**Submission to the Schools for Our Future National Inquiry into Australia's Public School Infrastructure Needs.**

## 1. Introduction

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. For over 20 years, we have worked with schools across Australia to deliver our evidence-based Kitchen Garden Program that connects children and young people to cross-curriculum learning through hands-on, active food education in kitchen and garden spaces.

This submission demonstrates that **kitchen and garden spaces should be recognised as essential school infrastructure**, not optional enhancements. Drawing on the Issues Paper and current evidence, we show how these spaces directly address the Inquiry's priorities relating to:

- student health, wellbeing and engagement
- inclusion and equity
- diverse learning needs and future-ready education
- community connection and sustainability

High-quality infrastructure is foundational to educational outcomes, wellbeing and engagement. Kitchen and garden spaces enrich school environments, and are a proven, scalable way to deliver desired outcomes in public education.

## 2. Response to Inquiry

### How well do public school facilities support student outcomes, inclusion, wellbeing and individualised learning? What improvements are needed?

The Issues Paper identifies a significant gap between current infrastructure and student need. Nearly all principals report increasing complexity, particularly in mental health, disability and behavioural needs, while over half report inadequate access to breakout spaces, counselling areas and flexible learning environments.

Kitchen and garden spaces address these gaps by functioning as:

- **Wellbeing infrastructure**: providing calm, sensory and restorative, nature-rich environments that support emotional regulation and reduce conflict, especially for those experiencing stress or disengagement. Kitchen and garden spaces are also proven to support cultural connection and strengthen sense of belonging.
- **Flexible learning environments**: enabling hands-on and differentiated learning that supports cross-curriculum learning areas including STEAM, Humanities and Social Sciences, Health and PE; general capabilities such as Personal and Social Capability, Creative and Critical Thinking, Intercultural Understanding, Literacy and Numeracy; and cross-curriculum priorities such as Sustainability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures – often simultaneously.
- **Inclusive spaces**: supporting students with diverse learning needs, and accessibility needs including neurodiverse learners and those who may not naturally thrive in traditional classrooms.

Evidence shows these spaces improve wellbeing, engagement and social cohesion through the creation of **safe, inclusive environments**.

*"Several students have independently started using the space as a calming strategy" with the Kitchen Garden Program providing "a chance for them to become 'experts' and engaged in learning in an alternative way."* - Kangaroo Flat PS

*"The program also supports students with additional learning needs by providing practical, hands-on experiences that allow for different ways of engaging and demonstrating success. The nature of the activities supports inclusion and provides opportunities for students who benefit from more active, experiential learning approaches."* - Roxburgh Homestead Primary School

The holistic approach of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program delivers significant wellbeing benefits to children and young people. Evaluations of the Program demonstrate impact in all six domains of the Nest, Australia's wellbeing framework for children and young people.[1]

[1] https://www.aracy.org.au/stephanie-alexander-kitchen-garden-foundation-and-the-nest/

**What types of learning spaces are required to meet diverse learning needs?**

The Inquiry highlights a pressing need for spaces that accommodate all types of learners, yet reports widespread inadequacy in both modified and purpose-built environments for students with diverse learning needs.

Kitchen and garden programs provide:

- **Multi-modal learning environments** (practical, sensory, collaborative)
- **Non-classroom settings** where different forms of participation and success are possible
- Opportunities for **movement, agency and real-world application**, particularly beneficial for students who struggle in traditional classroom settings

These features align with contemporary pedagogical approaches and inclusive design principles, providing **additional pathways for participation and achievement**.

*"The hands-on nature of the learning has been particularly beneficial for students with learning difficulties, providing them with engaging, accessible opportunities to develop skills, build confidence, and connect classroom learning to real-world contexts."* - Coimadi Primary School

*"We have a large population of students with sensory sensitivities who have had more exposure to fresh fruit and vegetables. Having students touch and smell while harvesting has been a huge step for many of our students."* - Broadmeadows Special Development School

**How do differences in infrastructure contribute to inequities? How can schools be inclusive and culturally safe?**

Public schools educate a disproportionate number of students facing disadvantage, including 90% of those from low socio-educational backgrounds and the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Infrastructure inequity compounds educational inequality.

Traditional schoolyard design—dominated by large sports fields—often excludes:

- girls
- quieter students
- neurodiverse students
- students who do not enjoy schoolyard sport

These students are frequently pushed to the margins of school space and experience reduced participation.

Kitchen and garden spaces help address this by:

- Creating **distributed, smaller-scale, relational spaces** that promote inclusion and belonging
- Supporting **mixed-gender collaboration and leadership spaces**
- Offering **alternative modes of participation and social connection**
- They also provide opportunities for **culturally responsive learning**, including connections to food, land and community, supporting culturally safe environments for children and young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and migrant backgrounds.

