

Should Australian schools check students' lunchboxes?

What they said...

'Inspect[ing] school lunchboxes on their nutritional content... is highly unethical and not endorsed by government education departments'

Kelly Fullerton, nutritionist and teacher

'You don't want to be looking after one child who is on a sugar high from their lunchbox'

A Western Australian teacher commenting on the need to monitor student lunches

The issue at a glance

On March 3, 2021, The Herald Sun published an article by Susie O'Brien in which she detailed social media complaints from parents objecting to teachers monitoring what goes into school lunchboxes. <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/education/parents-slam-teachers-over-school-lunch-box-bans/news-story/683492d192e63e61b146be263d4055d1>

O'Brien has drawn attention in the past to what some parents consider unjustified interference by schools in an area they regard as a family responsibility.

<https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/opinion/susie-obrien-its-clear-some-school-staff-are-on-a-power-trip-over-kids-lunchboxes/news-story/d04c5664c779e6846ee46191b9b2de96>

In May 2020, concern about the quality of student nutrition prompted three Tasmanian schools to trial free school lunches <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-10/students-who-get-free-hot-meals-more-likely-to-attend-school/12966772>, while in September 2020, a plan was announced to trial free school lunches in some Canberra public schools. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-25/liberal-politician-candice-burch-criticises-free-school-lunch/12703846?nw=0>

The question of how best to ensure that Australian schoolchildren receive a nutritious lunch is an ongoing and widely debated one.

Background

School lunchbox guidelines for parents

All Australian states and territories supply guidelines to assist parents and guardians in the preparation of school lunches for their children. Western Australia appears to have the most detailed and prescriptive set of guidelines. It begins by dividing foods into four groups from each of which parents should select. These are bread and cereals; fruits and vegetables; reduced fat dairy, meat, and alternatives; and snacks. Examples are given as to what can be selected from each group. Within the snacks category the options are dried fruit, pikelets, plain rice crackers, cheese and crackers, dips (tzatziki and hummus), and plain popcorn.

The Western Australian guidelines then give more specific advice, following what is termed a traffic light system. Foods are classified as 'green' meaning they should constitute 60 percent of what is eaten, as 'orange' meaning they should constitute 40 percent of what is eaten, or as 'red' meaning they should not be consumed at all. Included on the 'red' list are full-fat pastry items; sweet sandwich fillings including jam,

nut spreads and honey; and high fat sandwich meats including polony and salami. Soft drinks, cordial, sports drinks, and fruit juice are also excluded.

<https://www.waschoolcanteens.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/ABCD-and-TL-Table.pdf>

In Victoria, school lunchbox advice is presented in a pic'n'mix format, with parents being advised to select from six groups – fruit (fresh, frozen, pureed and canned in natural juice); vegetables, legumes and beans; milk, yoghurt, cheese and alternatives; lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes and beans; grain (cereal) foods; and plain water. <https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/schools/healthy-lunchboxes>

Victoria also follows a traffic light system which specifies fewer items than Western Australia's. Included in the Victorian 'red' list are pies and sausage rolls, Devon, salami and Strasburg sandwich meats and biscuits, cakes, slices, and sweet pastries.

<https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/healthy-choices/guidelines/traffic-light-system>

South Australia's lunchbox advice is very similar to Victoria's except five groups are offered from which to make a choice. Water is later recommended as the only appropriate drink - pack plain water to drink, such as tap, spring, mineral, soda and sparkling waters, instead of sugary drinks like soft drink, fruit juice drink or flavoured milk. South Australia also makes allowance for some discretionary foods such as 'cakes, lollies, sweet biscuits and chips.' Parents are advised regarding these: 'Try to avoid them all together. If you have them, include only occasionally and in small amounts.'

<https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+interne+healthy+living/healthy+eating/healthy+eating+tips/healthy+lunchboxes>

South Australia also follows a traffic light system. Included in the 'red' category are soft drinks, artificially sweetened soft drinks, energy drinks, sports drinks, flavoured mineral waters, sports waters, and fruit drinks. The 'red' category also includes pasta meals, pizzas, baked potato products, dim sims, fried rice and noodles, crumbed and coated foods, frankfurts and sausages.

https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/right_bite_manual_colour.pdf?acsf_files_redirect

New South Wales <https://education.nsw.gov.au/parents-and-carers/going-to-school/preparing/starting-primary-school/health-and-wellbeing/eating-at-school> and Queensland <https://www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/media-release-healthy-lunchboxes-healthy-kids/> offer similar, though less specific advice and give directions as to how nutritious lunches can be prepared.

The Australian Capital Territory also follows a similar traffic light system in regulating what foods school canteens sell and advising parents on what should be in children's lunchboxes.

https://www.education.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/692279/ACTGOV_EDU_C-The-Traffic-Light-System-in-Schools-Factsheet-FA.pdf

The guidelines supplied in the Northern Territory appear to be among the least prescriptive. They are published under 'Tips for parents' on the Northern Territory Education Department's School Nutrition and Healthy Eating site.

<https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/health-of-students/school-nutrition-and-healthy-eating>

Variations and school autonomy in the application of food guidelines

The degree of rigor with which these guidelines are promoted and monitored appears to vary across schools. Western Australian School Canteen Association executive officer,

Megan Neeson, has explained that it is difficult to find a uniform strategy for all schools to follow, and there continue to be differing ways in which the traffic light policy is implemented in Western Australia. Ms Neeson stated, 'Lunchboxes and what parents choose to send from home are not included in the scope of the [Department of Education's] Healthy Food and Drink policy. It is a school-based decision if they choose to look at lunchboxes and provide feedback to parents.'

<https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/lunchbox-policing-wa-schools-crackdown-on-unhealthy-food-20170531-gwhb8w.html>

The traffic light strategy and other similar guidelines appear to have been developed primarily to regulate school canteens and the foods they stock and sell to students. Similar nutrition standards have also been developed to guide early education and childcare centres in the provision of food to preschoolers.

A 2017 Deakin University study of preschool and school meals policies stated of Australia 'National voluntary guidelines (based on the Australian Dietary Guidelines) have been published to guide States and Territories in developing healthy school food provision policies. From these, each State and Territory has developed a set of independent healthy canteen guidelines. Seven States and Territories have implemented mandatory standards based on their guidelines.'

Almost all States and Territories identify 'red category' foods, which are either completely banned in schools or heavily restricted. Guidelines are generally mandatory for government schools in each State or Territory and are highly encouraged for Independent and Catholic schools. New South Wales does not have a 'red' category and instead terms high fat or high sugar foods 'occasional' foods which are allowable in a balanced diet. <http://dro.deakin.edu.au/eserv/DU:30100216/sacks-preschoolandschool-2017.pdf>

The monitoring of and compliance with policy guidelines in schools varies across States and Territories. In general, the policies are not actively enforced or routinely monitored by government. There is variable implementation across the different jurisdictions and poor rates of adherence. <http://dro.deakin.edu.au/eserv/DU:30100216/sacks-preschoolandschool-2017.pdf>

Some school actions that have provoked parental complaints

Actions that some Australian parents have complained about include the confiscation of food items packed by parents and their return to the children at the end of the day.

<https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/lunchbox-policing-wa-schools-crackdown-on-unhealthy-food-20170531-gwhb8w.html>

Parents have also objected to notes being sent home with their children challenging the nutritional value of the food given the child for lunch. Some of these notes have been condemned as 'condescending'. <https://www.qt.com.au/news/school-serves-mum-warning-note-after-confiscating-/3146434/>

Parents have further objected to teachers making inaccurate assessments of the food the child has been given. For example, mistaking the nature of some backed goods.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-10/chocolate-slice-shaming-kids-wrong-food-messages/8258086>

Parents have also objected to the contents of school lunchboxes being criticised when the school canteen sells similar items.

