



Submission on the Interim report of the Productivity Commission's Review of the National School Reform Agreement

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Contact:

Dr Cathy Wilkinson
CEO
0417 660 227
cathy.wilkinson@kitchengardenfoundation.org.au

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Interim Report of the Productivity Commission's Review into the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA).

Our response focuses on the following two reforms of the five key areas:

1. Lifting student outcomes
2. Improving student mental health and wellbeing

The Foundation wishes to draw the attention of the Panel to the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program as an evidence-based approach that has been proven to support student learning and wellbeing.

The Foundation adopts the Nest¹ definition of wellbeing, and evaluations of the Kitchen Garden Program demonstrate impact in all six domains of the Nest "that all young people are valued, loved and safe, have material basics, are healthy, learning, and participating and have a positive sense of identity and culture".

An important predictor of mental health is social connectedness. An evaluation of the Kitchen Garden Program shows strong evidence of positive social outcomes for children, schools and communities involved in the Program², supporting all members of the school community to thrive.

Through the Program, all types of learners have equal opportunities to have their learning needs met. The Program is particularly effective at engaging reluctant classroom learners, providing opportunities for hands-on, contextual learning to support integrated teaching approaches, and providing practical learning experiences across the breadth of subject areas.

The kitchen and garden are valuable learning spaces which offer a range of opportunities to reinforce and enhance the skills and concepts taught in the classroom. The Program enriches learning, improves school engagement, and enhances social connection.

Working in the kitchen and garden creates opportunities for children and young people to work with others beyond their usual friendship groups, including alongside educators and adult volunteers, teaching them valuable social skills and offering a means for widening social networks and deepening connection.

The Program is considered particularly effective at engaging those at risk of disengagement and children with challenging behaviours.

In an evaluation conducted by the University of Wollongong ³, teachers and parents reported improvements in students' social behaviours, with 86% of teachers reporting improvements in students' teamwork skills and parents reporting improvements across a range of student behaviours, including modifying previous bullying behaviour, managing difficult behaviour, interacting with people of many ages, leadership skill development and sense of pride in the school.

The Kitchen Garden Program is proven to assist schools in building further connections through an inclusive and immersive program that links family and community engagement for social cohesion and community pride.

The Program has been used by many schools to engage students and families from a range of backgrounds, including those with English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D), and refugee groups.

'The program was providing a way for parents from a non-English speaking background to be more involved in their children's education. At this school several parents volunteered in the kitchen who would have been uncomfortable doing so in the classroom because of their lack of English language proficiency.' ⁴

Read more about how schools use the Kitchen Garden Program for community engagement here: <https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/content/community-engagement-through-kitchen-garden-program>

The Kitchen Garden Program responds to the needs of all students, including those of 'priority equity cohorts'. The Program operates in over 1000 schools and services around Australia, with approximately half of all schools located in rural, regional and remote locations.

The Program also operates in approximately 20 special schools nationally, and the Foundation is currently working to further develop a suite of inclusivity and accessibility resources, to be co-designed with educators and people with lived experience in the sector.

With the Kitchen Garden Program being established in response to the obesity crisis, it is particularly strong in supporting students, their families and communities to build capacity around lifestyle factors such as physical activity and nutrition.

A University of Melbourne evaluation⁵ found that the Kitchen Garden Program encourages positive health behaviour change in participating children, and highlighted the transfer of benefits to the home and broader community. Key findings of the evaluation include strong evidence of child willingness to try new foods, and statistically significant increases in child knowledge, confidence and skills in cooking and gardening.

The same evaluation also highlights that 97% of teachers agree the program is engaging and aids learning across other subject areas.

The Kitchen Garden Program has models for early childhood, primary and secondary years that are integrated with the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum.

Over 20 years of operation, the Foundation has developed a suite of high-quality teaching resources and curriculum materials in collaboration with educators, supporting quality teaching and aiding student learning outcomes.

The Program supports cross-curriculum learning in STEAM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics), along with development outcomes such as cultural studies, health, and physical education.

Through the Program, vocational skills and pathways are developed, with entrepreneurial skills, communication, leadership, critical thinking, planning, teamwork, inclusivity, and reciprocity enhanced.

Investigations into sustainability, climate, systems thinking, and food security are encouraged, teaching students about caring for nature and the planet, and helping to shape citizens of the world.

The Foundation actively collaborates with Aboriginal- led organisations to align our work with culturally safe practices and explore ways to create connections to First Nations histories and cultures. Curriculum resources currently offered include First Nations seasonal calendars, bush tucker gardens and recipes. The Program has been a point of connection between schools and local Elders and Aboriginal communities, as well as a way of connecting to language, Country and culture.

Read more here: <https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/content/growing-positive-food-habits-remote-schools>

And here: <https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/content/bungwahl-ps-canteen-links-kitchen-garden-program>

The Kitchen Garden Program is renowned for its capacity to foster inclusivity and a sense of cultural safety and belonging. Connections through food are a wonderful way of learning about all cultures and celebrating both similarities and differences. Creating safe and inclusive environments in this way supports good mental health and wellbeing.

Read here for a news story on food, belonging and schools:

<https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/content/food-belonging-and-schools>

And here: <https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/content/students-celebrating-diversity-through-food>

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation initiatives align with key education, health, wellbeing, food and climate priorities supporting children and young people across Australia.

