

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

Response to consultation

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Recipient

South Australian Social Development Committee

sdcc@parliament.sa.gov.au

Dietitians Australia contact

Bradley Stirling, Policy Officer

pao@dietitiansaustralia.org.au

Dietitians Australia acknowledges all traditional custodians of the lands, waters and seas that we work and live on across Australia. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and future and thank them for their continuing custodianship.

The leading voice in nutrition and dietetics

A PO Box 2087 Woden ACT 2606 | **T** 02 6189 1200

E info@dietitiansaustralia.org.au | **W** dietitiansaustralia.org.au

Dietitians Association of Australia | ABN 34 008 521 480

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About Dietitians Australia

Dietitians Australia is the national association of the dietetic profession with over 9000 members and branches in each state and territory. Dietitians Australia is the leading voice in nutrition and dietetics and advocates for the profession and the people and communities we serve.

The Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) program provides an assurance of safety and quality and is the foundation of self-regulation of the dietetic profession in Australia. Accredited Practising Dietitians have an important role in shaping nutrition-related policies that are evidence-informed, practical, and aimed at improving health outcomes across the population.

This submission has been prepared by staff and members of Dietitians Australia in accordance with the organisation's [Conflict of Interest Management Policy](#) processes approved by the Board of Dietitians Australia. Contributors include South Australian Branch members and other members of Dietitians Australia with diverse expertise across public health, clinical practice, academia, research, and community nutrition.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen South Australia's school breakfast program and add a healthy school lunch program, based on national evidence-based nutrition guidelines and co-designed with Accredited Practising Dietitians.
2. Embed nutrition into public health and education policies and strategies to mitigate the impacts of poor nutrition on learning, well-being and health.
3. Implement continuous evaluation of school meal programs to track their impact, help improve services and guide future policies across Australia that improve the health of children.

Discussion

Dietitians Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry. This submission will respond to the following terms of reference of the inquiry:

- a) the proportion of children and young people in South Australia who go to preschool and school without having breakfast and/or bring lunch;
- b) the academic and social impacts of preschool and school hunger;
- c) the effectiveness of the recently expanded public schools breakfast program in 2023 by the South Australian Government;
- d) ways to support families to decrease the number of children and young people going to preschool and school hungry;
- e) the operation of other national and international preschool and school meal programs and their effectiveness; and
- f) any other related matters.

a) the proportion of children and young people in South Australia who go to preschool and school without having breakfast and/or bring lunch

Current systems and policies do not sufficiently address the growing issue of child hunger and meal skipping in South Australian schools, which has implications for both immediate wellbeing and long-term health outcomes.

Skipping breakfast

Recent surveillance indicates that 35.4% of government school students report “sometimes or often” skipping breakfast, with an additional 9.5% reporting they “always” skip breakfast (Sincovich et al., 2022a). These findings are reinforced by broader population-level research, which found that among 8- to 16-year-olds, 57.6% sometimes skip breakfast and 10.1% always skip, while only 32.3% reported never skipping breakfast. This corresponds to an estimated daily breakfast-skipping prevalence of around 10%, and a weekly prevalence nearing 58% (Sincovich et al., 2025).

Skipping lunch

There is currently no systematic data collection in South Australia regarding lunch skipping. However, national figures from the *Foodbank Hunger Report 2024* indicate that approximately 15% of Australian children attend school without a packed or purchased lunch at least once a week (Foodbank Australia, 2024). These figures suggest that a significant proportion of children are attending school without access to adequate nutrition to support learning, concentration, physical activity, and overall development.

The unmet need

While existing programs may recognise the importance of school nutrition, they do not adequately reflect the extent of unmet need or respond with appropriate system-level solutions. Without targeted and sustainable action, we risk the long-term health, educational, and social outcomes of children.

To address this, we support coordinated efforts to embed universal, equitable access to nutritious food within school environments. This includes the expansion of school meal programs and embedding nutrition within broader public health and education strategies. To evaluate the success of these programs and policies, greater national or state-level data collection and monitoring of meal programs is needed. These actions must be grounded in evidence and equity, with a focus on long-term prevention of diet-related disease and disadvantage, educational or otherwise.

b) Academic and social impacts of school hunger

Dietitians Australia is deeply concerned about the academic and social consequences of school hunger. The evidence is clear: regularly skipping meals significantly undermines student learning, engagement, overall health, and social wellbeing.

