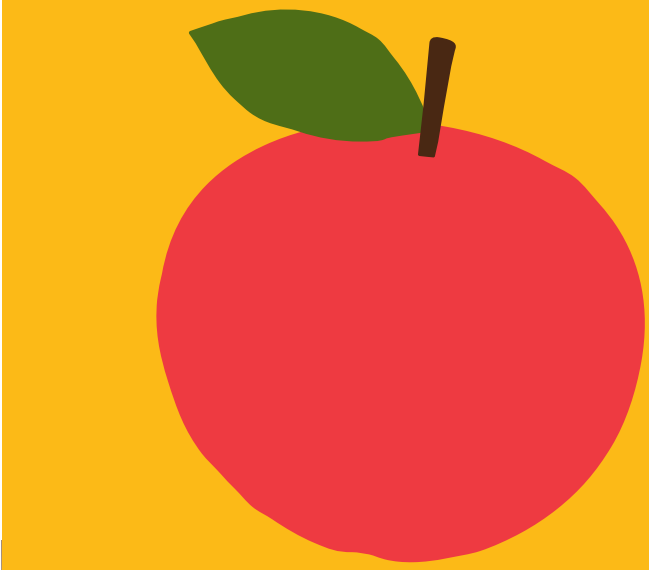
School Food Systems

Position Statement



Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation®

Acknowledgement and Commitment

At the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the unceded lands and waterways where we live, learn, and grow. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Elders past and present and recognise their enduring connection to Country.

First Nations peoples have been caring for Country for tens of thousands of years. Their deep knowledge of growing, harvesting, preparing and sharing food continues to inspire our work and offers powerful lessons for children and young people across Australia.

We are committed to ongoing cultural learning and to walking alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, learning with humility, and supporting self-determined outcomes through meaningful partnerships.

Background

The persisting cost-of-living crisis is affecting households across the country. Many families are experiencing financial stress, often forced to lean on ultra-processed foods to make ends meet. This, in turn, is impacting school lunchboxes, with 90% of Australian children bringing lunch from home, most of which is of poor nutritional quality. The ripple effect is hitting school canteens, which are under pressure to offer familiar ultra-processed foods that often lack variety and fresh ingredients, like garden-grown salads and herbs.

Schools are powerful environments for shaping attitudes and behaviours towards food. With up to 200 school days each year, over 13 formative years, the opportunity to influence food and nutrition literacy is immense.

Since 2004, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation has been driving a national movement to embed lifelong positive food behaviours and attitudes in children and young people through fun, hands-on food education across schools and communities. For over two decades, we have been shifting school food culture towards a healthier, more equitable food environment for multicultural communities, First Nations peoples, young people and students in special education.

We know that when children actively grow, harvest, prepare, and share fresh food, they build practical skills, confidence, and a deep appreciation for seasonal, diverse produce. This experiential approach fosters a lasting, positive relationship with food — one that supports wellbeing, helps prevent obesity and malnutrition, builds community connections, and promotes sustainable solutions.

We know that when growing and cooking food is fun, rewarding, and emphasises enjoyment, it creates lifelong skills that children truly value, retain, and repeat. Unlike other programs, we create moments of connection, conversation, and respect, turning food education into a shared experience that lasts.

Our strategic focus is on implementing a Whole School Approach to Food tailored to educational settings across all ages, demographics, contexts and communities. Through our evidence-based Kitchen Garden Program and Community Initiatives, we integrate food education across curriculum, culture, and operations, creating cohesive, sustainable impact.

Our role in the school food movement

With over two decades of implementing impactful food education across Australia, we are the experts in hands-on cooking and gardening education in schools, early childhood services and the community. We have a deep national reach, empowering children and young people to experience practical lessons that increase food literacy, sustainable food systems awareness and informed choices around food, health and the environment.

Although we are not an organisation of nutritionists, school meal providers or canteen operators, our strength lies in enabling schools and communities to deliver impactful cooking and gardening programs, and in supporting locally-led school food system initiatives that reflect the diversity and goals of each community.

