

School canteens: using ripples to create a wave of healthy eating

Canteens are not the main source of food for Australian school kids, but their symbolism is big

There is widespread awareness of the obesity epidemic in Australian children,¹ and the focus has now, quite appropriately, turned to action. In the United Kingdom, celebrity chef Jamie Oliver is trying to transform a 100-year-old school lunch service from “soggy and fried” to “crisp and fresh”. In Australia, the question is whether school canteens should be a high priority for action, because of their accessibility and visibility, or a low priority, on the grounds that canteen foods contribute little to children’s energy intake.

Negative ripples from canteens

Over the period of a year, children aged 5–15 years obtain only about 16% of their total energy intake from food eaten at school, and probably less than 3% comes from canteens.² But while the energy contribution is small, the symbolism is big. Canteen users consume significantly greater amounts of foods likely to promote unhealthy weight gain, such as fast foods, confectionery and packaged snacks.² The types of foods and beverages that predominate in school canteens not only undermine the health and nutrition curriculum, but also create the impression that foods and drinks that are high in fat, sugar and salt belong on the plate as “everyday foods”, rather than on the side as “occasional foods”. Other common practices in schools that undermine healthy eating messages include rewarding children with sweets, having soft-drink and confectionery vending machines, holding sporting events with fast-food vouchers as prizes, and using chocolate

drives for fundraising. All these practices create negative ripple effects on Australian family eating practices and beliefs.³ Children are developing the food preferences that they will carry with them into adulthood, so strengthening family and school environments for enjoying healthier food choices is critical.

In a 2004 survey of 18 Victorian primary schools (unpublished data), we found that, of the 17 with a food service, all sold meat pies, but only five sold fruit on a regular basis. As a rule, canteen managers provided foods that sold well and had a long shelf life. They usually had no mandate or support to do otherwise. A reliance on profits from canteens, vending machines and “junk food fundraising” also makes it hard for schools, particularly high schools, to model healthy eating. In common with a survey of 500 New Zealand schools,⁴ we found that schools readily recognise the rather poor job they do of providing a healthy food environment. Most schools do not see food provision as part of their core business and lack the inclination or resources to take on this “added” responsibility. Private enterprise fills this vacuum, with the result that the health of profits increasingly dominates the health of pupils. An extreme example is the “cola war” in the United States, in which the weapons of choice have been contracts with schools to sell minimum volumes of Coca Cola or Pepsi.⁵

Creating a new epidemic?

Perhaps we should consider the task ahead of us as the creation of a new epidemic of healthy eating rather than reducing an obesity

epidemic. Using the principles in Gladwell's recent bestseller *The tipping point*,⁶ the school canteen and students themselves could be the catalyst for healthier eating among children and adolescents — turning negative ripples into positive waves.

Can a “tipping point” be created from a handful of champion schools that decide to embrace the whole-of-school policies and strategies needed to get their canteens right (healthy, enjoyable, profitable and supported), hoping that others will follow their lead? This is almost certainly too much to expect to happen in 9000 schools across Australia, which tend to function semi-autonomously on these matters. Lessons from successful public health programs, such as sun protection and injury prevention, show that tipping the balance in targeted behaviours from unhealthy to healthy requires a backbone of strong central policy, ongoing social marketing, and supported and coordinated implementation of programs.

Some Australian models

Various government-supported models influence how school canteens operate in Australia. Probably the least effective include the Victorian model of simply disseminating canteen guidelines⁷ and the Australian Government model from the pre-election spending spree, wherein each school could apply for \$1500 to reinvent the “healthy canteen” wheel. Neither has policy, social marketing or implementation support.

A third model, which has some merit, is exemplified by the Western Australian (StarCAP⁸) and Tasmanian (Cool CAP⁹) school canteen accreditation programs. Both have well developed criteria and processes for schools to work through to achieve program accreditation. StarCAP is backed by the WA government, but is managed on a shoestring budget, without policy and social marketing support, and thus has a low accreditation rate (7% of schools) and declining reach.¹⁰ Cool CAP is newer, with a higher accreditation rate (42% of schools accredited or working towards it), and so far has been successful in securing legislative and monetary support. Ultimately, however, the impact of these types of programs will probably be modest as long as the impetus to change remains with each individual school.

Because they are well supported and centrally driven, the most promising models come from New South Wales and South Australia. The NSW Healthy School Canteen Strategy (“Fresh Tastes @ School”)¹¹ grew out of the NSW Government Childhood Obesity Summit in 2002. It is now mandatory for state schools to provide food and beverage choices consistent with the *Australian guide to healthy eating*.¹² NSW Health has also boosted support for the NSW Canteen Association so that it, in turn, can support schools to operate economically viable, nutrition-oriented school canteens. Early positive waves include support from parents, canteen managers, some food companies and, increasingly, local health and education services. A similar model released in 2004 in South Australia brings SA government backing to a set of healthy eating guidelines.¹³ The guidelines encourage links between the canteen, the community and teaching about nutrition food skills. Both the NSW and SA government models would now benefit from social marketing explaining the rationale, processes and

support for the program. It would make sense, for example, to link these strategies with the national “Go for 2&5” (2 serves of fruit and 5 serves of vegetables) campaign.¹⁴

If we are serious about the childhood obesity epidemic, school canteens are a good place to start, because they carry a symbolism that ripples into the Australian diet far beyond their contribution to energy intake. At the moment, the ripples are a negative and undermining force. However, full implementation of the NSW or SA models for school canteens throughout the country could just tip the balance towards an outbreak of healthier eating.

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