

## **INQUIRY INTO FRESH FOOD PRICING**

**Organisation:** Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South  
Wales

**Date Received:** 25 May 2018

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**Inquiry into Fresh Food  
Pricing**

**Submission to the NSW  
Legislative Council Portfolio  
Committee No. 1 – Premier  
and Finance**

**May 2018**

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of New South Wales

**FEDERATION OF PARENTS AND CITIZENS ASSOCIATIONS OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

## Introduction

Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is thankful to the Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 1 – Premier and Finance for this opportunity to contribute feedback into this inquiry into fresh food pricing. P&C Federation supports the position of individual educational and developmental needs met by a range of differential services expressed through appropriate and well-planned curricula, programs and environments conducted by sensitive and well-trained personnel in conjunction with parents<sup>1</sup> and families.

The core belief of P&C Federation is that the education of our children and youth are the most fundamental means of ensuring individual and collective success and, as a result, our greatest national resource.

P&C Federation's response to this inquiry is guided by our belief that all children and families must have access to nutritious foods, and that the Government must ensure children and families do not lack access to nutritious food due to factors beyond their control. Considering Australia is an affluent country that produces 90% of its domestic food requirements,<sup>2</sup> and that the New South Wales budget is currently in surplus, there is no reason why nutritious and affordable food should not be accessible to all children.

## Terms of Reference

### The prevalence of food insecurity in New South Wales

The latest figures from the NSW Population Health Survey show around 7% of the New South Wales population aged over 16 are prone to food insecurity (i.e. there were times in the prior 12 months when they ran out of food and could not afford more). As this survey is conducted by computer assisted telephone interviewing technology, these figures are likely underestimates, given the persistent problem of unreliable telephone connectivity in areas such as remote or Indigenous communities.

With that said, the survey shows the rate of food insecurity is especially high for those between 25 and 45 years of age (>8%, versus <5.5% for people aged over 55), which is the typical age range of parents of school-age children.<sup>3</sup> There are clear reasons why parents may be particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, as supporting children inevitably raises the cost of living for households. A large portion of parents' food expenditure is for their children as well as themselves, and other expenditure for children such as clothing and school-related costs may leave parents' funds for food even more strained. This is particularly alarming as results in the NSW Population Health Survey have indicated that food insecurity for people aged under 45 rose considerably between 2007-2014.

Other concerning findings from Food Bank include two-thirds of Australian teachers reporting children coming to school without having breakfast, and 63% of those teachers saying children who come to

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<sup>1</sup> "Parent" refers to anyone with legal care of a child, such as a parent, carer or legal guardian

<sup>2</sup> Department of Agriculture and Water Services at <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/food> (accessed 1 May 2018)

<sup>3</sup> Figures available at HealthStats NSW at [http://www.healthstats.nsw.gov.au/Indicator/beh\\_foodsec\\_age/beh\\_foodsec\\_age](http://www.healthstats.nsw.gov.au/Indicator/beh_foodsec_age/beh_foodsec_age) (accessed 1 May 2018)

school hungry do so at least three times a week. This is particularly prevalent in the Government school sector (75% of teachers in Government schools have witnessed children coming to school hungry, versus 48% in non-Government schools).<sup>4</sup> Another survey found nearly one in six parents in Australia said their children attend school without lunch or money to buy lunch at least once a week, and 18% said their children attend school without eating breakfast just as frequently.<sup>5</sup>

This has detrimental impacts on children's education. There is a plethora of advice from health specialists that food insecurity disrupts children's sleeping patterns, makes behavioural problems at school more likely, reduces children's concentration, and reduces their energy and general ability to function through the day. For children in families with ongoing food insecurity, these symptoms may become long term issues, which could therefore affect a child's educational outcomes throughout their schooling years. Indeed, in one survey by Food Bank, school teachers estimated that a child coming to school hungry loses over two hours a day of learning time<sup>6</sup> – thus, a child coming to school hungry multiple times a week could lose nearly one term of learning time over the course of a year.<sup>7</sup>

In areas with high levels of food insecurity (such as Western Sydney and low-income regional areas), we know of P&C Associations that run free breakfast clubs and lunch box top-ups for students, to ensure all students in their community have regular access to nutritious food. This is in addition to the large number of school canteens which would not exist without the volunteering efforts of parents. However, that any child in the public school system is reliant on the goodwill of parent volunteers for some of their food intake is unacceptable, especially considering parents in food insecure areas may lack the time for regular volunteering.

