

## **Inquiry into the most effective ways for Western Australia to address food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty.**

Submission by Geoffrey Holt, BA Hons Econ, M.Phil. Cert Ed, PGCE

[REDACTED]

Current Job Title: Education for Sustainable Development Coordinator & Humanities Teacher, Busselton Senior High School. & UN SDSN Global Schools Advocate

Executive member of the State School Teachers Union of Western Australia

I make this submission in an individual capacity and not as a representative of Busselton SHS or the SSTUWA. I have spent my entire career of 35 years in public education having worked in the field of Aboriginal Education for ten years at Swan View SHS and received a federal award for Outstanding Achievement by a Teacher (NIQTSL) 2004, for my work improving outcomes for Aboriginal Students.

I have won several other state and federal teaching awards most recently United Nations World Teachers Day Award 2020 for Excellence in Global Citizenship Education. Suffice it to say that I have a strong record of championing social justice and equity through education and see quality inclusive public education as key to addressing many of the problems we face. This is in keeping with UN SDG #4.

My interest in food insecurity arises out my years working in both Aboriginal education and more recently in student services at Busselton SHS. Throughout this time, I have observed the increasing prevalence of hunger and malnutrition among students as well as the manifestation that this has on overall physical health, mental health, and cognitive function.

We are becoming increasingly aware that mental health is at a crisis point in our schools with many excellent initiatives being run across the state in our schools to address it. These are too numerous to mention but tend to focus on inclusivity, harmony, RUOK, and a host of other aspects to engender belonging and support for all. I have played a full part in such events and will continue to

do so; however, I do feel that we are overlooking the importance of diet and exercise on mental and physical health.

There is a plethora of research which establishes a positive correlation between diet, the microbiome and good physical and mental health.<sup>1</sup> Every day at school I observe malnourished students and those with poor quality diets struggling with mental health issues. Many students visit the local supermarket over the road from school, buy a Dare (choc milk) or 500ml Monster drink and that constitutes breakfast. Finances permitting, recess might involve a salty or sugary snack from the canteen or more processed fast food kept in the backpack. Some even get MacDonald's passed through the fence! For those without money, breakfast and recess does not take place at all. There are many more of these students than we would care to imagine.

The number of students who arrive at school without a nutritious start to the day is truly alarming. On many occasions I have surveyed students about their diets only to find that 50% of them have nothing before coming to school. Further investigation reveals a shocking lack of fresh fruit and vegetables in their diet and a reliance on fast processed foods. I can attest to the diets of our students as I have been running a waste recovery program at BSHS for several years. We empty the bins twice a week and recover, recycle and reuse what we can whilst collecting containers for the CDS program.

This process is highly instructive, in that it reveals the staggering quantity of sugary drinks consumed by young people, by far the most popular items we recover are choc milks, moccas, chip packets, and lolly wrappers. The amount of organic scraps is less than 5% of what we recover! There is an absolute paucity of fresh vegetable matter, and this only confirms the lack of nutrition in the diets of our young people.

I am sure that you will have received submissions from scientists and nutrition experts, so I will not presume to expatiate other than to draw attention to the gut brain axis which is negatively impacted by chronic inflammation caused by poor diet and a chronic lack of micronutrients. Over time this leads to a condition known as metaflammation.<sup>2</sup> This condition leads to chronic diseases in later life including metabolic syndrome, hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacker, 2021, Brain Changer

<sup>2</sup> Christ & Latz, 2019, Nature Reviews Immunology.

In my view, students in schools are already developing and manifesting dysbiosis due to poor gut microbiomes arising our poor diets and malnutrition.

The other side of the health and wellbeing coin relates to exercise. The dietary factors referred to above are compounded by a lack of exercise among young people. Once more, my experience has shown that young people are much more sedentary at school and home, with many spending hours looking at screens. Combine this with cigarette, alcohol and drug consumption in later adolescence and we have the perfect storm of poor physical and mental health that we see unfolding before us.

Over many years at various schools, I have run programs aimed at providing improved diet and physical activity for students. These have included breakfast clubs, free seasonal fruit provision and, most significantly, a variety of strength and conditioning programs targeting at risk groups students such as Aboriginal Students. These programs involve a strength circuit followed by the provision of fruit and high protein snack and have proven to be very popular.

Students in these programs have reported improved engagement, attendance, behaviour and cognitive function. The problem has always been a lack of time and resources to run such programs. I currently spend two hours of my DoTT time running these programs but have never had time and resources to roll them out fully despite showcasing them to senior management at the school level. One outcome which has shone through has been the increased level of engagement and improved mental health reported by participants.

At the start of the Covid pandemic I proposed an SSTUWA branch motion calling upon the government to provide free school meals for students in hardship. This was supported by the entire BSHS branch and sent up the chain, but nothing came of it. In the UK Marcus Rashford, the Manchester United and England soccer player received a great deal of media attention for forcing Boris Johnson to do a backflip and provide free school meals to those at risk during lockdowns and school holidays. I was born and brought up in Manchester and had free school meals as a kid as well as free school milk. Margaret Thatcher put a stop to this, leading to huge increases in malnutrition and food insecurity which persists to this day.

It seems like an absolute no brainer to provide schools with the resources to provide nutritious food to students. Schools are at the heart of our communities, and we have the capacity to deliver on this if we are resourced appropriately. There will be a need to revisit the health guidelines to ensure that school canteens are providing adequate fruit and vegetables and avoiding the

processed, salty sugary meals which still prevail in many settings. Some logistical issues will need to be addressed also.

When I worked as a volunteer teacher in Tanzania 30 odd years ago at a rural boarding school, we gave each child a bowl of porridge for breakfast, some rice and stew for lunch and meal after school. That was in a developing country with a GDP per capita only 6% of that we enjoy. Yet in our affluent society we offer nothing for free at school to our most precious asset, our youth!

I urge the committee to consider introducing free school meals for those in need, to look seriously at the issues of malnutrition, the gut brain axis and the need for more physical exercise when considering this problem. I also urge you to look at financing low SEI schools especially according to need including the provision of a balanced dietary intake complimented by more opportunities for vigorous physical exercise to improve both physical and mental wellbeing.

Regards

Geoff Holt

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