Achievement, engagement and wellbeing

Recent research shows that students who consistently skip breakfast are 78% more likely to fall below the national minimum standard in numeracy and 63% more likely in reading—even after adjusting for socioeconomic status (Sincovich et al., 2025).

These academic setbacks are echoed in broader measures of wellbeing. Children who skip meals report lower cognitive engagement, weaker emotional connections with teachers, reduced feelings of school belonging, and poorer overall health and sleep quality (South Australian Department for Education, 2023).

Feedback from educators corroborates this data. In Victoria, teachers report that students experiencing hunger frequently present as tired, disengaged, and more likely to be disruptive or absent from class (Victorian Council of Social Service, 2024). Meanwhile, in New South Wales, early evaluation of a school lunch pilot program revealed noticeable improvements in student concentration and behaviour during afternoon sessions following the introduction of a universal meal (Manson et al., 2025).

The lasting impacts

A secondary analysis of the 2011–2012 National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey revealed that Australian children aged 5 to 12 consumed approximately 37% of their daily energy intake during school hours. Of that intake, 44% came from discretionary foods—such as processed snacks and sugary drinks (Manson et al., 2021). At the same time, core food groups like vegetables, dairy, and lean meats, were significantly under-consumed, with many children not reaching even a single serve of these key food groups during the school day (Manson et al., 2021).

Research shows that dietary habits formed in childhood significantly influence eating behaviours later in life. For example, children who consume greater amounts of core food groups like fruits and vegetables are more likely to maintain these habits into adulthood (Horovitz, O., 2024). These dietary patterns suggest systemic gaps in the nutritional quality of school-time eating and highlight the need for nutritious school food provision to enhance students' cognitive function, concentration, and academic performance as well as to establish lifelong healthy eating patterns (Manson et al., 2021).

Mental health and belonging

At Ashcroft Public School in Western Sydney, a daily breakfast program supports 60–80 students, helping to alleviate hunger while fostering a stronger sense of care and belonging within the school community. School personnel report clear positive impacts on children's classroom learning and behaviour when they are not hungry (Loueizi, as cited in ABC News, 2024). These insights reaffirm the critical role of school food programs in supporting both academic achievement and mental wellbeing.

Recent research underscores the significant impact of diet on children's mental health and educational outcomes. Professor Felice Jacka, Director of Deakin University's Food and Mood Centre, highlights that early dietary exposures profoundly influence lifelong eating habits and mental wellbeing (Jacka et al., 2011). A well-established link exists between diet quality and mental health, with healthier diets consistently associated with lower risks of depression in children and adolescents (Jacka et al., 2010).

The solution

These findings highlight the urgent need for system-wide approaches to address school hunger—not only as a health and equity issue, but as a fundamental pillar of educational success. School meal programs must be recognised as essential enablers of learning and social development, not discretionary add-ons. We strongly advocate for investment in universal, nutritious school food provision as a critical strategy to enhance student outcomes and reduce the broader costs of educational disadvantage.

c) Effectiveness of the South-Australian Public Schools Breakfast Program

Dietitians Australia acknowledges the efforts of the South Australian Government in expanding access to school breakfast programs, a key strategy for addressing food insecurity and supporting children's learning and wellbeing.

Since its 2023 expansion, the South Australian Public Schools Breakfast Program has significantly increased its reach. Foodbank South Australia now supports over 300 dedicated School Breakfast Programs and approximately 550 school-based food programs overall (Foodbank SA, n.d.). Between Terms 1 and 3 of the initial expansion year, the program delivered an additional 52,000 breakfasts, reaching an estimated 2,000 additional students each week (South Australian Department for Education, 2024).

The South Australian Government has committed AUD \$6.5 million over four years to sustain and further scale this initiative (South Australian Department for Education, 2023). Early anecdotal feedback from teachers suggests improvements in student punctuality and classroom attention among regular participants. However, to date, there is no independent or peer-reviewed evaluation directly linking the program to measurable improvements in educational or wellbeing outcomes (South Australian Department for Education, 2024).

Foodbank South Australia delivers School Breakfast Programs (SBPs) to over 300 schools across the state, directly addressing the reality that more than one in four South Australian children have experienced hunger in the past year (Foodbank SA, n.d.). Annual surveys and school feedback demonstrate that SBPs significantly enhance student wellbeing, build community cohesion, and reduce the impact of food insecurity on learning.