With our extensive school network and proven whole-school effectiveness, we can be the bedrock, the catalyst, and the inspiration for innovative school food solutions and delivery — helping educators and communities achieve lasting change.

WHAT WE KNOW WORKS

1 WE NEED A NATIONAL FOOD SKILLS COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK FOR ALL YOUNG PEOPLE

A national framework would ensure every child — from early childhood to secondary years — gains essential knowledge and experience across growing, harvesting, cooking, meal planning, nutrition, budgeting, and critical thinking — skills proven to support lifelong health and wellbeing.

Research indicates that school food education improves dietary habits. This contributes to better academic performance and resilience, and reduced obesity risk and health inequities. Yet most Australian schools lack consistent, high-quality food skills programs, and teachers report insufficient training and resources to deliver them.

Embedding a structured, age-appropriate framework with touch points across all ages would address these gaps and empower young people to make informed choices. However, the burden must not always be on schools alone.

Community support is critical to embedding food literacy across places where young people are engaged, such as sporting clubs, neighbourhood houses, community centres, after-school clubs and more. Importantly, this removes the burden of skills being a school-based educator challenge only.

We are leaders in Australia-wide community place-based initiatives that centre on locally-led food system solutions. Our approach has been proven five times more effective for community-level change than areas without our support.

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Many Australian school canteens are already integrating our Kitchen Garden Program into their whole-of-school food culture by incorporating garden-grown produce to boost the variety of fresh, delicious menu options and by using cooking spaces to deliver hands-on food education.

2 FOOD PROVISION MUST BE CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE AND AFFORDABLE FOR ALL

Research shows that simply providing more food does not guarantee better health or learning outcomes for children — quality matters. Nutritious, appealing meals improve concentration, attendance, and wellbeing, while culturally relevant options foster inclusion and respect.

In Australia, some school meal programs and food relief initiatives face criticism for offering ultra-processed or low-nutrient foods — often due to cost, logistical challenges and a lack of training — missing the opportunity to provide nourishing choices and shape lifelong habits.

Prioritising fresh, seasonal, and diverse food, selected with student input, ensures dignity, enjoyment, and equity. Quality food provision can be achieved simply and affordably. It should be an investment in children's health, happiness, and future productivity, not just a response to hunger.

Integrating the student-grown produce harvested and enjoyed through the Kitchen Garden Program is a fast-track solution for integrating more nutritious, colourful, fresh food into every aspect of the school food environment.

3 SCHOOL CANTEENS CAN BECOME SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

School canteens are more than just service providers. They have the potential to become hubs that promote healthy variety and address broader food system challenges.

A social enterprise model transforms canteens from food outlets into hubs for education, employment, and sustainability. Social enterprise canteens are already proving successful around the globe — offering nutritious meals while creating jobs for vulnerable groups and training opportunities for students.

By embedding circular economy principles, these canteens can reduce food waste, source locally, and foster community ownership. Linking canteen operations to vocational pathways — such as hospitality and agriculture — builds real-world skills and strengthens local economies. This approach reimagines school food as a driver of social impact.

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The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation is the first step in promoting career pathways for young people via practical hands-on experiences.

4 LUNCHTIMES CAN BE PART OF LEARNING

Lunchtime is more than a break — it's a vital part of the school day that supports wellbeing, learning, and social development. Recent research has revealed that the average allocated lunchtime eating period was ten minutes or less, with 58% of parents and 30% of teachers rating this as inadequate.

Studies show that when children eat alongside their teachers and peers in calm, well-designed, dedicated spaces with enough time, they consume food in a healthier environment, build stronger relationships, and return to class more focused. Yet many Australian schools lack proper dining areas, and rushed mealtimes undermine these benefits.

Embedding lunch as a structured, social learning experience — supported by appropriate infrastructure — reinforces food literacy, willingness to try new foods, inclusion, and respectful behaviours. It's a simple, powerful shift that aligns with whole-school wellbeing strategies and enhances educational outcomes.

5 SCHOOLS NEED APPROPRIATE INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO FOOD

Infrastructure matters. We know that schools with gardens, cooking facilities, and quality dining spaces are far more likely to deliver effective food education and school meals that foster healthy eating.

