure funding for existing schools should be made available to assist with accommodating school meals programs and food education programs.



With a community of practice of over 1,000 schools and early childhood services around Australia, and with a “start small, dream big” approach, we have developed a flexible and adaptable model to setting up kitchen garden programs in schools and services of all sizes and diverse needs.

We stand ready, willing and able to assist with providing guidance, best practice and professional development to build capacity for educators and school leadership and staff for this transformation, and welcome any questions or opportunities to discuss further.

Reflections from Elizabeth Downs Primary School

I most certainly believe Kitchen/Garden provides a necessary sense of cultural understanding, particularly through the introduction/reinforcement of culturally influenced dishes that reference and open discussion for foods, practices, and techniques they may not have been introduced to before.

I regularly draw influence from as many different food cultures as I can, and we talk about what the name of the produce/dish is in their language.

The eating component of our Kitchen lessons enables the students to feel welcomed, and provides a sense of family that may be missing from their regular daily routine due to the interruptions of migration and settling.

This is the same in the garden space, where students like to identify plants and talk about how to say and pronounce it in their native tongue.

- Kim Meissner, Kitchen Garden Program, kitchen specialist educator



Endnotes

- i <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- ii <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>
- iii <https://www.fao.org/right-to-food/news-and-events/news/news-detail/World-Food-Summit-on-Food-Security-2009/es>
- iv <https://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/12/9/2894>
- v <https://www.iier.org.au/iier33/large.pdf>
- vi https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/sites/default/files/food%20education/sakgnp_evaluation_uow_finalreport_2012.pdf
- vii <https://mispgh.unimelb.edu.au/centres-institutes/centre-for-health-equity/research-group/jack-brockhoff-child-health-wellbeing-program/research/previous-projects/evaluation-of-the-stephanie-alexander-kitchen-garden-program>
- viii https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/sites/default/files/Files/UoM_SAKG_Eval_Report_Final%20AUG%202019.pdf