<https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/parenting/school-life/can-you-spot-why-this-fouryearolds-lunch-box-was-slammed-as-unhealthy/news-story/0c7ba1f7b8e005e0869928b0d59b624b>

Internet information

On March 9, 2021, HCF (the Hospitals Contributions Fund) updated the entry on its website titled 'What's gone wrong with our diet?' which presents some of the factors contributing to adult and childhood obesity in Australia.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.hcf.com.au/health-agenda/food-diet/nutrition/whats-gone-wrong-with-our-diet>

On March 8, 2021, Optimum Intake Dietitians published on their website sample letters that parents might use to respond to schools regarding inappropriate monitoring of student lunchboxes.

These can be accessed at <https://www.optimumintake.com.au/school-lunchbox-reward-system-parent-letters/>

On March 8, 2021, news.com.au published an article titled 'Sydney mum criticised for using Spam in kid's school lunch box' which presented parents' confusion over whether Spam was an appropriate sandwich filling for a child's school lunch.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/food/eat/sydney-mum-criticised-for-using-spam-in-kids-school-lunch-box/news-story/6dfeaa5232c1efe1fbe237de9d58231d>

On March 3, 2021, The Herald Sun published a comment by Susie O'Brien titled, 'Parents slam teachers over school lunch box bans'. The comment quoted numerous online parent criticisms of teacher interference in what families were feeding their children for lunch.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/education/parents-slam-teachers-over-school-lunch-box-bans/news-story/683492d192e63e61b146be263d4055d1>

On February 15, 2021, ABC News published a report titled 'Nutritionists call for healthy lunch program to be rolled out in schools across Australia' which details concern among nutritionists about the diet of Australian children and suggestions that schools do more, including the possibility of providing nutritious school lunches.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-15/experts-call-for-healthy-lunch-program-across-australian-schools/13153270>

On February 5, 2021, the website Healthy Mummy published the results of a survey it had conducted among over 4,000 mothers which found that 50 percent of respondents were unhappy with what they saw as schools' judgemental approach to monitoring what parents provide in school lunchboxes.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.healthymummy.com/50-mums-feel-schools-dont-properly-check-whether-food-kids-lunch-healthy-option/>

On January 29, 2021, The Daily Mail Australia published an article titled 'Parents slam school's "ridiculous" and "confusing" lunchbox rules that ban muesli bars and yoghurt "pouches" - but allow muffins and yoghurt in "tubs"'. The article presented some of the parent criticisms of a school's inconsistent monitoring of student lunchboxes.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-9199479/Parents-slam-lunchbox-police-ridiculous-confusing-rules.html>

On January 25, 2021, ABC News published a report titled 'Stop talking about your dieting in front of children, experts warn, as eating disorders rise' which detailed the rise in eating disorders among children and advised parents on how they might encourage their children to eat a balanced diet.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-24/parents-urged-to-stop-diet-talk-as-child-eating-disorders-rise/13086858>

On January 23, 2021, 7 News published a report titled 'Mum "accosted" by other parents at school over lunchbox choice' which detailed a mother being criticised by another parent for including fruit and vegetables in her child's lunchbox. The report demonstrates the extreme sensitivity among some parents over comparisons between the contents of students' lunchboxes.

The full text can be accessed at <https://7news.com.au/lifestyle/b-mum-slammed-for-giving-her-son-healthy-snacks-at-school-c-2001237>

On June 22, 2020, The Herald Sun published a report by Susie O'Brien titled, 'Kids don't like being told by schools what they should be eating, new study finds'. The article presents the findings of a Monash University study which found that school attempts to shift children's eating habits, including by lunchbox monitoring, were not being well received by parents or students.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/kids-dont-like-being-told-by-schools-what-they-should-be-eating-new-study-finds/news-story/f81aa10030f5a09119b4fabf8d31afea>

On March 27, 2020, The Conversation published an article by Fiona MacDonald, Senior Research Fellow, Victoria University, titled 'Schools provide food for many hungry children. This needs to continue when classes go online' which examines the meal support programs many schools run and argues that these need to continue when schools go online in response to COVID19.

The full text can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/schools-provide-food-for-many-hungry-children-this-needs-to-continue-when-classes-go-online-134384>

On March 22, 2020, The Sydney Morning Herald published an opinion piece by Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator and professor of education policy at the Gonski Institute for Education, at the University of New South Wales. The comment is titled 'Healthy children learn better. So why don't we feed them at school?' and argues that Australian schools should supply lunches for their students.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/healthy-children-learn-better-so-why-don-t-we-feed-them-at-school-20200211-p53zp5.html>

On June 21, 2018, Casey Cardinia Kids published a comment by Melissa Grant titled 'Give me a lunch break' in which she criticised the expectations of some schools regarding the lunches parents supply their children as unrealistic and judgemental.

The full text can be accessed at <https://caseycardiniakids.com.au/news/2018-06-21/schools-must-stop-lunchbox-shaming-parents-kids/>

On February 5, 2018, news.com.au published an advice piece by Australian nutritionist and teacher Kelly Fullerton titled 'We need to put an end to the lunch box police'. This gives advice to parents and schools on how best to promote healthy eating among children.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.kidspot.com.au/school/primary/real-life/we-need-to-put-an-end-to-the-lunch-box-police/news-story/adb92aada77d964823f2413c0c6c3682>

On October 4, 2017, yahoo!news published a report titled 'School lunch police spending 30 minutes a day searching for banned snacks'. The report gives examples from Australian and British schools of parents angered by the lunch monitoring policies adopted by some schools.

The full text can be accessed at <https://au.news.yahoo.com/primary-school-staff-inspect-lunches-for-banned-unhealthy-snacks-37340313.html>

On May 31, 2017, WAtoday published an article titled 'Lunchbox policing: WA schools crackdown on unhealthy food' which presented information on Western Australian schools monitoring student lunchboxes and a range of responses to this practice.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/lunchbox-policing-wa-schools-crackdown-on-unhealthy-food-20170531-gwhb8w.html>

In 2017, Deakin University published a paper titled 'Preschool and school meal policies: an overview of what we know about regulation, implementation, and impact on diet in the UK, Sweden, and Australia'.

The paper details the meals policies that operate in Australian schools and pre-schools and compares their effectiveness with those operating in the United Kingdom and Sweden.

The full text can be accessed at <http://dro.deakin.edu.au/eserv/DU:30100216/sacks-preschoolandschool-2017.pdf>

On November 20, 2014, yahoo!news published a report titled 'Leaked school letter ignites junk food row' which focuses on parents' criticisms of a food confiscation policy apparently being adopted by a Western Australian primary school.

The full text can be accessed at <https://au.news.yahoo.com/leaked-school-letter-ignites-junk-food-row-25568989.html>

On January 12, 2011, the Australian Parliament released a Social Policy Section Research Paper titled, 'Marketing obesity? Junk food, advertising and kids' which noted the extent to which advertising targeting children shaped their food preferences.

The full text can be accessed at [https://www.aph.gov.au/About Parliament/Parliamentary Departments/Parliamentary Library/pubs/rp/rp1011/11rp09](https://www.aph.gov.au/About%20Parliament/Parliamentary%20Departments/Parliamentary%20Library/pubs/rp/rp1011/11rp09)

On July 8, 2009, The Guardian published a report titled 'Pupils' work improves after a healthy lunch' which detailed the results of an English study which showed that better lunchtime nutrition improved students' concentration in class.

The full text can be accessed at

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/jul/08/school-lunches-pupil-concentration>

The British National Health Service has published guidance for assisting schools in developing a packed lunch policy. The guidance states, 'The whole school community and local partnerships should be involved and engaged with developing a packed lunch policy.'

The full text can be accessed at https://ww3.brighton-hove.gov.uk/sites/brighton-hove.gov.uk/files/School%20Lunch%20Box%20Policy_0.pdf

Arguments in favour of schools monitoring student lunches

1. Poor nutrition is common among Australian schoolchildren and their parents. Those who advocate that schools should actively monitor what students are eating for lunch claim that this is necessary to help shift the poor eating habits of many Australian families.