*"Educators have also observed students demonstrating new levels of confidence, independence, and teamwork."* - Epsom Primary School

**What is the impact of infrastructure on engagement, wellbeing, achievement and staff outcomes?**

The Inquiry emphasises the strong relationship between infrastructure and student engagement, attendance, behaviour and academic outcomes, as well as teacher effectiveness and retention.

Kitchen and garden spaces contribute to:

- **Improved engagement and motivation**, particularly for students at risk of disengagement
- **Reduced behavioural issues**, through purposeful, collaborative activity
- **Enhanced school culture and belonging**

For educators, these spaces:

- enable **innovative, cross-curricular teaching**
- support **team teaching and collaboration**
- contribute to **job satisfaction** by expanding pedagogical possibilities

*"I believe this program has been one of the best initiatives for our school. On a personal level, it has given me renewed inspiration and a real sense of enthusiasm for continuing to work here."* - name withheld

*"The teachers have found that their repertoire of skills and knowledge of gardening has also improved, even if it is outside of their comfort zone."* - Mooroopna Primary School

**What infrastructure is needed to prepare students for future pathways and a full curriculum?**

The Issues Paper highlights the need for learning environments that foster **critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability and real-world skills**.

Kitchen and garden spaces support:

- **Interdisciplinary learning** across science, sustainability, health, and STEM
- Development of **practical life skills**, including food literacy and nutrition
- **Collaboration, problem-solving and creativity**

Research from the Queensland University of Technology, Centre for Inclusive Education brings student voice to the fore. When students are asked what kind of school they would like, they say they "want school spaces that are fun and colourful, where they can play and move, but also where they can relax and have quiet to think. Instead of noisy, stuffy, crowded classrooms that are dark and have funny smells, they want to have space to spread out with fresh air and light and opportunity to be connected to nature and to animals. Sustainability and adventure are important, as are opportunities to feel supported and safe." [2]

Kitchen and garden spaces respond to that call, extending the curriculum beyond traditional classrooms and contributing to a **more engaging, applied and future-focused learning experience**.

*"Students have shown increased enthusiasm, confidence, and teamwork," and have "demonstrated emerging leadership by taking responsibility for caring for garden spaces and supporting peers."* - Cranbourne Carlisle Primary School

At East Gippsland Specialist School, integration of garden and kitchen learning aligns strongly with vocational pathways through engaging in real-world tasks that build independence and prepare them for future community participation.

**What are the consequences of current funding approaches, and is a national strategy needed?**

The Issues Paper identifies a lack of national coordination, inconsistent investment and an absence of a clear picture of infrastructure needs.

[2] https://research.qut.edu.au/c4ie/2019/06/17/students-at-the-centre-of-designing-school-spaces-for-wellbeing-and-learning/

Without recognition in funding frameworks, kitchen and garden infrastructure remains:

- unevenly distributed
- dependent on local fundraising or short-term grants
- inaccessible to many high-need schools

This perpetuates inequity, limiting access to high-impact learning environments.

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation has registered unmet demand from over 450 schools wanting to offer the Kitchen Garden Program to meet their health, wellbeing, education and sustainability objectives, but for who lack of funding remains a barrier.

**How is the role of schools changing, and what infrastructure is needed?**

Schools are increasingly expected to function as **community hubs**, delivering integrated services and supporting families.

Additionally, schools are at the front lines of addressing rising food insecurity, increasingly offering breakfast programs and other forms of formal and informal food provision. Food insecurity is a known contributor to reduced school attendance, engagement and success. When children are hungry, reduced energy, focus, and concentration negatively impact learning and behaviour.

Kitchen and garden spaces contribute by:

- boosting fresh, school-grown food access for local communities
- enabling **community engagement and shared use**
- supporting **family and intergenerational programs**
- fostering **connections between schools and local communities**
- supporting school readiness to successfully integrate school feeding programs, allowing for flexible, place-based approaches to improving food security outcomes
- enhancing the school food environment through growing fresh produce for use in breakfast clubs, canteens and student food provision

These spaces align strongly with full-service school models and enhance schools' capacity to support broader wellbeing outcomes.

*"Having our [migrant] families in the school using and helping in the garden and benefiting from the produce stands out as a defining highlight."* – school name withheld

That family involvement is collaborative. Families share knowledge, support the maintenance of the garden, and benefit directly from the produce. In doing so, the program strengthens trust and connection between school and home.

**What infrastructure is needed for climate resilience and sustainability?**

The Inquiry highlights increasing risks from heat, climate change and environmental pressures, alongside the need for greener, more sustainable schools.

