

**Prepared by the Western Australian School Canteen Association Inc.
(WASCA)**

**Submission to the 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.**

Background

WASCA, formed in 1994, is a not for profit, non-government health promotion charity. Our key focus areas include:

- Promote the provision of nutritious foods in schools and community
- Influence policy and advocate for healthy food environments
- Promote best practice in all aspects of the work of the Association as well as the food service operators we support.

Terms of reference

1. The impact of poor nutrition on children and young people and the extent of the problem in Western Australia.

Adequate nutrition is essential for children and young people for normal growth and development, preventing overweight and obesity and reducing the risk of chronic disease such as heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and certain cancers. Children who have a BMI classified as overweight or obese during their childhood years are more likely to be overweight or obese adults.

According to the [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) children in Australia are consuming above the recommended number of serves of discretionary food and drinks; discretionary foods are classified as foods high in energy and in added sugar, salt and saturated fats. High consumption of discretionary foods displace core foods such as vegetables, wholegrains and lean meat, with only 9% of Australian children eating the recommended number of vegetables.

In addition to health impacts, going without enough food, or enough nutritious food can have detrimental impacts on classroom engagement and academic performance.

For this reason, many schools have formal or informal policies and practices to ensure that children do not go hungry whilst at school. Often this includes food being supplied through school breakfast programs and/or by the school canteen.

2. Challenges for children and young people in accessing enough nutritious food.

Access to enough nutritious food is influenced by range of factors such as household income, socioeconomic status, the food environment as well as food literacy skills of parents and caregivers.

The 2019 WA [Food Relief Framework Report](#) highlights the extent of food insecurity in WA alongside WA food relief system. The impact of household income on food insecurity is a significant factor with the report noting that in the last 12 months, 27% of families with children had to reduce the amount of food provided at meal times because there was not enough money.

Children in remote and regional communities are more likely to experience food insecurities in comparison to children living in metropolitan areas. Given factors which influence food insecurity such as, commodities and general cost of living have increased it is not far stretched to forecast that food insecurity in WA is set to increase.

Access

According to the [Australian Health Survey: Nutrition supplement report](#) (2001/12) around 4.8% of people were living in a household in WA that, in the previous 12 months, had run out of food and had not been able to afford to buy more and 2.1% went without food when they couldn't afford to buy any more. This is higher than the national average of 4% and 1.5% respectively.

Children and young people are mostly reliant on others (parents & caregivers) to make choices and provide them with food during their schooling years and children are well aware of food stress in families. According to Godrich, Lo, Davies, Darby & Devine (2017) 20% of children living in regional WA were classified as food insecure; 1 in 5 children were concerned that food would run out before their family could afford to buy more; and 14.6% were concerned that their meals contained cheap (i.e low quality) foods because their family was running out of money.

The size of WA represents a unique challenge for children and young people in accessing enough nutritious food, especially in regional and remote locations. Freight costs, irregular deliveries, high prices and storage issues affect food quality and availability.

Food environment

The built environment has a contributing factor to overweight and obesity and junk food industries are allowed to market their products to children anywhere they want. Research from Trapp and colleagues (2021-2022) shows that children's exposure to advertising results in increased awareness of products, brand loyalty, development of cultural norms that these foods are ok, and an increase in overall energy consumption.

Further, we know that children living in low socio-economic areas of WA are exposed to higher densities of unhealthy food outlets (i.e., fast food and alcohol outlets) and outdoor advertisements for unhealthy foods and beverages than children from advantaged areas. In many cases, junk food is cheaper and more convenient than healthy options, making it difficult to choose nutritious food. The government cannot afford to continue to leave regulation of unhealthy food marketing in the hands of industry. This should instead be based on sound evidence with health of children at its core.

Adding to this we are aware that children's exposure to junk food advertising extends beyond the school environment infiltrating into the sporting community. There is no reciprocal relationship that exist between physical activity and junk food. In 2021 Cancer Council WA released a report ["Unhealthy Promotion in Elite Sport: when burgers aren't better"](#). This report detailed that over a 2-month period 28% of social media posts from seven elite Western Australia sporting teams contained unhealthy marketing including alcohol, junk food or gambling promotions. Advertising to children on social media is unregulated thus, placing children at greater exposure of junk food advertising. WASCA's public health initiative Fuel to Go & Play® works closely with Healthway's partnered sporting associations and local sporting clubs to create healthy food environments. One key strategy is to reduce children's exposure to junk food advertising in the sporting community as children should be able to enjoy and participate in sporting activities free from junk food advertising.