On July 19, 2019, the Australia Institute of Health and Welfare released a report detailing the poor diets of many Australians. The report concluded 'Australians of all ages generally have a poor diet—that is they do not eat enough of the 5 food groups and eat too many discretionary foods high in salt, fat and sugar.'

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/food-nutrition/poor-diet/contents/poor-diet-in-children>

The report found that 7.1 percent of children aged 2-17 consumed sugar sweetened drinks daily in 2017-18. It further found that three to eight serves of discretionary foods (high in sugar, fat, and salt) were consumed by children each day in 2011-12. Children aged 2–17 years who are daily consumers of sugar sweetened drinks consume on average 2.4 cups per day (equivalent to 1.6 cans of soft drink or one 600mL bottle).

Daily consumption of sugar sweetened drinks generally increased as age increased, for both boys and girls—from 4 percent of 2–3-year-olds up to 12 percent of 14–17-year-olds. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/food-nutrition/poor-diet/contents/poor-diet-in-children>

It further found that adult diets were similarly poor. Less than one in ten adults met the recommendations for daily vegetable consumption in 2017-18, while five to seven serves of discretionary foods were consumed by adults per day in 2011-12. 1 in 2 people aged 18 and over (49 percent) did not eat the recommended two serves of fruit, while over 9 in 10 (92 percent) did not eat the recommended 5–6 serves of vegetables. Fruit intake was worse among young people: more than half (54 percent) of those aged 18–24 had inadequate fruit intake, compared to one-third (36 percent) of people aged 75 and over. Fruit and vegetable consumption was also measured over time. Between 2007–08 and 2017–18, the proportion of the population not meeting the fruit and vegetable guidelines remained about the same, approximately 49–52 percent of people do not meet the fruit guidelines, and approximately 93–94 percent do not meet the vegetable guidelines. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/food-nutrition/poor-diet/contents/poor-diet-in-adults>

The decline in children's diets from infancy to school age has also been demonstrated by a Victorian study published in the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics on March 12, 2018. The study found that while over 90 percent of children met Australian

Dietary Guidelines for fruit and vegetable intake at nine months, the number of children eating enough vegetables dropped substantially to less than 10 percent by 18 months and stayed low after that. Fruit intake was better, with most children meeting the guidelines at nine months and 18 months; however, this reduced to only about one third who met the guidelines at five years.

The guidelines recommend that children under two years of age do not eat any discretionary or 'junk' foods, and yet less than 10 percent of children were meeting this guideline. By three and a half years of age, discretionary foods were providing on average more than a quarter of a child's total energy intake - a seriously concerning 235 percent of the recommended upper limit. <https://www.deakin.edu.au/about-deakin/media-releases/articles/urgent-need-to-tackle-poor-diets-of-australian-children-deakin-study>

Lead author Dr Alison Spence, from the Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) at Deakin University, has stated, 'Diets of young children are critically important for their current and future health and this study shows that they are missing out on key food groups like fruits and vegetables and eating too much junk food from an early age.' <https://www.deakin.edu.au/about-deakin/media-releases/articles/urgent-need-to-tackle-poor-diets-of-australian-children-deakin-study>

The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne has warned against adolescents worsening their nutritional status by misusing their growing independence and either indulging excessively in discretionary foods or following fad diets. The Hospital's advice page states, 'As children get older and become more independent, they may decide to follow particular diets or restrict certain food groups. There are many diets that adolescents may find appealing, and it is common for older children to experiment with "fad" diets. Unnecessarily restricting particular food groups may result in nutrient deficiencies which can be detrimental to health as your child may be missing vital nutrients for growth and development (e.g. going gluten-free when it's not needed...)' https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Nutrition_older_children/

In the context of this general background of poor nutrition among children and their parents, one Western Australian teacher has been quoted as saying that while she had some reservations about policing school lunchboxes, she understood why some schools chose to do this. She stated, 'Go sit at a school in a lower socio-economic area - kids with one roll-up for recess, or two dry cruskits, one chocolate chip cookie, or one jam sandwich- this was to cover recess and lunch, everyday...something needs to happen.' <https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/lunchbox-policing-wa-schools-crackdown-on-unhealthy-food-20170531-gwhb8w.html>

2. Poor nutrition negatively affects children's health

Those who favour schools actively monitoring student lunches point to the long-term health consequences of poor nutrition.

It is recognised that what children eat in their early years and the eating patterns they form can have a significant impact on their physical health well into the future. Deb Schofield, diabetes education services manager at Diabetes WA has noted that a lunch box that is packed with energy-dense foods — such as cakes, biscuits, and crisps — can lead to children filling up on those foods and not having room left for foods with enough essential nutrients. A diet substantially composed of high fat and high sugar foods can result in unhealthy weight increases. Ms Schofield has stated, 'Being overweight or obese in childhood means these children are more likely to grow into overweight or obese adults, putting them at risk of multiple chronic conditions, including type 2 diabetes and

cardiovascular disease.' Ms Schofield advises, 'Go for a balanced lunchbox and don't make occasional "extra" foods, such as cakes and crisps, seem like every day eating.' <http://health.thewest.com.au/news/1787/how-eating-can-affect-childrens-wellbeing>

The Victorian government's Better Health Channel notes, 'The number of overweight children in Australia has doubled in recent years, with a quarter of children considered overweight or obese. Causes of obesity in children include unhealthy food choices, lack of physical activity and family eating habits.' The Channel lists health conditions which are related to obesity. Though these conditions usually present in adulthood, they are now being observed in children and adolescents. These conditions include type 2 diabetes – while this condition is most commonly seen in adults, it is now also being diagnosed in children; eating disorders such as bulimia or binge eating; orthopedic disorders – problems with foot structure; liver problems, including fatty liver; cardiomyopathy – a problem with the heart muscle, caused when extra effort is needed to pump blood; respiratory disorders, such as blocked airways and restrictions in the chest wall, which cause breathlessness during exercise; and sleep apnoea – this is a condition that causes difficulty breathing when sleeping. It also causes snoring, waking often and poor sleep. It makes people feel tired and contributes to poor concentration during the day. <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/obesity-in-children-causes>

The 'Obesity Epidemic in Australia Final Report' was released by the Australian Parliament on December 5, 2018. The report presented a similar list of illnesses associated with obesity. It stated, 'The link between obesity and poor health outcomes is well established. Overweight and obesity lead to heightened risk of developing chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. In particular, visceral fat, which is stored around the body's vital organs, has been associated with increased risk of heart disease and metabolic disorders. Being overweight or obese also increases risk for at least 13 types of cancer, including breast and colon cancer. <file:///C:/Users/Pc/Downloads/c01.pdf>

It has been noted that this problem has been developing for at least thirty years, that is, while nearly three cohorts of primary and secondary schoolchildren have completed their education. Analysis of data collected in state surveys between 1967 and 1997 shows that from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s the prevalence of obesity tripled and that of overweight doubled among 7- to 15-year-olds, compared with a much smaller rate of increase over the preceding 16 years. Other data indicates that obesity may be developing at a much younger age. According to recent research from South Australia, the percentage of obese pre-schoolers (children aged four years) in South Australia rose from 3.5 percent for girls and 3.2 percent for boys in 1995 to 5.8 percent for girls and 4.1 percent for boys in 2002.

https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/archive/obesity

It has also been noted that in addition to predisposing children to overweight and obesity and the risk of many associated diseases, poor childhood nutrition threatens dental health. Dr Justin Wong, a specialist paediatric dentist, has stated, 'More than half of decayed teeth in children are currently untreated and yet it can have negative effects on their quality of life, including pain, difficulty eating, altered sleeping habits, speech, growth and social behaviour.' The frequency of consumption of sugary foods has a much greater influence on decay risk than the actual amount eaten. So regular consumption of sugary treats, including dried fruit, fruit leathers, muesli bars and fruit drinks (including 100 per cent juices) leads to an increase in decay-causing bacteria in the mouth,

increasing the risk of developing tooth decay. Dr Wong recommends, 'Whole fresh fruit and vegetables are preferable to processed foods with added sugars because decay-causing bacteria are less able to create acids from fruit sugars.'