The school remains the expert in creating relevant food-based spaces for their students and community. Dining areas designed for shared meals promote social connection, dignity, and cultural inclusion. Investing in this infrastructure is essential to embed a Whole School Approach to Food.

Our vast network of over 1,000 Kitchen Garden Program schools and early childhood services — with tailored infrastructure already in place — makes us the ideal implementation partner to propel the school food movement, including social impact canteens and universal school meals.

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6 ALL STAFF WORKING WITH SCHOOL FOOD MUST HAVE TRAINING, SUPPORT, TIME AND RESOURCES

Quality school food relies on skilled, confident staff and volunteers. Yet, less than a third of Australian educators and school food staff receive robust training in food skills, nutrition, or food safety. Evidence shows that professional development in these fields improves educator confidence, food quality, food safety, and student outcomes.

Staff and volunteers need ongoing access to hands-on training, both in-person and online; robust kitchen and garden resources; support from experienced providers; and dedicated time to deliver engaging food programs. With 21 years of deep experience, we have done the hard work, providing wraparound support, over 1,200 educational resources and recipes, and professional development for all Kitchen Garden Program members.

Investing in school workforce development ensures food provision is safe, inclusive, and high-quality. This empowers staff to model positive food behaviours and support whole-school adoption. Without this investment, programs risk inconsistency and missed opportunities for impact.

7 A NATIONAL GOVERNMENT APPROACH IS NEEDED FOR SCHOOL FOOD STANDARDS, GUIDANCE AND MONITORING

Australia's school food landscape is fragmented, with varying policies across states and territories. A unified national framework would ensure consistency, equity, and accountability.

A national strategy co-designed with those on the frontline of school food delivery and backed by standards, simple monitoring tools, and regular evaluation, would help schools deliver nutritious, culturally appropriate, and safe food programs. It would also support compliance, reduce health disparities, and align with Australian Dietary Guidelines.

Government leadership is essential to enable and embed food-based activities and provision as a core part of every child's learning experience.

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Our Call to Action

Australia has an opportunity to transform school food culture. To learn from others and be a global leader. We know the momentum for change is growing. We know the potential for collaboration and partnerships in school food systems is stronger than ever.

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation is committed to a national school food systems strategy that embeds fresh, seasonal food as a core part of learning, health, and community. We have national reach through a network of passionate schools and dedicated educators who are already taking young people, families, and the wider community on a critical journey towards better food systems.

We have evidence that shows the Kitchen Garden Program is the essential first step and the catalyst for school food transformation. Our best-practice, community-driven work at local and state levels has positioned us as national leaders in school food systems. Our model is trusted, effective, and scalable, making our organisation well-positioned to support meaningful, system-wide change.

- **Over one million Australian children have already benefited from our evidence-based program and community initiatives, which improve food literacy, wellbeing, and student engagement through hands-on gardening and cooking.**
- **Over 50% of our work supports children in remote or regional locations across Australia.**
- **Most of our schools are in communities experiencing socio-educational barriers.**
- **Students who participate in our food education develop healthier food behaviours, greater confidence in trying new food, and stronger social connections with their peers and community.**
- **Students, volunteers and staff involved in the Kitchen Garden Program grow their own food and prepare nutritious, culturally appropriate meals, making our program a central part of the solution to hunger and food insecurity.**

→ healthier food behaviours
→ greater confidence in trying new food
→ stronger social connections

It's time to act now. Why? Because what we do works. It's time to invest in food education within each high-priority community in Australia to impact young people, parents, carers, educators, and organisations actively participating in and volunteering for school food systems.

Embedding the Kitchen Garden Program nationally to fulfil unmet demand and target registered need will transform school food culture. It will support a Whole School Approach to Food, proven to enhance health, learning, and equity outcomes. It's time to scale deeply on what already works.

To explore opportunities to collaborate on school food systems improvements, please contact:

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PHOTOS

Photography at Kitchen Garden Program schools around Australia, by Rich Lowe and Nicole Cleary.

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