Strengthening student wellbeing and readiness to learn

Schools across both metropolitan and regional South Australia consistently report that SBPs ensure students start the day with a nutritious meal. This supports:

- Improved classroom engagement, focus, and academic outcomes
- Better attendance and punctuality
- Enhanced social skills and peer relationships
- Improved emotional wellbeing, particularly among vulnerable students

In one regional school, approximately 80% of students travel nearly an hour by bus. Previously, many arrived hungry and ate their lunch immediately upon arrival, often going without food later in the day. Since implementing the SBP, these students now eat breakfast when they arrive, leading to noticeable improvements in behaviour, engagement, and happiness (Foodbank SA, n.d.).

Building community and reducing stigma

In a metropolitan school, the SBP provides a relaxed, inclusive space that encourages not only student participation but also family engagement. On Fridays, parents and carers are invited to join breakfast with their children. This fosters stronger school-community relationships and allows staff to identify and respond to family needs in a more personal and supportive way. One staff member noted, *“Hospitality is always the way to communication and building relationship. This is essential to community growth”* (Foodbank SA, n.d.).

Families report increased connection with the school and students express a sense of safety, stability, and being cared for—knowing they can rely on breakfast each day (Foodbank SA, n.d.).

Responding to cost-of-living pressures

Schools have reported a 50% increase in the number of families needing food relief, driven by rising living costs, power outages, and insecure employment. The SBP has become a critical buffer for families under pressure. Some schools prepare take-home hampers with donated bread, fruit, and vegetables, allowing students to contribute food to their households. Staff observed that this has boosted student confidence and helped reduce stigma associated with food insecurity (Foodbank SA, n.d.).

Sustainability and local partnerships

Schools tailor their SBP delivery to meet local needs, including partnerships with local farms and businesses. For example, one regional school receives donated eggs and honey from nearby families, enhancing meal variety and reinforcing local food systems. Staffing approaches vary, with some schools employing School Services Officers and others relying on volunteers. Involving senior students in breakfast preparation has also supported leadership and engagement (Foodbank SA, n.d.).

The program's flexibility and local ownership have been key to its success. Schools frequently describe the program as *"life changing"* and *"essential"* to students' social, emotional, and academic development (Foodbank SA, n.d.).

In addition to government-led programs, non-profit organisations like KickStart for Kids play a crucial role in providing breakfast for South Australian students. As of May 2024, KickStart for Kids provides between 55,000 and 60,000 breakfasts weekly across the state, with demand rising by approximately one-third over the past year. This increase reflects growing levels of food insecurity, even in communities not previously identified as high need. The program has also expanded to include lunch services, demonstrating its responsiveness to evolving community needs. School staff report that such initiatives help reduce student hunger, improve punctuality, and support classroom engagement (ABC News, 2024).

Dietitians Australia commends the South Australian Government, Foodbank South Australia and KickStart for Kids for their commitment to reducing hunger and supporting student wellbeing through school-based food programs. Early evidence and stakeholder feedback indicate that these programs are having a meaningful impact—supporting concentration, attendance, emotional regulation, and social connection.

To fully realise the potential and ensure the long-term effectiveness of school food programs, Dietitians Australia recommends ongoing monitoring, independent evaluation of impacts and outcomes, and sustained support from the South Australian Government for existing meal initiatives. Embedding flexibility, cultural responsiveness, and sustainable funding into program delivery will be essential to meeting the diverse needs of South Australian children, families, and communities.

d) Ways to support families and reduce school hunger

To effectively reduce school hunger and improve child nutrition, a multi-pronged approach is required—one that addresses both food access within schools and the broader social determinants of food insecurity. Dietitians Australia supports the following evidence-informed strategies to ensure no child goes hungry at school:

Normalise participation through universal and inclusive delivery models: Programs that offer "grab-and-go" breakfasts or whole-class meals help reduce stigma by ensuring all students can participate without being singled out. Normalising access encourages uptake and supports student dignity, as well as promoting school connectedness and relationship building (South Australian Department for Education, 2023) (Rowe, F., 2011).

Implement universal or opt-out school meal programs: Evidence from Tasmanian and New South Wales pilot programs shows that participation rates exceed 90% and are associated with measurable improvements in children's dietary quality (Jose et al., 2024; Manson et al., 2025). Universal provision ensures consistent access, removes administrative burdens on families, and supports equity.