<http://health.thewest.com.au/news/1787/how-eating-can-affect-childrens-wellbeing>

In this context of increasing obesity and ill health among children there are parents and others who support the actions of those schools that are attempting to monitor student lunches. Sarah Wilson, who hosts the education and support blog 'I Quit Sugar', has stated, 'Clearly these teachers feel someone needs to do something about the issue... Every school day we entrust our kids to teachers between 9am and 3pm. Rather than sledge them, let's support them to do it in a way that neither shames nor misguides.'

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/opinion/should-school-lunch-boxes-be-monitored/news-story/9a1f740014fef0b328eb6a70d29f375d>

3. Good nutrition positively affects children's academic progress

Those who favour schools actively monitoring student lunches point to the positive effect that good nutrition can have on children's mental state and their capacity to learn. Research in the United States has recently shown a link between healthy school lunches and improved student test scores. In the United States students' meals are supplied by contractors and served in a canteen setting. A Californian study has demonstrated that those schools supplying the healthiest meals to their students showed improved student performance on a standardised across-state test of between .03 and .04 standard deviations – a statistically significant improvement.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/03/do-healthy-lunches-improve-student-test-scores/520272/>

Sean Patrick Corcoran, an associate professor of economics and education policy at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, has stated, 'I've seen a number of other rigorous studies that also find a connection between healthy eating and academic performance. Students who eat regular, healthy meals are less likely to be tired, are more attentive in class, and retain more information.'

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/03/do-healthy-lunches-improve-student-test-scores/520272/>

In Britain, a School Food Trust study conducted in 2009 found that improving food and dining facilities had a positive effect on pupils' behaviour and meant they were better at working on their own. Researchers made improvements at seven schools and used another four where lunch improvements had not been made as a control. Observers recorded pupil behaviour at the beginning of the study and then again 15 weeks later. The study found that pupils at the schools where improvements had been made were 18 percent more likely to be 'on task' (concentrating and engaged with learning) compared with those in the control schools. The study concluded, 'The net effect of these improvements in behaviour is likely to mean that more time is spent on achieving the objectives of the lesson and less time on activities or discipline needed to retain the pupils' focus.'

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/jul/08/school-lunches-pupil-concentration>

A 2015 Canadian study similarly found that lower diet quality, along with breakfast skipping and sugary drink consumption, were each associated with lower academic performance, reinforcing the value of good nutrition to children's health and learning. <https://theconversation.com/why-your-kids-need-a-national-school-food-program-83135>

The Victorian government's Healthy Eating Advisory Service also makes the link between children's diets and their academic performance. It notes, 'The research

suggests that eating a healthy and nutritious diet can improve mental health, enhance cognitive skills like concentration and memory and improve academic performance.' It further notes, 'Consuming too many nutritionally-poor foods and drinks that are high in added fats, sugars and salt, such as lollies, chips and fried foods has been connected to emotional and behavioural problems in children and adolescents. In fact, young people that have the unhealthiest diets are nearly 80 percent more likely to have depression than those with the healthiest diets.' The site quotes the principal of Marlborough Primary School, who states, 'When kids eat a healthy diet with a wide variety of fruit and vegetables in that diet, they actually perform better in the classroom. They're going to have better stamina with their work, and at the end of the day it means we'll get better learning results which will impact on them in the long term.'

<https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/schools/classroom/food-mood-and-learning>

An article published by Campbellsville University, Kentucky, in December 2016 on its Education site stressed the impact of school lunch on student performance. It stated, 'There are several direct effects that involve the immediate impact of nutrition on the daily performance of a student. Mental and behavioral problems can be traced back to unhealthy nutrition and poor eating habits.

Nutritional deficiencies in zinc, B vitamins, Omega-3 fatty acids and protein have been shown to affect the cognitive development of children. There is also evidence to suggest that diets with high amounts of trans and saturated fats can have a negative impact on cognition. This will harm the ability of students to learn at a pace necessary for school success.

Scientists have also established a link between student behavior and nutrition. Access to proper nutrition can help students maintain psychosocial well-being and reduce aggression. This can have a positive effect on students by avoiding discipline and school suspension.' <https://online.campbellsville.edu/education/healthy-body-healthy-mind-the-impact-of-school-lunch-on-student-performance/>

4. Advertising and packaging make healthy food choices difficult for parents and children

Those who argue that monitoring student lunches has a role to play in promoting healthy eating claim that it is necessary to help combat the influence of advertising and misleading labels which influence both children and their parents to purchase potentially harmful foods.

In 2014, Choice magazine published an article outlining the influence of advertising on the foods young people choose to eat. The article claims, 'Research has...shown advertising plays an important role in promoting unhealthy eating habits, influencing the brands children choose and encouraging them to like energy-dense salty, sugary or fatty foods.' <https://www.choice.com.au/shopping/packaging-labelling-and-advertising/advertising/articles/junk-food-advertising-to-kids>

Associate professor Teresa Davis from the University of Sydney Business School has warned that the influence of advertising campaigns can be very difficult for parents to counter. She has stated, 'The battleground between the food industry and parents is certainly not a level playing field. Advertising to kids is all-pervasive - [it's] a multi-billion-dollar industry with sophisticated, constantly evolving psychological techniques. We expect individual parents to be smarter than clever market researchers and branding experts, but not all parents possess the nutritional knowledge to counteract misleading marketing messages.' Davis warns that reversing children's preferences from unhealthy to healthy foods is hard when they are swamped with messages about

'treat' foods and there is almost no promotion of healthy food.

<https://www.choice.com.au/shopping/packaging-labelling-and-advertising/advertising/articles/junk-food-advertising-to-kids>

Jane Martin from the Obesity Policy Coalition (OPC) has cautioned parents that many fast food and soft drink companies attempt to confuse the picture by associating their brands with sporting activities that are seen as healthy. Martin states, 'Fast food companies sponsoring sports undermines the healthy eating messages that governments and parents are trying to promote. It normalises the relationship between junk food and sport, sending the message that if I play sport, I can eat what I want.' There are many sporting activities sponsored by fast food and soft drink manufacturers. McDonald's sponsors children's sports such as Little Athletics, Hoop Time basketball, and Swimming Queensland. KFC and Milo are sponsors of Cricket Australia. Coca-Cola sponsors Bicycle Network, which has a Happiness Cycle program for teens.

<https://www.choice.com.au/shopping/packaging-labelling-and-advertising/advertising/articles/junk-food-advertising-to-kids>

In a 2011 a research paper titled 'Marketing obesity? Junk food, advertising and kids' was prepared by the Social Policy Section of the Australian Parliament. It noted the extent to which advertising targeting children shaped their food preferences. A British Heart Foundation and Children's Food Campaign was cited which concluded that food marketing to children is almost always for unhealthy products and that this plays an important role in encouraging unhealthy eating habits which are likely to continue into adulthood. Further, evidence suggests that advertisements affect food choices at both brand and category level. That is, a McDonald's hamburger advertisement is likely not only to make it more probable that a person will buy a McDonald's hamburger in preference to another brand, but also that the person will buy a hamburger per se. There is evidence that advertising unhealthy foods to children influences not only which brands they choose, but the overall balance of their diet, encouraging them to eat energy-dense salty, sugary, or fatty foods in place of those which are more nutritious and wholesome.

