Key Findings of the Final Report to:
The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation

October 2009
KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

The Evaluation of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden (SAKG) Program has demonstrated that in the first two years of the implementation of the SAKG Program in Victorian schools, there are clear changes in child attitudes, knowledge, skills and confidence in relation to cooking and gardening. The overwhelming response by school principals and all other stakeholder groups was that the SAKG Program was well worth the effort required to maintain it.

A mixed methods approach was adopted for this evaluation. Qualitative measures such as focus groups, interviews and participant observation provided the primary means of understanding the impact of the program and how it was experienced by children and other members of the school community. Quantitative (i.e. survey) measures provided additional information about the extent of change occurring as a result of the SAKG Program.

The key findings of the evaluation are as follows:

- There was strong evidence of increased child willingness to try new foods including a significant difference between program and comparison schools.
- The kitchen classes were greatly enjoyed by children, and the children at program schools were significantly more likely than children from comparison schools to report that they liked cooking ‘a lot’.
- Children enjoyed their gardening classes but in schools where the garden specialists had fewer gardening qualifications and experience, children tended to report lower interest in participating in garden activities. Differences in levels of enjoyment of gardening reported by children from program and comparison schools were not statistically significant.
- Children’s competent use of knives in the kitchen appeared to be particularly valued by all stakeholders as evidence of skill but also as a symbol of trust.
- There was evidence of statistically significant increases in child knowledge, confidence and skills in cooking and gardening.
- Increases in food literacy occurred in both program and comparison schools and cannot therefore be attributed to the impact of participation in the program.
- The program was considered particularly effective at engaging ‘non-academic learners’ and children with challenging behaviours.
- The SAKG Program helped to create links between schools and the community. This was often noted as one of the program’s most important outcomes.
- Transfer of program benefits to the home environment was not one of the goals of the program but is emerging as a flow-on benefit.
- Perceived challenges to program sustainability include ongoing funding of the program and recruiting sufficient volunteer support to run classes. Increased integration with curriculum helps to overcome competing priorities for class time.
- The SAKG Program is associated with substantial financial cost and even greater community investment in terms of the resources of time and materials used.
- Program schools on average generated $1.93 of additional resources for every $1 of government funding invested in the SAKG Program.
This comprehensive evaluation of the SAKG Program makes an important contribution to the international literature on kitchen gardens and garden based nutrition programs. It included matched comparison schools, all of which had a gardening program and in some cases a limited cooking program. In doing so it provided an opportunity to assess the SAKG Program against what is being achieved by schools without the benefit of the design, funding and resourcing of the SAKG Program model.

The strong additional benefits of the SAKG Program to the school community were clearly demonstrated in terms of child engagement in learning, increased child willingness to try new foods, improved child knowledge, confidence and skills in relation to cooking and gardening, improved school social environment, and increased school-community connections.

There were also indications that the SAKG Program may be of greatest benefit to students of greatest disadvantage thereby addressing health inequities in a way that is difficult to achieve in health promotion programs. Further research is required to confirm this finding.

Economic analyses highlighted the value placed on the program by all stakeholders and the success of the funding model in leveraging funds to support schools’ implementation of the program.

The evaluation showed that the program would benefit from improvements to the components addressing food literacy, specialist qualifications in area of expertise, and curriculum integration. Schools also require greater support and guidance in relation to funding and volunteer recruitment to ensure the sustainability of the program.
EVALUATION RESEARCH TEAM

Principal Investigator: Dr Lisa Gibbs  
*The McCaughey Centre*, University of Melbourne

Investigator: Associate Professor Petra Staiger  
School of Psychology, Deakin University

Investigator: Associate Professor Mardie Townsend  
School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University

Investigator: Susie Macfarlane  
School of Psychology, Deakin University

Research Fellow: Karen Block  
*The McCaughey Centre*, University of Melbourne

Health Economics Advisor: Lisa Gold  
Deakin Health Economics, Deakin University

Research Fellow: Britt Johnson  
*The McCaughey Centre*, University of Melbourne

Research Fellow: Caroline Long  
School of Psychology, Deakin University

Research Assistant: Jennifer Kulas  
*The McCaughey Centre*, University of Melbourne

Statistical Advisor: Obioha Chukwunyere Ukoumunne  
Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics Unit (CEBU), The Royal Children’s Hospital

Advisory Support: Professor Elizabeth Waters  
*The McCaughey Centre*, University of Melbourne

*The McCaughey Centre: VicHealth Centre for the Promotion of Mental Health and Community Wellbeing

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the generosity of the school communities who committed considerable time and effort to participate in the evaluation. The funding provided by the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation to conduct the evaluation is also gratefully acknowledged, as is the financial support the Foundation received for the evaluation from VicHealth, the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and Deakin University. Lisa Gibbs acknowledges the NHMRC Capacity Building Grant for Child and Adolescent Obesity Prevention and the Jack Brockhoff Child Health and Wellbeing Program for salary and operational funding support. For their assistance in the early stages of this project; Helen Bolger-Harris, Monica Green, Lucy Westerman, Michele Bell and Sing Kai Lo are also gratefully acknowledged.