



# Preventative health, wellbeing and sustainability for all Australian children

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation's  
2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission

# Message from the CEO

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation was established in 2004 with the sole charitable vision of enabling healthy children and young people to live, and thrive, in sustainable communities across Australia.

Our globally-recognised Kitchen Garden Program is a positive, preventative health and education program supporting cross-curriculum learning and development outcomes including STEM, literacy, cultural studies, health, PE and the arts, while improving school engagement and social connection, with proven impact beyond the school or service gate for families and communities. This evidence-based approach empowers students to form positive food, health, wellbeing, educational and sustainability habits for life.

Nationwide, over 1000 primary and secondary schools as well as early childhood services and community settings are connected to the Kitchen Garden Program, with around 3 million food education experiences delivered per year.

In the past year, more than 1400 schools and services submitted grant applications to join the Kitchen Garden Program. **That's roughly 274,000 children who are standing by to receive critical preventative health education.**

Australia's children and young people are on track to live shorter lives than their parents, with 95% not meeting the recommended intake of vegetables, and one in four experiencing overweight or obesity. In addition, our youth mental health and wellbeing is in crisis, and schools are facing significant challenges around student engagement and learning.

Communities, educators and experts understand that nutrition and learning are interconnected in so many ways, including concentration and stamina, academic achievement, and even school engagement and belonging. Yet, studies show that school curriculums are falling short on delivering effective, consistent food education.

Our Foundation has impactful, evidence-based solutions. Our engaging, easy-to-implement Kitchen Garden Program increases children's willingness to try new foods, prepares them with significant knowledge and skills in cooking, gardening, sustainability, and importantly, teaches them how to turn fresh produce into a nourishing meal to feed themselves and those around them.

Our work has never been more important to the future of young Australians. An investment in food education is a vital preventative health measure that addresses inequities. Properly supported, we stand ready to contribute to strengthening the health and wellbeing of Australian children by delivering vital, hands-on and inclusive food education across the country.

DR CATHY WILKINSON

# Calling for multi-year investment

**We urge the Australian Government to fund the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation for \$2.5m per annum from 2025-2029, allowing the Kitchen Garden Foundation to continue – and expand – our essential work to improve the health, wellbeing, sustainability and educational outcomes for more children across Australia.**

The Kitchen Garden Program has received no funding from the Australian Government since 2015. An investment from the Australian Government means we can continue to serve communities in need and expand our work to meet the tremendous unmet demand. Funding of \$2.5m per annum over four years will allow the Foundation to:

- 1. Directly support up to 100 new schools and early childhood services per year to join the Kitchen Garden Program (400+ schools and services over 2025-2029) so we can continue to successfully reach priority populations and positively support community connection and resilience.**
  - For example, offering \$10,000 p/a to 100 schools and early childhood services in communities of need around Australia with a focus on:
    - low socio-educational advantage
    - rural/regional and remote communities
    - First Nations communities, disaster affected areas, or
    - those with other structural barriers to health
  
- 2. Continue to provide high quality support to our existing educators in 1000+ schools and services across Australia who deliver the Kitchen Garden Program.**
  - For example, maintaining and expanding our exceptional team of community engagement officers, and our Early Childhood Co-ordinator who provide this 'hands-on' support through 1:1 sessions, professional development workshops and daily telephone support.
  
- 3. Address the priority needs of Australian educators, helping them deliver our impactful preventative health program to children in need.**
  - For example, upgrading our online resource library and members forum to connect educators with each other and build on our 1200+ resources, training library, and support materials.
  - Update educational resources to remain current to the curriculum.
  - Develop new educational resources to meet learning needs on climate change, regenerative agriculture, food systems, and growing and cooking with First Nations foods.

