

**Submission
No 18**

**INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY INTO CHILDHOOD
OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY**

Organisation: Healthy Kids Association Inc.

Date received: 25 August 2016

Promoting and influencing healthy food choices for children.



21st August 2016
Standing Committee on Social Issues,
Legislative Council,
Parliament House,
Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000.

Dear Committee,

Re: Inquiry into childhood overweight and obesity

In response to the Inquiry into Childhood Overweight and Obesity, Healthy Kids Association welcomes the opportunity provide you with our submission. It is based on our daily work supporting schools to improve their food services. We applaud the NSW government for conducting an inquiry into this pertinent issue with its far reaching and long lasting negative effects.

Healthy Kids Association is a not-for-profit, non-government, health promotion organisation with the mission to promote and influence healthy food choices for children. The organisation is the primary source of information and advice to over 3000 schools in NSW and the ACT relating to healthy food in schools. HKA provides schools, families and the food industry with practical advice and support regarding nutrition for children. Our organisation has 25 years experience of working with schools supporting their endeavours to meet Healthy School Canteen Strategies. We are responsible for implementing and supporting the Crunch and Sip program. This is a classroom-based program to increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables by primary school aged children.

Central to reducing childhood overweight and obesity is improved food literacy, for children and adults. A part of the solution is for people to understand food rather than nutrients. People need to understand what foods to eat, in proper quantities and frequencies for a healthy life. The Australian Dietary guidelines (2013) are food based.

The education system has a central role to play in improving food literacy. Currently, work to improve rates of overweight and obesity is led by Health, due to the implications to the health system. Until Education can see the importance of their role in improving food literacy, the optimum time and place for intervention is being missed.

To address poor food literacy, the school curriculum needs development to adequately cover topics to educate tomorrow's adults about how to make healthier choices. Teachers need training so that they can confidently talk to students about food, using realistic and practical examples, not just about abstract concepts such as nutrients. People need to learn how to shop, prepare and cook for themselves, as well as how to discern what are healthier packaged foods. Health professionals need training on how to have conversations in a wide

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variety of settings about overweight and obesity. There needs to be a multi-level focus if the problem is to be addressed successfully.

Considerable work is underway to revamp the current food policy for schools. Once completed and launched it will be very important to provide support and resources to schools to ensure they have the skills, knowledge and understanding to implement new policy and guidelines. The Fresh Taste @ School strategy has been in place since 2005. It was mandatory for NSW public school. Its ambition was to improve the nutritional profile of foods served to children at the same time as linking the canteen, as a teaching tool to the school. Clearly this has not happened. There was not a monitoring or compliance element to the strategy. There was no recourse for schools that were not complying with the policy. The new strategy will suffer the same impact should it not address the issue of monitoring and compliance with consequences for both good practice as well as poor. Links to the school funding formula may be a solution, or the principal's performance agreement and subsequent salary negotiations.

The changing nature of families has impacted volunteering and volunteers historically staffed canteens. The shift away from volunteering has required the employment of staff in the school canteens. Parent bodies that are responsible for the canteen operation are voluntary and in many cases unskilled in managing staff and all the requirements and regulation of operating a food business. A consequence of this has been the outsourcing of canteens to third parties. Though contracted to meet the requirements of the healthy food and drink policy many (most) do not. We believe the trend to outsource canteens will continue. In 2015, 387 public schools were leased. These leases contributed \$6.23 million to those schools. The income to the schools of leased canteens can be considerable – up to \$70,000 for a large high school. I have attached the report from 2015. It is not difficult to understand the decision to outsource the school canteen. They are complex and challenging businesses with many regulations and standards to be met aside providing nutritionally sound menu items. Leased canteen operators must be held to account for their menus. We suggest the addition to the lease agreement that they must have their menu's assessed annually with a report provided to the Principal. Any items not meeting the nutritional criteria removed from the menu. Healthy Kids Association provides menu assessments to our member schools with information on alternate products and recipes that align with the current Fresh Tastes @ School strategy. Engaging with leasees has been challenging for my organisation. They have little interest in using better products or taking our advice in part due to perceived (and real) negative impacts to their financial returns. It takes more time (staff) to produce fresh food in a canteen rather than heat and serving pre-packaged products.

There is increasing evidence that nutritious food support children in their education, boosting students' concentration, ability to focus and their cognitive function. I am sure the health academics have provided you with that evidence base from the literature. That literature shows that improved nutrition in schools leads to increased focus and attention and improved test scores and behaviour in the classroom. Healthy and nutritious food in

school helps kids begin to understand food and their developing of lifelong healthy eating habits. Further it contributes to a culture of wellness in a school and is an ideal tool for reinforcing healthy eating messages from teachers.

It has been reported that teachers feel ill equipped to teach nutrition, work is required to ensure they have the knowledge and confidence to help students understand food. This is required within their training programs as well as once in schools by the curriculum and teaching materials available to them.

Healthy Kids Association applauds the inquiry into strategies to reduce childhood overweight and obesity and emphasise the need to go back to the classroom to address this. Wherever food is provided in schools, there is an opportunity to educate about healthier choices and to improve food literacy. We would welcome the opportunity to provide further advice and to meet the committee to discuss the role of food in schools and improving rates of children with a health weight.

Yours sincerely,

Jo Gardner
CEO