For example:

- The National Preventative Health Strategy calls for improving access to and the consumption of a healthy diet by enhancing health literacy in partnership with communities.
- The National Obesity Strategy aims to enable healthier schools and early childhood settings, empowering people to adopt healthier behaviours.
- The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) emphasises the importance of meeting the individual needs of all learners, and outlines education's role in supporting the wellbeing, mental health and resilience of young people.
- Good Practice Guide Supporting Healthy Eating and Drinking at School calls for:
 - Evidence based food literacy
 - Whole of school approach
 - Creating healthy school environments, delivery of health and nutrition literacy, and increased physical activity among school-age children and young people
- The 2022 Food Policy Index Australia report recommends policy action to “integrate practical skills in growing and cooking foods, as well as nutrition education, into the curriculum for early childhood education and care and all school years in a way that supports existing teaching priorities”.
- In addition, the public consultation process on the National Obesity Strategy highlighted that more than 80% agreed that healthy policies and practices in schools and promotion of healthy behaviours in education curriculum would help to prevent obesity.

The Kitchen Garden Program supports a preventive approach to mental health and wellbeing more broadly, including through improved food literacy and behaviour, supporting mood and energy to learn, and improving social connections for children and young people, so they can be more engaged with learning.

The Program is already recognised on the wellbeing program panels of education departments in some states.

Responding to the questions posed in the consultation paper:

2. What are the evidence-based practices that teachers, schools, systems and sectors can put in place to improve student outcomes, particularly for those most at risk of falling behind? Are different approaches required for different at-risk cohorts?

Kitchens and gardens are inspiring settings for both formal and informal learning to take place.

The Kitchen Garden Program is an evidence-based initiative that supports inclusive, adaptable learning and increases engagement. Providing hands on consolidation of classroom material by taking learning out of the traditional classroom reinforces curriculum concepts, and provides opportunities for all students to shine.

Literacy, numeracy, science, art and more all come to life in the Kitchen Garden Program. Recipes are procedural texts involving the concepts of fractions, weight and time. Children and young people learn science concepts such as freezing, condensing and boiling, weather patterns and plant growth to name just a few. They learn humanities through explorations of food, culture and geography.

Teaching children to grow, harvest, prepare and share seasonal produce embeds the passion, skills and curiosity to be part of sustainable food systems. All of this while increasing opportunities for non-competitive physical activity, and gifting them with lifelong skills for their health and wellbeing.

9. What evidence-based wellbeing approaches currently being implemented by schools and communities should be considered as part of a national reform agenda?

It is our view that the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program should be considered as part of the national reform agenda. As an holistic initiative, the Kitchen Garden Program has the potential to address multiple challenges facing children, young people, schools, and educators, while opening opportunities for engagement with families and the broader community. The Program offers a unified approach to teaching and learning, and removes the separation between learning and wellbeing in schools

The Kitchen Garden Program:

- is an evidence-based health and education initiative with a track record of success in improving food literacy, and engaging children and families in healthy food behaviour;
- contributes to preventing the childhood obesity pandemic and the ensuing cost of burden of disease;
- has been adapted over 20 years to a low-cost, standard national model that is scalable and adaptable to any community;
- has models for early childhood, primary and secondary years that are integrated with the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum, and offers hundreds of curriculum linked lesson plans and activities;
- supports an active and engaged educator Community of Practice, enabling opportunities for peer to peer networking and support;
- responds to government recommendations, global research and academic evaluations;
- encourages participation from local government, business and volunteers;
- engages disengaged students and connects parents with education;
- is culturally inclusive, celebrating migrant and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures;
- addresses issues experienced by the most at-risk, low-socioeconomic communities;
- supports mental health, increases green spaces for children and provides opportunities for non-competitive physical activity;
- enhances environmental sustainability understanding and practices;
- contributes to local food security and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals;
- provides learning and work pathways into agriculture, horticulture, hospitality and STEM;
- builds life skills, resilience, social capital and community mindedness.

13. What can be done to establish stronger partnerships between schools, Local Health Networks and Primary Health Networks?

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation enjoys relationships with a number of health networks around Australia, and has many examples of how schools, communities and local health networks cooperate around the Kitchen Garden Program.

See here for a case study on our partnership with Gippsland Lakes Complete Health: <https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/content/learning-and-growing-east-gippsland-community>

Another example of this in action here:

<https://www.margaretrivermail.com.au/story/8016756/margaret-river-to-pilot-kids-nutrition-program/>

And here: <https://healthwise.org.au/support-us/gift-fund/>

¹ The Nest is Australia's wellbeing framework for children and young people aged 0 to 24 years. Goodhue, R., Dakin, P., Noble, K. (2021) What's in the Nest? Exploring Australia's Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People. ARACY, Canberra. <https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action/the-nest-overview>

² Block, Karen & Gibbs, Lisa & Staiger, Petra & Gold, Lisa & Johnson, Britt & Macfarlane, Susie & Long, Caroline & Townsend, Mardie. (2012). Growing community: the impact of the Stephanie Alexander kitchen garden program on the social and learning environment in primary schools. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22167317/>

³ Yeatman H, Quinsey K, Dawber J, Nielsen W, Condon-Paoloni D, Eckermann S, Morris D, Grootemaat P and Fildes D (2013) Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden National Program Evaluation: Final Report. Centre for Health Service Development, Australian Health Services Research Institute, University of Wollongong. Full report available: <http://ahsri.uow.edu.au/content/groups/public/@web/@chsd/documents/doc/uow145163.pdf>

⁴ Block K, Johnson B, Gibbs L, Staiger P, Townsend M, Macfarlane S, Gold L, Long C, Kulas J, Okoumunne OC, Waters E, (2009) Evaluation of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program: Final Report. Melbourne: McCaughey Centre. Full report available: <https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/centres-institutes/centre-for-health-equity/research-group/jack-brockhoff-child-health-wellbeing-program/research/previous-projects/evaluation-of-the-stephanie-alexander-kitchen-garden-program>

⁵ ibid