# The cost of chronic disease

It is estimated that for every \$1 invested in preventative public health, \$14 is generated in return to the wider health and social economy.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

Overweight (including obesity) is now the leading risk factor contributing to disease burden in Australia.<sup>3</sup> Obesity affects one in four Australian children between the ages of 2 and 17, rising to one in two young people aged 18 to 24, with the cost of obesity in Australia in 2018 at \$11.8 billion.<sup>4</sup>

The World Obesity Atlas 2023 report, published by the World Obesity Federation predicts that childhood obesity in Australia will increase at 2.6% per year with a 2.5% impact on the national GDP.<sup>5</sup>

Obesity and overweight are also correlated to cancer risk, with 30–50% of all cancer cases being preventable by following a healthy diet and lifestyle, according to the World Cancer Research Fund.<sup>6</sup>

Overweight and obesity in children and adolescents are associated with poorer health and wellbeing, reduced school performance and increased risk of obesity in adulthood.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Masters, R, Anwar, E, Collins, B, et al. 2017, 'Return on investment of public health interventions: a systematic review', journal of epidemiology and community health, vol 71, pp 827–34, [jech.Bmj.Com/ content/71/8/827](http://jech.bmj.com/content/71/8/827)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/12/9/2894>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/australian-burden-of-disease-study-2024/contents/interactive-data-on-risk-factor-burden/leading-risk-factors>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/national-obesity-strategy-2022-2032>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.worldobesity.org/resources/resource-library/world-obesity-atlas-2023>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6738231/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/overweight-obesity/overweight-obesity-australian-children-adolescents/summary>

# The Kitchen Garden Program fully supports:

- The National Preventative Health Strategy
- The National Obesity Strategy
- The Good Practice Guide: Supporting healthy eating and drinking at school
- The recommendations of the 2022 Food Policy Index
- The Australian Curriculum learning areas, cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities
- Implementation of the National Quality Standard (NQS) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

## Compelling need

- Children and young people are on track to live shorter lives than their parents.<sup>8</sup>
- Almost 95% of children aged 2-18 years do not meet the daily recommended intake of vegetables.<sup>9</sup> Fruit consumption is also significantly below recommended levels. Ultra processed food consumption increasing.
- One in four children and young people have experience of being overweight or living with obesity.
- Schools are under increasing pressure to respond to complex issues including school disengagement and learning challenges, food insecurity, decreased physical activity, and increased mental health challenges.
- Cascading disasters (floods, fires, etc.) undermining community resilience and nature connection for children.
- Limited food access and food agency contributing to food insecurity.<sup>10,11</sup>
- Urgent need to take holistic approach to population health and planetary health.
- Preventable place-based inequities and structural disadvantage are being reinforced.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://hw.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/HWQld\\_Impact-of-Obesity-on-Life-Expectancy-in-Queensland\\_October-2022.pdf](https://hw.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/HWQld_Impact-of-Obesity-on-Life-Expectancy-in-Queensland_October-2022.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/health-conditions-and-risks/dietary-behaviour>

<sup>10</sup>

[https://parliament.wa.gov.au/publications/tabledpapers.nsf/displaypaper/4112328c3e40e68e40f5b7a3482589d70027ab44/\\$file/hungry+for+change+-+jsccyp+report+6.pdf](https://parliament.wa.gov.au/publications/tabledpapers.nsf/displaypaper/4112328c3e40e68e40f5b7a3482589d70027ab44/$file/hungry+for+change+-+jsccyp+report+6.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/food-insecurity-australia-what-it-who-experiences-it-and-how-can-child>