<https://www.aph.gov.au/About Parliament/Parliamentary Departments/Parliamentary Library/pubs/rp/rp1011/11rp09>

The parliamentary research paper also noted the extent to which food and soft drink manufacturers were harnessing children to demand that their parents purchase unhealthy items. This is referred to as 'pester power'. The paper states, 'According to the American Centre for Science in the Public Interest, pestering strategies undermine parental authority. Parents are forced to choose between being "the bad guy" by saying no to junk food or giving in to incessant demands. This conflict in negotiation between in parents and children is has been recognised as common, with "co-shopping" described by parents as stressful because of the purchase demands made by children. One marketing website promotes pester power as "a passport to growth" for companies. It advises advertisers "to develop a strategy, which targets the kids and influences them totally, so that next time they are out with their parents, they get what they want".'

<https://www.aph.gov.au/About Parliament/Parliamentary Departments/Parliamentary Library/pubs/rp/rp1011/11rp09>

It is also claimed that, despite food labelling regulations, some companies persist in making misleading claims about the nutritional value of their products. In 2016, for example, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) took legal action against Heinze Company Australia for its packaging of Little Kids Shredz

products. Heinze was found to have falsely marketed these products, which contain more than 60 percent sugar, as healthy options for young children. The ACCC demonstrated that the Shredz packaging featured images of fresh fruit and vegetables and statements such as '99 percent fruit and veg' to deliberately mislead the public. <https://www.adnews.com.au/news/heinz-called-out-over-misleading-kids-food-claims> The combination of advertising pressure from food and soft drink companies and misleading packaging from some food manufacturers makes it challenging for parents to supply genuinely nutritious lunches. Supporters of schools monitoring student lunches argue that schools can assist parents by helping them resist the influence of advertisers and by clarifying the nutritional value of some items.

5. Schools' lunchbox policies and monitoring programs are intended to be respectful and collaborative

Supporters of schools developing lunchbox policies and monitoring student lunchboxes argue that these are intended to be respectfully and collaboratively developed and implemented.

The approach recommended has been explained by the South Australian Department of Education in its guidelines for schools. The Department guidelines state, 'Working with children to improve their understanding about healthy food choices can have a positive impact upon what is brought to school. This includes making sure parents and caregivers are aware of the site's policy around healthy food and encouraging them to consider it when providing food and drinks. It is important that teachers and carers do not judge what is in a child's lunchbox or send food home with a child.'

<https://www.education.sa.gov.au/parents-and-families/safety-and-wellbeing/food-brought-home-healthy-food-choices> The language used in these guidelines is respectful and non-proscriptive. Its emphasis is educative, stressing the importance of making parents 'aware' of the school's healthy food choices policy, but it is not heavily directive. It encourages a non-judgmental approach and specifically warns against teachers making judgements about parental food choices and states that food should not be confiscated and returned home with the child.

The same guidelines also emphasise a collaborative approach. Referring to energy drinks, the guidelines state, 'There are no set guidelines for students bringing energy drinks to school. Individual schools are encouraged to develop policies in consultation with their communities. Teachers are encouraged to use information about energy drinks to work with students and children to help them make informed and responsible choices about their use. Providing accurate information to the parent community and governing council about the possible harmful effects of energy drinks is also important.' <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/parents-and-families/safety-and-wellbeing/food-brought-home-healthy-food-choices> Again, what is being stressed is the importance of community education and consultation.

The Healthy Kids Association, originally the New South Wales School Canteen Association, also adopts a similar respectful, non-directive tone when addressing parents about the preparation of school lunch boxes. It states, 'With the unpredictable nature of our day to day lives, preparing and packing a healthy lunchbox can be a difficult task. Finding time to shop and prepare interesting and healthy meals for school lunches can be stressful. But the foods we send to school with our kids can contribute up to 1/3 of their daily intake of nutrients. So, it's important to pack a balanced lunch to ensure they're getting the nutrients they need.' <https://healthy-kids.com.au/parents/packing-a-healthy-lunchbox/>

In Britain, the situation regarding the regulation of school lunchboxes is broadly that in Australia. Packed lunches brought from home are not covered by the regulations surrounding food sold in school canteens. However, schools in Britain, as in Australia, can set their own policies regarding the types of food consumed on their premises during the school day. <https://www.teeslaw.com/insights/can-a-school-decide-what-your-child-eats/>

The British National Health Service has published guidance for assisting schools in developing a packed lunch policy. The guidance states, 'The whole school community and local partnerships should be involved and engaged with developing a packed lunch policy.' Though the guidance recommends schools monitor school lunches, it suggests that this should be in line with the policy developed through community consultation. Its emphasis is on gradual change, education, and community involvement. It states, 'Schools should introduce changes slowly and in agreement with whole school community, with a final goal of developing a school policy which fits in with national standards.' The National Health Service guidance also stresses a responsive approach which evaluates the effectiveness of schools' packed lunch policies to see if they need reform. It states, 'Collecting data and monitoring the impact of your policy will allow you to see and make improvements.' https://www3.brighton-hove.gov.uk/sites/brighton-hove.gov.uk/files/School%20Lunch%20Box%20Policy_0.pdf

Irby Primary School is an example of a British school attempting to follow an educative, non-judgmental approach. Before giving advice on what should be included in a school lunchbox it states, 'We appreciate this may not suit all families and the decision about what to include in your child's lunchbox remains with parents.' Regarding the monitoring of lunchboxes, it states, 'Lunchbox contents are monitored from time to time, as one way of evaluating the effectiveness of the schools Healthy Eating Policy. Feedback for pupils remains generic and focuses on "healthy" food items e.g. "Well done, I see you have some juicy fruit and veg". Where there may be a high number of products which are high in fat, sugar, or salt, this will be used as a focus for PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic) lessons...'

<https://www.irbyprimary.com/s/Irby-Food-Policy-2020.rtf>

Arguments against schools monitoring student lunches

1. School monitoring of students' lunchboxes can alienate parents and distress children. Opponents of schools attempting to regulate what parents feed their children argue that this is seen as an intrusion by parents and can be upsetting for children.

One of the concerns parents express is that schools criticising what parents feed their children creates confusion and distress for children who are confronted by conflicting sources of authority. One United States mother has described sending her child to a pre-school program with a lunch that contained a turkey and cheese sandwich, a banana, apple juice and potato chips. A state inspector assessing the pre-K program at the school said the girl also needed a vegetable. The mother claims her daughter was so intimidated by the inspection process that she was too scared to eat all her homemade lunch. <https://www.nccivitas.org/2012/state-inspectors-searching-childrens-lunch-boxes-this-isnt-china-is-it/> Another United States mother recalled a similar experience when her ten-year-old daughter's teacher instructed her to throw her crackers out because they were unhealthy and advised her to eat more fruit and vegetables. The girl

was subsequently teased by other students over her eating habits and the mother visited the school to complain to the principal.

<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/family-meals-focus/55-school-nutrition-horror-stories/> A spokesperson for the Ellyn Satter Institute (a United States organisation promoting healthy family nutrition) has stated, 'Excellent nutrition education in the schools supports and works with parents. It does not circumvent, undermine, or criticize them, directly or indirectly through their children.'

<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/family-meals-focus/55-school-nutrition-horror-stories/>

Parents also doubt that teachers have the right to attempt to determine what their children will eat and have criticised them for what is seen as highhanded behaviour. In one Western Australian school a letter was sent home to parents indicating that items such as lollies, chocolates and potato chips would be confiscated from student lunchboxes and not returned till the end of the school day. The letter stated, 'If your child has chosen to make inappropriate food choices for their lunch they will not be provided with an alternative.' <https://au.news.yahoo.com/leaked-school-letter-ignites-junk-food-row-25568989.html> Lisa Wolff, the website editor of Mouths of Mums, has stated, 'What gives the teacher the right to judge what is or isn't good for our kids... Our mums feel strongly that teachers need to focus on what they're good at — teaching our kids — and leave the lunchbox alone.'