In 2020, WASCA presented a submission on the Draft Operational Policy 2.4 - Planning for School Sites to the WA Planning Commissioner recommending that the planning policy be strengthened to prohibit fast food outlets being located next to school sites. This is consistent with the Sustainable Health Review Final Report that recommended as a priority action that changes to planning laws were required to limit unhealthy food outlets and to support access to healthy food options, including near schools. Currently, the Planning and Development (Local Planning Scheme) Regulations 2015 (WA) prescribe matters which local governments may consider when

assessing development applications. Public health concerns cannot be considered even if a proposed application for a fast-food outlet is directly opposite or adjacent to an existing school.

See:

- Godrich S, Lo J, Davies C, Darby J Devine A. 2017. Prevalence and socio-demographic predictors for food insecurity among regional and remote Western Australian children. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health.
- Trapp G, Hooper P, Thornton L, Kennington K, Sartori A, Billingham W, Bivoltsis A. 2022. Does fast food outlet density differ by area-level disadvantage in Perth, Western Australia. Health Promotion Journal of Australia.
- Trapp G, Hooper P, Thornton L, Kennington K, Sartori A, Hurworth M, Billingham W. 2021. Association between food outlet availability near secondary schools and junk food purchasing among Australian adolescents. Nutrition, 91-92.
- Trapp G, Hooper P, Thornton L, Kennington K, Sartori A, Wickens N, Mandzufas J, Billingham W. 2021. Children's exposure to outdoor food advertising near primary and secondary schools in Australia. Health Promotion Journal of Australia.
- Trapp G, Hooper P, Thornton L, Kennington K, Sartori A, Wickens N, Billingham W. 2021. Children's exposure to unhealthy food and beverage advertising during the school commute in Australia. Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, 75:1232-1235
- [Obesity Policy Coalition](#) Overbranded, Underprotected report (2018).

Food literacy

Factors influencing food utilisation include nutrition knowledge and skills, children's food preferences, storage facilities, preparation and cooking facilities and skills and time to purchase and prepare food. When money to purchase food is limited parents often choose the food they know their child will eat to avoid wastage. Meaning money is the driving factor in food selection, not nutrition.

3. The extent to which food relief:

- a) Is currently accessed by children and young people, including at school and in early childhood education and care settings**
- b) Is effective.**

In Western Australia, many schools participate in school breakfast programs, most often conducted in partnership with the Foodbank School Breakfast Program (SBP) and to a lesser extent coordinated at a school level by the canteen or chaplain. The SBP specifically targets schools that have a low Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) and/or a significant subset of students at risk of disadvantage. There have been a number of reports and journals published about the success and barriers for implementation of school breakfast programmes. Future implementation of school breakfast programs in WA need to address strategies designed to reduce stigma and enable ease of access for all children.

See

- Edith Cowan University and Telethon Kids Institute. 2018. [Evaluation of the Foodbank WA School Breakfast and Nutrition Education Program](#)
- Foodbank. 2011. [School breakfast program case studies](#)

Anecdotal evidence provided by canteen supervisors note that children who are food insecure are still going extensive periods without food during the school day. Canteens are often relied upon to provide these children with meals throughout the day including recess and lunch. The cost may be covered by the canteen (and/or canteen staff personally), the school or parents.

While anecdotal evidence highlights the issue of food insecurity throughout the school day, research is required to identify the severity and extent of children who rely on the canteen/school for the provision of additional meals throughout the day. Further, adequate nutrition is considered important for learning, but there is little robust research on the association between diet and learning in school-aged children.

Canteen staff have some confronting stories to tell, so it would be valuable to highlight their experiences and investigate/consider how we could harness their knowledge to help address food insecurity in children.

4. The extent to which food literacy programs aimed at children and young people and/or their parents/carers:

- a. Are currently accessed**
- b. Are effective.**

The Department of Education's Healthy Food and Drink in Public Schools (HFD) policy aims to increase the promotion and provision of nutritious foods and help students and parents to make informed choices. The policy is based on a traffic light system of categorising food and drinks. For example, canteen menus must contain at least 60% green food and drinks (e.g. fruit, vegetables, hot meals, soup, sushi, salads, sandwiches, water and reduced fat milk) and no more 40% amber items (e.g. reduced fat pastries, juice and small fruit muffins). Red items are not permitted (e.g. sugary drinks, deep fried food, confectionery). This means that at least within the school environment (canteen and classroom) there is a greater focus on nutritious foods. Part of policy implementation in the past has included students and parent workshops. Current activities include kindy orientation sessions whereby details about the HFD policy, packing a healthy lunch box and food and nutrition needs of young children are presented during the school coordinated kindy orientation. From 2018-2022 WASCA reached 13,774 families through kindy sessions.