Address root causes of food insecurity through financial and in-kind support: Cost-of-living pressures remain a major driver of household food insecurity. Measures such as targeted cash transfers, increased concessions, and on-site food pantries can ease financial strain and support families to meet basic food needs (Foodbank Australia, 2024; Victorian Council of Social Service, 2024).

Ensure cultural inclusivity and nutritional adequacy through co-designed, dietitian-led menus: Culturally responsive meal design—developed in collaboration with local communities and led by Accredited Practising Dietitians—ensures meals are acceptable, nutritious, and respectful of cultural and religious dietary needs (Galloway et al., 2025; Manson et al., 2022). This is critical to achieving both uptake and impact.

Strengthen regional and remote food supply systems: In rural and remote areas, school food programs face significant supply and infrastructure challenges. Investment in regional kitchens, bulk-buy cooperatives, and local procurement initiatives can improve program sustainability and reduce costs over time (Manson et al., 2022).

Dietitians Australia urges policymakers to consider these solutions as part of a comprehensive and equitable school food strategy. Such measures not only reduce school hunger, but contribute to broader health, education, and social outcomes for Australian children and families.

e) Operation and effectiveness of other national and international school-meal programs

Dietitians Australia strongly supports the inclusion of national and international best practice examples in informing policy decisions about school meal provision. Evidence from Australian pilot programs and international models demonstrates that universal school meal programs can deliver measurable benefits across health, education, equity, and environmental sustainability domains.

Australian Examples

The Victorian School Breakfast Clubs Program

Foodbank Victoria, in partnership with the Department of Education and Training Victoria, has implemented the School Breakfast Clubs Program (SBCP) across 500 government schools to address school hunger and improve educational and health outcomes for children (MacDonald, 2019). Between 2016 and 2018, the program delivered over 1.8 million kilograms of healthy, nutritious food to schools across the state (MacDonald, 2019).

Reach and frequency

- Over 50,000 breakfasts are served each school week, supporting approximately 30% of all Victorian government primary school students.
- On average, 33 students attend breakfast clubs each operating day, representing 21% of total school enrolments.
- More than 40% of schools run breakfast clubs five days per week, with increasing uptake observed between 2016 and 2018.
- Non-metropolitan schools tend to serve a higher proportion of their students, with 40% reaching over a quarter of their enrolment, compared to 12% in metropolitan areas.
- Schools with the highest disadvantage (SFOE index) show the strongest engagement, with 51% running clubs five days per week.

Educational and social impact

Teachers report significant improvements in students' cognitive and social functioning:

- 95% observed improved concentration.
- 90% noted increased engagement and focus.
- 88% reported better social skills.
- 85% observed improved academic outcomes.
- 85% linked the program with improved attendance and punctuality.

Schools consistently connect breakfast club attendance with better readiness to learn and more positive attitudes toward school.

Health and nutrition awareness

Breakfast clubs also serve as platforms for nutrition education:

- 89% of schools use them to teach the importance of eating breakfast.
- 89% of teachers noted greater student awareness of healthy eating habits.
- 92% reported a broader positive influence on the school's health-promoting environment.

These programs have become embedded within broader welfare and wellbeing strategies, enabling regular, informal engagement with students who may require additional support.

Tasmanian School Lunch Project

The Tasmanian School Lunch Project delivers universal hot lunches across approximately 30 schools using a central kitchen model. The program provided consistent access to nutritious meals and created opportunities for students to engage with positive food experiences. Teachers and parents reported that students became more willing to try new foods, with two-thirds of parents noting a shift toward more adventurous and positive eating behaviours (Jose et al., 2024; Galloway et al., 2025).

Additional outcomes included:

- Improved mealtime behaviours and calmer classroom environments;
- Strengthened social connections during shared lunches;
- Minimal food waste, with uneaten meals redistributed to local food programs and plate waste composted or integrated into school gardens;
- Curriculum integration, including student leadership and hospitality training, particularly in district and secondary schools.

Berrima School Lunch Program

The Berrima pilot demonstrated strong early outcomes across multiple domains (Manson et al., 2025), with qualitative findings suggesting potential for long-term gains with continued investment.

Key findings included:

1. Health and development

- a. 93% of students tried new foods, with 69% of parents reporting changes in eating habits.

- b. Students demonstrated improved food autonomy, cutlery use, and hunger recognition.
- c. Parents noted a reduction in after-school hunger for some children.