<https://www.heraldsun.com.au/education/parents-slam-teachers-over-school-lunch-box-bans/news-story/683492d192e63e61b146be263d4055d1> In an opinion piece published in The Herald Sun on March 3, 2021, Suzie O'Brien quoted a range of complaints posted on Facebook from parents who believe that teachers are wrongfully intruding in what is a family matter. One parent was quoted as saying, 'What gives teachers the right to take food or say no to the items us parents pack?' Another parent stated, 'I don't think anyone, including teachers, should have a say in what you feed your own child (unless allergies are involved).'

<https://www.heraldsun.com.au/education/parents-slam-teachers-over-school-lunch-box-bans/news-story/683492d192e63e61b146be263d4055d1> Another parent responded to a Western Australian school's attempts to regulate what her child ate with, 'How about I feed my kid whatever I want and you mind your own business...'

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-9199479/Parents-slam-lunchbox-police-ridiculous-confusing-rules.html> A further Western Australian mother stated, 'I informed the school that when they buy, make and pack my kids' lunchboxes, then and only then can they dictate to me, their parent, what my child can and [can't] eat.'

<https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/lunchbox-policing-wa-schools-crackdown-on-unhealthy-food-20170531-gwhb8w.html>

Claire Tanner, the lead author of a 2019 University of Melbourne study of schools' attempts to regulate students' lunches, stated, 'Rigid school rules and surveillance of childhood eating at school can produce feelings of frustration, concern, worry, upset and anger for families, and feelings of worry, embarrassment, fear and shame for children.' The University of Melbourne study found in some cases, photos of children with 'good' and 'bad' lunch boxes were circulated around the school to teach others what to bring and what not to bring. Young students were also singled out by teachers and given yard duties or penalty points for having the wrong food, the study found. Parents expressed anger and frustration at what they saw as the stigmatising treatment of their children.

<https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/parents-clashing-with-teachers-over-unhealthy-lunch-boxes/news-story/46584b298e7a2f37aa5aeecc7b9a424>

A similar study conducted by a Monash University team in 2020 found that the negative and punitive approach taken by many schools meant that children and parents dismiss the healthy eating information being supplied as irrelevant to the home setting. The study's lead author, Professor Jane Maree Maher, stated that parents rejected the moral 'assumptions that if "unhealthy" foods are in a lunchbox then children have made bad choices and parents are not caring enough to provide healthy food'.

<https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/kids-dont-like-being-told-by-schools-what-they-should-be-eating-new-study-finds/news-story/f81aa10030f5a09119b4fabf8d31afea>

It has further been suggested that where poverty restricts what parents are able to supply as lunches for their children, then the strict enforcement of school rules regarding food worsens the situation for parents and children and serves to create embarrassment and ill feeling. A 2018 survey of 1,000 Australian parents showed that 22 percent of children under the age of 15 live in a household that has run out of food at some stage over the past year. One in five children affected go to school without eating breakfast at least once a week, while one in 10 go a whole day at least once a week without eating anything at all. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-15/report-shows-one-in-five-children-suffer-from-food-insecurity/9653532> A former nurse and widowed mother of four children interviewed by the ABC, in April 2019, stated, 'Sometimes the kids would go to school with no lunch. There would always be something on the table at night, but it might not have been as nutritious as it should have been.' Thirty-six percent of parents surveyed in 2018 said they would skip a meal at least once a week so their children could eat, while 29 percent would go a whole day at least once a week without eating at all. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-15/report-shows-one-in-five-children-suffer-from-food-insecurity/9653532> Critics have noted that in circumstances such as these, the enforcement of school rules around what students should eat for lunch is not appropriate.

2. Schools healthy eating guidelines to parents are often unclear and not accepted by parents

In addition to questioning schools' right to regulate what families supply for children's lunches, some parents complain that the regulations given them are confusing and unclear.

Such complaints were made regarding a Western Australian school where students were sent home a list of foods that were 'recommended' for lunch and foods that were 'not permitted'. Among the sources of confusion was that while 'yoghurt' featured on the recommended list, 'yoghurt pouches/tubes' were also listed on the not permitted list. Among the many complaints, one mother noted, 'You can also get sugar-free all-natural yoghurt in pouches, yet they say no yoghurt pouches.... but yoghurt not in pouches is okay? Maybe it's about packaging, either way it's overkill.'

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-9199479/Parents-slam-lunchbox-police-ridiculous-confusing-rules.html>

The above example comes from a school applying the traffic light system. This is a commonly used guideline for healthy choices at schools which categorises foods and drinks according to their nutritional value and is used in many school canteens. Green being the best, and red food — which includes cakes, confectionery, fats, and soft drink — not being recommended. Parents have complained that these rules are inflexible and difficult to apply. For example, one parent has complained that in her child's classroom, 'Organic sugarless zucchini muffins and banana and almond muffins were sent home.

Cupcakes were sent home which had less sugar and calorie content than the approved muesli bar.' Another mother complained, 'I got a note for sending chocolate tiny teddies, yet the honey or plain ones were absolutely acceptable.'

<https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/parenting/kids/mum-receives-warning-note-from-school-over-bad-food-in-lunch-box/news-story/7d2e9af2d84bb403bab7155746c3939e>

Another Western Australian mother complained, 'Since when is popcorn not allowed as a snack? It's not nuts, and I personally don't consider it junk! I have no idea what to put in her bloody lunchbox beside a sandwich.' <https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/lunchbox-policing-wa-schools-crackdown-on-unhealthy-food-20170531-gwhb8w.html>

It has also been noted that not only are the regulations applied at individual schools difficult to understand and apply, but regulations vary between schools, making it hard for parents with children at several schools to adhere to the different requirements. In a Channel Nine mother's segment written by Jo Abi, the author noted, 'It doesn't help that each school has come up with a different set of rules, so if your children attend different schools, it is highly likely that you will confuse them.'

<https://honey.nine.com.au/mums/school-lunches-rules/502a88a6-a9ef-41cc-a3f3-cb350b7d7cbf>

It has further been claimed that in addition to state and school food guideline sometimes being confusing, schools do not always consistently apply the guidelines they seek to have parents and students follow. On January 9, 2019, The Conversation published an article by Jane Martin, Executive Manager of the Obesity Policy Coalition, and Senior Fellow, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at The University of Melbourne. Dr Martin stressed the important role for governments and by extension schools in helping to educate parents regarding healthy diets for their children. She stressed the dangers associated with misleading packaging and advertising which disguise unhealthy ingredients in products marketed as suitable for children. However, Dr Martin argues that current eating guidelines are not sufficiently clear or consistent. She states, 'Schools need consistent guidelines and policies that support children and parents in making healthy choices. With a lack of consistent messaging and leadership, it's no wonder there is confusion about what is healthy.' She cites as an example, 'Children are exposed to pervasive and persistent junk food marketing through TV, social media or on their way to school. Then at school, there are mixed messages about what they should eat – some schools enforce no lolly policies yet use lollies in school fundraisers.' <https://theconversation.com/lets-untangle-the-murky-politics-around-kids-and-food-and-ditch-the-guilt-108328>

Overall, it appears that communication with parents is unsatisfactory and that parents do not feel properly informed of what they are being asked to do. Nor does it seem that parents accept the rationale behind some of the regulations being imposed. Inadequate and unclear communication of eating guidelines is likely to make school attempts to improve student eating habits ineffective. A 2019 evaluation of several studies on the impact of school lunchbox interventions on what children eat was inconclusive with some studies reporting some positive impacts and other reporting none. No studies reported any impact on student obesity.

<https://ijbnpa.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12966-019-0798-1>

A study conducted by a Monash University team in 2020 concluded that school guidelines around what should be packed in student lunches were not clear. The study's lead author, Jane Maree Maher stated, 'Generally, children and parents felt school food

messages are unclear, contradictory and not relevant to them.'

<https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/kids-dont-like-being-told-by-schools-what-they-should-be-eating-new-study-finds/news-story/f81aa10030f5a09119b4fabf8d31afea>

Critics argue that without clear communication between schools and parents and without parent acceptance of the eating habits being encouraged schools' attempts to regulate student lunches are likely to fail.

