



MORE GREEN PLEASE! A SNAPSHOT OF AUSTRALIAN SCHOOL CANTEENS

1.1 Introduction

The Parents' Jury is an online network of thousands of parents, grandparents and guardians, who are interested in improving the food and physical activity environments of Australian children.

In the fight against childhood obesity, the school setting is key in helping children learn to make healthy food choices. A school's role in delivering healthy eating messages can educate and influence the wider community.

1.2 The role of school canteens

While the face of the traditional 'tuckshop' is changing, the canteen as a primary delivery service of food to students is an important part of the healthy eating message.

However, parents believe this is not always the case. Below is a series of comments from members of The Parents' Jury which reflects some of their concerns:

*If I were in a situation where I had to rely on canteen lunches for my son,
I'd be very concerned.*

*I once saw chocolate tiny teddies listed as a green light food, so
I have no faith in that system.*

Little to no vegetables or salad on the menu choices.

1.3 A snapshot of schools

School canteens are important to many parents. To reflect their concerns, The Parents' Jury sought to investigate whether public school canteen menus adhere to state/territory school nutrition guidelines, in addition to examining the general health levels of their menus.

Under the guidance of The Parents' Jury, Monash University and VicHealth, research was undertaken to develop a snapshot of school canteen menus in Australia.

A sample of 263 menus from across Australia was assessed, representing approximately 4% of all government schools.

Menus were found online and were from 2011 to 2012. This ensured they were current and subject to state/territory policy and guidelines.

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Rural and metropolitan, primary and secondary schools were considered, in order to reflect Australian population levels and location.

Each menu was analysed in accordance with the relevant state/territory guidelines, which generally follows a traffic light food spectrum. The research was unable to ascertain exact portion size, or whether food items were home-made or manufactured. However, as another form of assessment, the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating (which is also the basis for state and territory based guidelines) was also utilised.

Compliance was determined based on the amount of green items on a menu. It also required canteen menus to have no red items on the menu (on more than two occasions per school term, as defined in individual policy/guidelines). In some states, there are banned food or drink items, such as soft drink, and this was also considered.

1.4 Results

- Across Australia, almost 30% of all surveyed primary schools and almost 19% of surveyed secondary schools are compliant.
- Western Australia has the highest rate of compliance, where 62% of surveyed menus adhere to the state's Healthy Food and Drink policy.
- The next best performing states/territories are South Australia and the Northern Territory where 35% and 29% of surveyed schools adhere to policy.
- The poorest performing states/territories are the ACT with 5%, Victoria with 16% and Queensland with 18% of surveyed menus complying with their individual policies and guidelines.
- Surveyed states where green food made up more than half the menu are Western Australia (93%) and the Northern Territory (93%) followed by QLD (58%).
- With the exception of South Australia, secondary schools have more red items on their menus than primary schools.
- Over 38% of menus across all surveyed secondary schools feature soft drink.
- 56% of all surveyed menus feature chocolate or other forms of confectionary. Over 96% surveyed schools feature pastries as a regular part of the menu.

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- 87% of all surveyed schools also serve pies regularly on their menus and 69% serve salads. The average price for a pie is \$3.17 and the average price for a salad is \$3.83, a difference of 66 cents. In some states and territories, the difference was over \$1.00.
- On average, 76% of all the surveyed school menus feature fruit.

1.5 Recommendations

Members of The Parents' Jury call on government to:

Ensure all government school canteen menus contain over 60% green menu items.

All nutrition guidelines suggest that foods categorised as green should be part of a child's every day diet. Foods that fall into the amber and red categories are higher in energy, saturated fat, sugar and/or salt and, particularly in the case of the red category, energy dense and nutrient poor. They're considered to be 'extra' foods and should only be an occasional treat in every child's diet.

If consumed daily, the food provided through the school canteen may comprise a third of a student's total daily intake and has a significant influence on their health and nutrition. Evidence suggests exposing children to healthy fruit and vegetables at school can double their consumption (Tapper, Lowe and Howe 2003). Therefore, healthy options must feature more strongly on the school menu.

This is particularly important given the growing push for healthy food options to be prepared onsite. Not only can meals made onsite often be a simpler option, a reduced reliance on pre-packaged foods makes them more sustainable and profitable

The surveyed schools across Australia shows under half of their menus are 'green' food items (48%). However, on average, over 50% of menu items fall into the amber (49%) and red (3%) categories. The Parents' Jury is not suggesting the 'amber' category be removed from the menu, but it should not be on par with or exceed the proportion of 'green' food items available.

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Ensure all government school canteen menus use a traffic light, front of pack food labelling system.

In order to enhance children's understanding of food to be eaten 'all the time' and food to be eaten 'occasionally,' items on school canteen menus should be clearly marked.

Evidence suggests consumers, particularly children, understand traffic light food labelling (Kelly et al 2008) and there are a number of surveyed schools in this research whose menus do feature this.

In conjunction with food literacy education, a clear labelling system can assist in improving children's understanding of nutrition. Further, it may increase the healthy eating message being spread and supported in the home.

Achieve this by requiring all government schools to work with canteen support services.

It is our contention the high number of healthy school canteens in Western Australia are the result of a comprehensive and resourced compliance system, introduced by the government in 2008.

However, support organisations also exist to help school canteens offer a healthy and comprehensive service. Some are more resourced than others; however (with the exception of Western Australia) they're all reliant on schools and canteen businesses contacting them on a voluntary basis.

We urge the government to enhance these services and require public schools to avail of them. Not only will their canteen menus improve, schools across the country will deliver the same, consistent healthy eating message.

1.6 Conclusion

No school canteen is the same. They may be run by volunteers, or operate as a commercial business. They may operate in a state of the art kitchen, or in a room next door to the Principal's office. They may tailor menus to meet cultural expectations, or have restricted access to food supply. However, they are all a powerful healthy eating conduit within the school setting and they should reflect the educational goals of the school and support and complement student learning.

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Canteens, while playing a central role in food literacy, cannot operate in isolation. To succeed, they need public and sustained support from the school community – the Principal, teachers, students and parents.

Many parents want healthy food policies to be an official part of the school setting. Improving menus, increasing healthy fundraising and public support of the canteen will only enhance the positive messages children and families receive about healthy eating and the importance of using fresh ingredients.

The Parents' Jury believes it is important that parents, teachers and students work together to support a whole-school approach to building a culture in which students actively choose nutritious foods and a healthy lifestyle. However, parents also need the support of government to ensure schools and their canteens are in a strong position to deliver a healthy eating message.

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