# About the Kitchen Garden Program

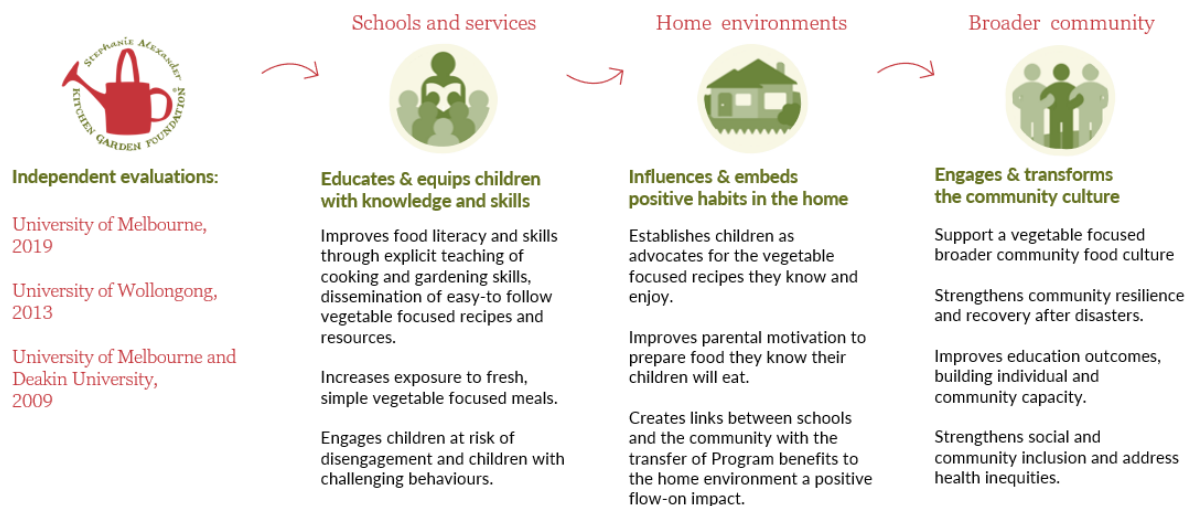
Established by legendary Australian cook Stephanie Alexander in 2004, for over 20 years the Kitchen Garden Program has been Australia's leading preventative health program for children and young people.

The Kitchen Garden Program provides primary school, high school and early childhood educators with the teaching framework, extensive resources, professional development, national community of practice and ongoing personalised support, to ensure they have the skills and confidence to deliver impactful health education with strong links to the curriculum.

## Supporting Australia's educators

- 97% of teachers agree that the Kitchen Garden Program is engaging and aids learning across other subject areas
- Effective engagement of reluctant classroom learners and children with challenging behaviour
- Proven to support holistic wellbeing and sense of school belonging
- 86% of teachers report improvements in students' teamwork skills and social behaviour

## Independent evaluations



# Healthy eating impact

Independent academic research has highlighted our Kitchen Garden Program demonstrates:

- Strong evidence of increased willingness to **try new foods**
- Statistically **significant increases** in child knowledge, confidence and skills in cooking and gardening
- Learning to cook at a younger age is associated in adults with **increased cooking and food skills** and confidence, healthier cooking practices and attitudes, and overall **better diet quality** when compared with those who learn to cook as adults.
- Respondents, when reporting the age at which they learned to cook, are more likely to recollect learning most of their skills before the age of 12.

An independent evaluation report was commissioned in 2024 for the horticultural sector as part of the Plus One Serve initiative. Our Kitchen Garden Program was the strongest performer of 10 food education programs rigorously assessed.

# Wellbeing impact

Our Kitchen Garden Program:

- is an aligned program of the **Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)**
- is a quality-assured program in the **NSW Department of Education's** Student Wellbeing external programs catalogue
- is an endorsed program on the **South Australian Department for Education** External Wellbeing Programs Directory
- is on the **Health and Wellbeing QLD** Pick of the Crop directory for schools
- is included on the **Beyond Blue Be You** mental health and wellbeing programs directory
- demonstrates impact in all six domains of the **Nest**, Australia's wellbeing framework for children and young people

# Sustainability impact

Our Kitchen Garden Program:

- is strongly aligned with **UN Sustainable Development Goals**
- has curriculum links to
  - Biodiversity
  - Circular economy
  - STEM
  - Soil health
  - Climate change
- Connects head, heart and hands through learning and practical sustainability skills for life.

## A Federal Government investment in the Kitchen Garden Program supports:

- educators to deliver on curriculum objectives
- government priorities in health, wellbeing, and sustainability
- our small team to service our growing national member base
- our Foundation to adapt to changing circumstances and pursue new opportunities to impact even more young people.

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**Dr Cathy Wilkinson – CEO, Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation**  
0417 660 227 | [cathy.wilkinson@kitchengardenfoundation.org.au](mailto:cathy.wilkinson@kitchengardenfoundation.org.au) | @Cathy Wilkinson