2. Social wellbeing

- a. Teachers reported calmer classrooms and improved peer support during meals.
- b. Community engagement flourished, with volunteers—including grandparents—assisting with meal preparation.

3. Education

- a. Attendance remained stable, with some anecdotal improvements in afternoon focus.
- b. Academic benefits are anticipated over a longer timeframe.

4. Economic impact

- a. The program created paid employment for a chef and apprentice.
- b. Volunteers gained skills and social connections.
- c. Locally sourced produce supported regional economies and reduced costs.
- d. Families experienced time and financial relief, particularly single-parent households.

5. Equity

- a. All students received the same meals, with flexible pricing to support accessibility.
- b. While some families required adjustments, the program was largely well received.

6. Environmental sustainability

- a. Bulk supply and composting reduced packaging and food waste.
- b. Schools improved recycling and waste management, often engaging with local sustainability programs.

International Models

Global programs such as Finland's universal school meals, Japan's curriculum-integrated lunches, the UK's *Universal Infant Free School Meals*, and the US *Community Eligibility Provision* illustrate the value of opt-out, universally accessible models. These initiatives link strong nutrition standards, trained food staff, and food education to improved diet quality, school attendance, student wellbeing, and educational equity (Manson et al., 2022).

Sweden provides a world-leading example of a universal school meal system, with all students in compulsory school entitled to a free, nutritious lunch every day. By law, these meals must be nutritious, aligning with Sweden's national dietary guidelines and public health goals. The School Food Sweden (SkolmatSverige) tool supports the continuous improvement of school meal quality across the country by offering a self-assessment and benchmarking platform for schools. Developed by researchers at Karolinska Institutet, the tool evaluates six domains: nutritional quality, food safety, environmental sustainability, pedagogical potential, organisation and service, and student satisfaction. Since its launch in 2011, over half of Swedish municipalities have participated, using the tool to drive improvements and support evidence-based decision-making at both the school and policy level. Evaluations show that the tool has contributed to more nutritious and pedagogically integrated school meals, improved food culture in schools, and stronger alignment with Sweden's dietary and sustainability targets (SkolmatSverige, 2024). According to the Swedish Food Agency

(2023), school meals contribute to students' health, social well-being, and learning capacity, and promote health equity across socioeconomic groups.

These systems also respond directly to barriers cited by South Australian students—such as time pressures, body image concerns, and unappealing food options—that contribute to breakfast skipping (South Australian Department for Education, 2023).

f) Other related matters

In addition to operational considerations, several cross-cutting factors are essential to the success, equity, and sustainability of school meal programs. Dietitians Australia highlights the following key issues for consideration:

Stigma reduction through universal access

Universal, opt-out meal provision is a powerful mechanism to reduce stigma. By eliminating the distinction between fee-paying and non-paying students, these models enhance dignity and significantly improve participation rates—particularly among adolescents, who may otherwise decline support due to social pressures (Manson et al., 2022).

Culturally responsive menu design

Co-designed menus that incorporate the preferences and traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and other culturally diverse communities foster greater cultural safety and student engagement. Culturally inclusive food services are not only more acceptable but are also critical to ensuring equity and participation (Galloway et al., 2025).

Sustainability through ongoing co-design and secure funding

The long-term viability of school food programs depends on secure, multiyear funding that covers food, staffing, infrastructure, and evaluation. Equally important is continuous community engagement, with iterative co-design processes involving students, parents, educators, and local food suppliers (Jose et al., 2024).

Behavioural clustering and the need for integrated health promotion

Breakfast skipping rarely occurs in isolation. It is often part of a broader pattern that includes low physical activity, inadequate sleep, and dieting behaviours. Addressing school hunger should therefore be embedded within whole-child, school-based health promotion strategies (South Australian Department for Education, 2023).

Embedding nutritional standards

School meals should consistently meet evidence-based dietary guidelines. For example, low glycaemic index and fibre-rich breakfast options are shown to support sustained attention and satiety during morning classes (Sincovich et al., 2022b). These considerations should be clearly reflected in menu planning and procurement policies (South Australian Department for Education, 2023).

Workforce capacity: The role of dietitians

Accredited Practising Dietitians are essential to the success of school meal programs. Their expertise in menu development, nutritional analysis, allergy and dietary management, and program evaluation ensures both safety and effectiveness. We recommend the establishment of funded dietitian roles within all large-scale school food initiatives to support implementation and continuous quality improvement (Manson et al., 2022).

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