3. Schools may be unaware of the food aversions and allergies of particular children
Opponents of schools attempting to regulate what parents feed their children argue that teachers are often unaware of the allergies of individual children or of their personal food preferences.

Susie O'Brien, in an opinion piece published in The Herald Sun on March 3, 2021, stated, 'Many kids also have special needs or are fussy so parents have a hard enough time getting their kids to eat without these harsh restrictions.'

<https://www.heraldsun.com.au/education/parents-slam-teachers-over-school-lunch-box-bans/news-story/683492d192e63e61b146be263d4055d1>

Science Direct has explained that sensory food aversions (SFAs – that is an absolute refusal to eat certain types of food due to either taste or texture issues) are common. Some children refuse to eat a few select foods, whereas others will refuse most foods, only accepting a select few. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/neuroscience/food-aversion> NAPA (the Neurological and Physical Abilitation Centre) has explained that extreme picky eating may actually be a food aversion and that some children with such aversions may be able to eat no more than 30 types of food. Those who are diagnosed as 'problem eaters' eat less than 20 different foods. The Centre recommends that the best way to deal with children with food aversions is 'by providing a positive mealtime experience'.

<https://napacentre.com.au/food-aversion/> Positive modelling of eating a wide range of foods, always supplying a 'safe' food the child is prepared to eat and resisting trying to enforce the eating of particular foods are presented as key strategies in helping children expand the range of foods they may be able to eat. Insensitive reactions to a child's food choices and attempts to compel students to eat certain foods are likely to be counterproductive and may induce vomiting and food refusal on the part of the child.

<https://napacentre.com.au/food-aversion/> Some child experts suggest that food aversions that involve aversions to certain textures of foods may indicate a sensory processing disorder requiring diagnosis and management.

<https://www.verywellhealth.com/how-to-help-children-with-texture-aversions-to-food-1323972> Parenting blogs suggest that overcoming schoolchildren's food aversions is a whole family affair involving trialing new foods 'in the safety of home', making trying new foods fun, rewarding the adoption of new food types and giving lots of praise. <https://starlightandstories.com/2017/11/03/tackling-food-aversions-with-a-school-aged-child/>

Nutritionists further argue against shaming children over their food choices. Australian Nutritionist, Kelly Fullerton, has stated, 'Shame is debilitating and a violation of our rights. When we've been shamed, we carry a negative burden that shifts thinking about food from being safe to something destructive...Children can develop maladaptive eating behaviours that can prevent them from learning to like new foods. Ultimately, food shame does not improve health and increased anxiety around food decreases appetite and food acceptance.'

<https://www.the curious nutritionist.com.au/childs-teacher-is-the-lunch-box-police/>

These arguments suggest the harm potentially done by any bluntly controlling

measures schools may attempt to apply when seeking to have children eat more nutritious lunches.

In addition to food aversions, there are a significant number of children who suffer from food allergies. An allergy is when the immune system reacts to a substance (allergen) in the environment which is usually harmless (such as a certain type of food). Symptoms may include hives, swelling of the lips, eyes or face, vomiting or wheeze. An extreme anaphylactic reaction may cause the sufferer to stop breathing and untreated may result in death. <https://www.allergy.org.au/patients/food-allergy/food-allergy> The Australian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy has stated, 'Food allergy occurs in around 10 percent of infants, 4-8 percent of children, and about 2 percent of adults in Australia and New Zealand.' Peanut, tree nuts, shellfish, fish, sesame, and egg are the most common food allergens in older children and adults. Other triggers such as fruits and vegetables have been described, and almost any food can cause an allergic reaction.

<https://www.allergy.org.au/patients/food-allergy/food-allergy> Hospital admissions for severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) have doubled over the last decade in Australia, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom. In Australia, admissions for anaphylaxis due to food allergy in children aged zero to four years are even higher, having increased five-fold over the same period.

<https://www.allergy.org.au/patients/food-allergy/food-allergy>

Food allergies, especially to dairy products, wheat products, and certain fruits and vegetables may limit parents' choices when preparing their children's lunches and make it inappropriate for schools to attempt to proscribe certain food groups.

4. Providing free, well-balanced school lunches is more effective than monitoring and prohibiting certain foods

Some opponents of schools attempting to regulate what parents and guardians put in children's lunchboxes argue that a more effective way to ensure students have quality lunches is for the school to supply them.

There have been numerous studies which have claimed that free school lunches perform an important role in helping to guarantee good nutrition in all children, irrespective of economic circumstances. It has also been claimed that these lunches help educate children in healthy eating patterns and educate their food preferences. A study published in 2017 in *Critical Reviews in Food and Nutrition* argues, 'School meal programs are of particular interest for improving public diet because they reach children at a population scale across socio-economic classes and for over a decade of their lives, and because food habits of children are more malleable than those of adults.'

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10408398.2016.1197180>

Similarly, Professor Rebecca Golley from Flinders University, commenting in February 2021, stated that a universal lunch program would help boost health and education outcomes. Professor Golley has argued that Australia should be learning from places like France and Japan, where school lunch programs have led to bolstered health outcomes for children. The Professor has stated, 'We want to see whether there are... options where industry, government and the not-for-profit sector could work together to achieve something more sustainable and more nutritious to support children's health and learning.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-15/experts-call-for-healthy-lunch-program-across-australian-schools/13153270>

In March 2020, The Sydney Morning Herald published a comment by Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator and professor of education policy at the Gonski Institute for Education at the University of New South Wales. Finland provides free, catered hot school meals to

all pupils from pre-primary to upper secondary education every school day, as guaranteed by the country's 1948 Basic Education Act. Professor Sahlberg stated, 'Some [Australian] schools offer children breakfast or lunch daily, but the majority have to get by with what's in their lunchbox. My short experience of Australian lunchboxes suggests children don't eat well enough during school days to learn as we parents would expect them to. Some basic facts speak for themselves: only one of 20 school-aged children eat enough vegetables daily.' <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/healthy-children-learn-better-so-why-don-t-we-feed-them-at-school-20200211-p53zp5.html>

Professor Sahlberg went on to explain that school lunches are problematic not only because they are not always filled with nutritious food but also because the food that parents and guardians supply may not always be eaten by their children. A freshly cooked, communal school lunch provides a greater incentive for children to eat.

Professor Sahlberg noted, 'I live in Sydney with our two school-aged boys. Each evening we parents ask the same question: what to put in their lunchboxes? We pack food we think is healthy, but too often carrots and apples return home uneaten.'

Australia is among the wealthiest countries in the world. If we want our children to be the best educated, they need to eat better. There is no better place to do that than school. Finland, Sweden and Estonia are among countries where all children have a nutritious lunch every day for free.' <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/healthy-children-learn-better-so-why-don-t-we-feed-them-at-school-20200211-p53zp5.html>

There have been trials of free lunch programs in some Australian states and territories. Currently, the Queensland Greens have as one of their policies 'a universal, free school breakfast and lunch program in every state primary and secondary school in Queensland, to ensure every child has access to a healthy breakfast and lunch.' They have pledged to establish a \$1.2 billion fund for state schools to upgrade infrastructure where needed to accommodate the breakfast and lunch program including kitchen facilities and eating areas.

The breakfasts and lunches would be required to adhere to the Australian Dietary Guidelines outlined by the Australian Government to ensure every child has access to a healthy breakfast and lunch. Schools would be resourced to accommodate any dietary or cultural requirements. <https://greens.org.au/qld/freelunch>

There are advocates for free school lunches in many other countries. Sarah Riggs Stapleton, Assistant Professor, Education Studies, College of Education, University of Oregon, has stated, 'I believe it's our duty in schools to treat students with dignity and compassion. Moreover, access to food is a basic human need and should be considered a right – regardless of income. The best way to [provide good food without shame] in U.S. public schools is to provide every student with free meals.'