A joint report by youth mental health organisation Orygen and Mission Australia reveals that **76% (over three in four) of young Australians** experience a negative emotional, functional, or safety impact due to climate change.[3]

One of the key recommendations is to "enhance disaster resilience and climate change education. Develop national education strategy and programmes focusing on joint climate change, disaster resilience and emotional impact education. This will equip young people with the knowledge, practical skills and opportunities needed to prepare for current and future climate change impact and to participate in collective environmental action."[4]

Kitchen and garden spaces contribute to climate-responsive infrastructure by:

- increasing **green cover and shade**, improving thermal comfort
- supporting **hands-on sustainability education** which can assist in restoring a sense of agency that may help to offset feelings of helplessness and/or hopelessness that may contribute to anxiety
- modelling **resource-efficient practices** (water use, composting, food systems)

They provide real world application of sustainability principles, and a practical and visible way to embed sustainability within school environments.

*"Composting has become a whole-school practice, with each class involved and student monitors taking responsibility for managing compost daily. This has helped build awareness and practical skills in sustainability and waste management across the school." -* Flowerdale Primary School

[3] https://www.orygen.org.au/About/News-And-Events/2026/Three-in-four-young-people-say-climate-change-is-a

[4] https://www.orygen.org.au/Policy-Centre/Policy-Areas/Social-and-environmental-factors/More-than-distress-How-climate-change-is-shaping-y/More-than-distress_full-report_2026-online.aspx?ext=.pdf

**3. Evaluation results**

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation recently completed an early evaluation of a cohort of 53 low SES public schools who received a Kitchen Garden Program membership package and $1,000 kitchen and garden infrastructure grant.

- 96% of schools reported that their learning environments and now more inclusive, accessible and interactive
- 94% reported improvements in social skills
- 84% reported improvement in student resilience
- 77% reported improvements in school engagement and attendance
- 91% reported that their Kitchen Garden Program enabled student development in alignment with the curriculum general capability area of Personal and Social Capacity
- 81% reported that their Kitchen Garden Program enabled teaching of the Sustainability curriculum
- 79% reported that their Kitchen Garden Program aligned with the Science curriculum

These results clearly illustrate the impact that can result from investment in kitchen and garden infrastructure.

**4. Recommendations**

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation recommends that the Inquiry recognise kitchen and garden spaces as essential school infrastructure and embed them within national planning, funding and design frameworks.

1. **Recognise kitchen and garden spaces as core wellbeing, inclusion and learning infrastructure.** These spaces should be considered part of the core suite of facilities required to support student wellbeing, inclusion, engagement and individualised learning.
2. **Include kitchen and garden spaces in inclusive education infrastructure planning.** Planning and design standards should ensure these spaces are accessible and usable for students with disability and diverse learning needs.
3. **Prioritise kitchen and garden infrastructure as an equity-focused investment.** Investment should particularly support low-SES schools, regional schools, and schools with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and immigrant student populations.
4. **Recognise kitchen and garden spaces as infrastructure that improves student and staff outcomes.** These spaces should be valued for their contribution to student engagement, wellbeing, behaviour, school culture, teacher collaboration and staff satisfaction.
5. **Include kitchen and garden facilities in infrastructure required to deliver a full and contemporary curriculum.** These facilities support interdisciplinary, applied and future-focused learning across sustainability, health, science, STEM, food literacy and practical life skills.

6. **Establish a national infrastructure framework that includes kitchen and garden spaces.** Such a framework should be supported by dedicated capital funding, with priority given to schools and communities experiencing disadvantage.
7. **Incorporate kitchen and garden spaces into community-integrated school models.** These spaces should be planned as assets that can strengthen family engagement, intergenerational programs and connections between schools and local communities.
8. **Recognise kitchen and garden spaces as part of climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable school design.** These spaces should be included in efforts to increase green cover, improve thermal comfort, support sustainability education and model resource-efficient practices.
9. **Invest in kitchen and garden spaces to support effective school food reform.** Children who are hungry face significant barriers to learning, participation and thriving at school. With groundswell support for school feeding programs already growing, investment in kitchen and garden infrastructure would help schools successfully integrate future school food changes by providing practical spaces for food education, preparation, shared meals and whole-school engagement.

## 5. Conclusion

Kitchen and garden spaces represent a **high-impact, evidence-based infrastructure solution** that responds directly to the challenges identified in the Issues Paper.

They:

- improve health, wellbeing and engagement
- address inequity and inclusion
- support diverse and future-focused learning
- strengthen community connection
- contribute to sustainability and climate resilience

For the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, the evidence is clear that **kitchen and garden spaces are not optional—they are essential.**

A national commitment to investment in school kitchen and garden infrastructure would deliver enduring educational, social, sustainability and economic benefits to children and young people, and the communities they learn, live, grow and work in.