WASCA was involved in the development of the 'Packed with Goodness' sessions conducted by Cancer Council WA. We consider this a useful and important initiative that should continue to be used to help address food literacy in parents to the benefit school children.

WASCA has a strong partnership with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation. Many schools in WA have established gardens and often link to the canteen. Significant evaluation of the program has been conducted and indicate positive impact in terms of increasing food literacy and reduced food insecurity in the school setting.

5. Government-funded school lunch programs.

Currently in WA a government-funded school lunch program does not exist. There is an extensive school lunch pilot project being conducted in Tasmania by School Food Matters (previously Tasmanian School Canteen Association). Following on from the success of the pilot with three schools in 2020, they are currently working with 15 schools and this will be extended to an additional 15 schools later in 2022/early 2023. They received significant government funding (\$1.4million) for two years and philanthropic funds that contribute to paying project coordinator, Julie Dunbabin. Whilst I know Julie will be wealth of information, from our perspective some of the key learnings of the project so far are:

- a) The need to have a model that is flexible and adaptable. For example, in some schools the canteen is providing the lunches and have the facilities to do so, in others the canteen involvement in minimal. Some schools are providing lunches to whole school multiple times a week, in others they are only supplying one year group
- b) A partnership approach including schools, food industry and primary producers, other non-government organisations and government is essential

- c) Sufficient funding that includes a program coordinator to support schools, cover the cost of food, equipment upgrades in some schools, evaluation and training/capacity building is essential.

We understand the Department of Education in the Australian Capital Territory is working towards a school lunch pilot project for implementation later in 2022 or early 2023.

WASCA is in the process of seeking support for a research and pilot project in WA to investigate the feasibility of implementing a school lunch program in partnership with the Telethon Kids Institute. The project will have a strong focus on scoping, capacity building and evaluation. Measuring the impact will consider food security, eating culture, education outcomes (including concentration and behaviour), school attendance, using seasonal and local produce and limiting food waste.

6. Any other existing or potential initiatives.

A cross government, multi sector approach is required to address food insecurity. We need collective action including health, education, and agriculture sectors as well as local government to:

- address growing levels of overweight and obesity in children and young people, which can be indicators of food insecurity
- address Australia's alarmingly low levels of fruit and vegetable consumption
- identify and provide practical assistance to people experiencing food insecurity and linking them with further supports
- introduce greater regulatory powers at the government and local government level to remove and/or prohibit unhealthy advertising of energy-dense, low-nutrient food and drinks
- invest in public health in WA, with initiatives and services implemented by WA based organisations.

A WA specific and/or national nutrition survey that includes questions about food intake, source of food (e.g. home, school canteen, other food outlets etc.) and why food is/is not available and consumed would be very useful. Previous surveys include:

- Child and adolescent physical activity and nutrition survey (CAPANS); CAPANS was conducted jointly by the Physical Activity Taskforce (PATF), Healthway and the Department of Health in 2003 with Notre Dame University and again in 2008 with Edith Cowan University
- [Australian Health Survey: Nutrition First Results - Foods and Nutrients \(2011-12\)](#)
- [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey \(NATSINPAS\) and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Measures Survey \(NATSIHMS\) \(2012-13\).](#)

7. Western Australia's obligations and responsibilities to monitor and address food insecurity as an aspect of child wellbeing.

We are aware of the Telethon Kids Institute Food Atlas that will be able to geospatially map, measure and monitor food access (and food insecurity) over time throughout WA, we consider this a useful and important tool and understand this will require future funding support to keep data current.

Yij, Palermo and Kleve (2019) conducted a systematic review of food insecurity population-based interventions and determined that whilst a vast number of published and grey literature were identified (n=3565) based on 98 interventions there was a lack of coherent national responses that address the range of food insecurity determinant. Therefore, we recommend a set of

determinants are developed and then all programs/initiates that address food insecurity must include measures and reporting mechanisms about all or some of the same determinants.

See

- Yii V, Palermo C, Kleve S. 2019. Population-based interventions addressing food insecurity in Australia: A systematic scoping review. *Nutrition and Dietetics*.