<https://theconversation.com/we-should-serve-kids-food-in-school-not-shame-81787>

5. Food education is more effective than monitoring and prohibiting certain foods

Critics of the rigorous monitoring of school lunches argue that it is counter-productive and that education and guidance are more effective. Some critics further argue that for food education to be successful the emphasis in some schools needs to shift and teachers need to be better trained.

Australian nutritionist, Kelly Fullerton, has stated, 'Lunch box policing in schools, while coming from a place of wanting the best for children's health has provoked a backlash from parents and the media. When there's an assumption that eating is easy and that rigid rules will fix unhealthy eating, it...sets children up to be less motivated to eat well

and places a great amount of stress on parents doing their best to navigate a very complex food environment as well as help their child/ren establish food skills...

There also seems to be an understanding that a healthy eating policy...is...permission to audit or inspect school lunchboxes on their nutritional content. This practice is highly unethical and not endorsed by government education departments.'

<https://www.thecuriousnutritionist.com.au/the-solution-to-healthy-eating-without-lunch-box-policing/>

Fullerton argues that schools need to educate children to eat properly rather than simply attempt to control the food their parents or guardians place in their lunchboxes. She states, 'The current Australian Curriculum allows for cross-curricular approaches to learning about food, but this needs to be considered in an age-appropriate way. [Put] as many sensory experiences with food education at the forefront of learning. Children do not see nutrition, they see food. Make the food they're not familiar with or still learning to like accessible.' She also suggests that changes need to be made to the whole school environment to encourage positive learning about different foods. She states, 'Schools that have a kitchen garden program are ultimately increasing access to vegetables, improving knowledge ...of food, and promoting the language of food. Experiences in context are extremely powerful enablers. Every food experience that's provided adds up. Classroom celebrations can be an opportunity to add vegetables, sausage sizzles can have salads made by the children from the school garden, tuck-shop menu items can be trialled with children's input.' <https://www.thecuriousnutritionist.com.au/the-solution-to-healthy-eating-without-lunch-box-policing/>

Fullerton concludes, 'A whole school approach that allows all stakeholders to participate in learning about food with rich and real hands-on practical experiences constructs a foundation of food education that will lead to long term healthy eating.'

<https://www.thecuriousnutritionist.com.au/the-solution-to-healthy-eating-without-lunch-box-policing/>

A similar endorsement of the value of school gardens in educating student food choices has been made by Canadian educators. Sunday Harrison, founder and executive director of Green Thumbs Growing Kids, has stated, 'Research has shown that when children are involved in gardening at their school [they] show a willingness to try new foods, their academic achievement increases (especially in the sciences), and their social and emotional development is supported.' <https://peopleforeducation.ca/events/strategies-to-engage-students-in-healthy-eating/>

It has further been noted that for schools to successfully educate students about food, there will need to be curriculum changes and further teacher education. On January 7, 2019, The Conversation published an article by Tony Worsley, Chair in Behavioural Nutrition, Deakin University; Janandani Nanayakkara, PhD (Nutrition), Deakin University; and Melissa Burton, PhD student, Deakin University. The article was titled 'Why we need to take food education in Australian schools more seriously' and, though focusing on Australian secondary schools, argued that food education needs to be reformed across the Australian education system. The authors state, 'A growing evidence base, mainly in the US, Canada, western Europe and Australia suggests food literacy and skills education programs lead to greater confidence in performing practical food skills, such as planning and preparing meals, interpreting food labels, basic food safety, food regulations. This, in turn, is associated with healthier dietary choices...

The fundamental question is: Does [the current food curriculum] meet the present and future life needs of students and their families? At present, food education tends to be

patchy, with some emphasis on students' acquisition of food preparation skills but lesser coverage of environmental and social issues, marketing practices or family dynamics.

Possible solutions include providing more intensive education about food in university teacher education programs and continuing professional education for food teachers.'

<https://theconversation.com/why-we-need-to-take-food-education-in-australian-schools-more-seriously-106849>

Further implications

Concern regarding the diet and health of Australian children has sparked debate on the way schools should respond. Regulating school lunches does not seem a sufficient response. If social media is an accurate gauge, teachers monitoring student lunchboxes appears to provoke hostility among parents and so may not be an effective tool for educating either children or their families about good eating habits. It also does little to address social inequality, where children may be poorly fed or sometimes not fed at all because of family poverty.

One proposal which seems to be building a slow momentum is that schools should supply meals to students. Currently, many schools across Australia have set up free breakfast clubs, or offer emergency food and lunches. These measures are targeted at children who might otherwise go hungry. However, these programs are not consistent across Australia, with some funded by schools, and others through food agencies, donations, or by state governments. The Victorian government, for instance, spent A\$13.7 million on breakfast clubs from 2016 to 2019. As a result, students in around 500 of Victoria's most disadvantaged primary schools have had access to nutritious food. The Victorian government has also committed a further \$58 million to expand the program to 1,000 schools in the state from 2019 to 2023, providing free lunches and holiday food supplies to many schools that had not previously been able to supply them. Other examples include the New South Wales government's commitment of \$8 million in June 2019 to expand their School Breakfast 4 Health program to an additional 500 schools in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. The challenges posed by COVID19, which has made the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged more evident, appears to have increased pressure for more formal and widespread provision of meals through schools. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/insight/schools-provide-food-for-many-hungry-children-this-needs-to-continue-when-classes-go-online>

The possibility of Australian schools supplying all students with lunches has attracted significant recent attention. Some of these school lunch proposals would involve parents having to pay a charge for the food supplied. A report published in January 2021 detailed the findings of a Flinders University investigation into the pros and cons of school provided lunches. It concluded that the uniform delivery of lunchtime food at school could be a solution to better childhood nutrition and learning in Australia. As outlined in the Flinders scheme, nutritious meals would be prepared on site and served to children in their classroom, school hall or school yard, compared with the current school food model in Australia where generally parents provide lunch to their children, either as a lunchbox packed from home or purchased from a school canteen. Under this proposal, parents would pay for meals, with fees subsidised according to family income. Teachers could also eat the meals, and students could have the option to be involved in the cooking. The advantage of this type of scheme would be some offset in the cost to government, though the charging of a fee might reduce the number of children who

would take part. <https://www.news-medical.net/news/20210121/School-provided-lunches-could-be-a-solution-to-better-childhood-nutrition.aspx>

There has also been some interest within several Australian jurisdictions in supplying free school lunches to all children. In December 2020, the results of a trial of free school lunches in three Tasmanian schools were reported. All children at these schools were invited to a hot sit-down meal every day for four weeks. Numerous improvements were noted, including an improvement in school attendance. One of the school principals stated, 'We've seen a lot more student engagement in the classrooms, a lot more attention, focus and drive with their learning... The food that's being provided isn't just a sandwich. It's food that's been nutritionally looked at so that it sustains their energy levels and their... stamina throughout their learning day,'

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-10/students-who-get-free-hot-meals-more-likely-to-attend-school/12966772> Similarly, in September 2020, as part of its re-election program, the Canberra Labor government announced a plan to trial free breakfasts and lunches three days a week at five public schools in the Australian Capital Territory. The trial is aimed at determining if supplying students with better nutrition improves their engagement. It is also intended to ensure that no students are going hungry. <https://the-riotact.com/campaign-trail-more-rego-cuts-free-breaky-for-school-kids-and-berry-fires-up/407142> Some schools and local areas have taken independent initiatives to supply free meals to their students. Mooroopna Park Primary School, located near Shepparton, Victoria, has relied on food donations, fundraising and the support of the Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project to employ a full-time chef to cook breakfast, morning tea, lunch, and afternoon tea for students. The primary school is one of the most disadvantaged in the state. The school's principal has stated, 'As a school, we have no doubt it has been really positive in terms of student engagement, parent engagement and attendance, which ultimately reflects in students' outcomes.' <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/we-notice-what-they-do-or-don-t-eat-how-schools-are-tackling-student-hunger-20200929-p5608g.html>