This is in contrast with other countries which guarantee all school children are provided with fresh lunch food:

- In Japan, the *School Lunch Law* guarantees all school children are provided with fresh lunch food, whose production is with fresh products and is generally subsidised by municipalities. The typical cost of these lunches is approximately \$US3.00, though there are discounted or free options for children of low-income families.<sup>8</sup> Japan is consistently among the top performing countries in literacy and numeracy.
- In Brazil, since 1988 there has been a guarantee in the Constitution that all children in the public school system will receive a school meal. The provision of free school meals was strengthened from 2003 onwards when Brazil embarked on a large-scale food and nutrition security strategy. Under Brazilian legislation, at least 30% of the ingredients for free meals in public schools must be sourced directly from family farms.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that many of Brazil's educational outcomes have improved markedly since 2003 and again since 2009, the years when Brazil's school feeding program began to be strengthened. For instance, between 2005 and 2012, enrolment rates for 4-

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<sup>4</sup> Food Bank 2015. *Hunger in the Classroom*.

<sup>5</sup> Food Bank 2018. *Rumbling Tummies: Child Hunger in Australia*

<sup>6</sup> Food Bank 2015. *Hunger in the Classroom*.

<sup>7</sup> This is based on the assumption that learning time is approximately six hours a day for five days a week, for four ten-week terms.

<sup>8</sup> National Institute for Educational Policy Research. 2013. *School Lunch Program in Japan* – publication from Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

<sup>9</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). 2014. *Scaling Up: The Brazilian School Feeding Model*.

year-olds increased from 37% to 61%, while enrolment rates for 5-year-olds increased from 63% to 83%. Between 2003 and 2012, Brazil's global mathematics scores increased 35 points, and it had one of the world's largest drops in low performers.<sup>10</sup>

- In Sweden, all primary school students have access to free school lunches. This is provided by each municipality, and the food standards are overseen by the Swedish Food Administration and Swedish National Agency for Education, who consider nutritional factors.<sup>11</sup>
- In Finland, legislation requires all primary and secondary students to be provided with one meal each school day. Each Finnish municipality is required to establish a student welfare plan that includes details of their arrangements for school meals, which must meet nutritional standards.<sup>12</sup> Both Sweden and Finland have among the world's highest literacy and numeracy rates.
- In Estonia, the national government funds education via formulas that include grants earmarked specifically for the provision of free lunches for all students.<sup>13</sup> These school meals are required to include vegetables every day, fruits at least three times a week, and meat or poultry at least twice a week.<sup>14</sup> Estonia has among the best secondary education attainment rates of all OECD countries.

It is noteworthy that countries such as Brazil and Estonia have considerably lower GDPs and development than Australia,<sup>15</sup> yet their provision of free nutritious food in schools is considerably more extensive than anywhere in Australia. It is also noteworthy that most of these countries' education outcomes are either among the world's best or, in the case of Brazil, their education outcomes have improved noticeably since enacting education programs that include more school meals. Considering New South Wales is an affluent state with a budget surplus, there is no reason why state-wide free school meal programs could not be enacted in its public schools. Regular meals are a necessity for education, and we urge the Government to ensure no child in the public school system lacks access to nutritious food.

### **The identification of 'food deserts' and any efforts to address them**

'Food deserts' are areas characterised by a relative lack of fresh food outlets such as green grocers, compared to less healthy food outlets such as fast food franchises or takeaway shops. Within greater Sydney, the greatest lack of fresh foods is in the city's west, where takeaway and alcohol outlets often outnumber greengrocers and supermarkets, whereas in more affluent areas such as Sydney's North, there are overall more venues to purchase fresh produce.<sup>16</sup> This pattern is roughly mirrored in the frequency of diabetes in Sydney, with a study by the University of Wollongong finding the risk of diabetes in Sydney's northern beaches suburbs considerably lower than that of Sydney's Western suburbs.<sup>17</sup> Visual representations of both studies are provided on the following page.

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<sup>10</sup> OECD. *Education Policy Outlook: Brazil*. September 2015; OECD. *Brazil Country Note. Education at a Glance 2017*. OECD Country Notes 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Skolmat Sverige. *Summary of School Food Sweden's report on school meal quality for the school year 2014/15*.

<sup>12</sup> Finnish National Board of Education. 2008. *School Meals in Finland: Investment in Learning*.

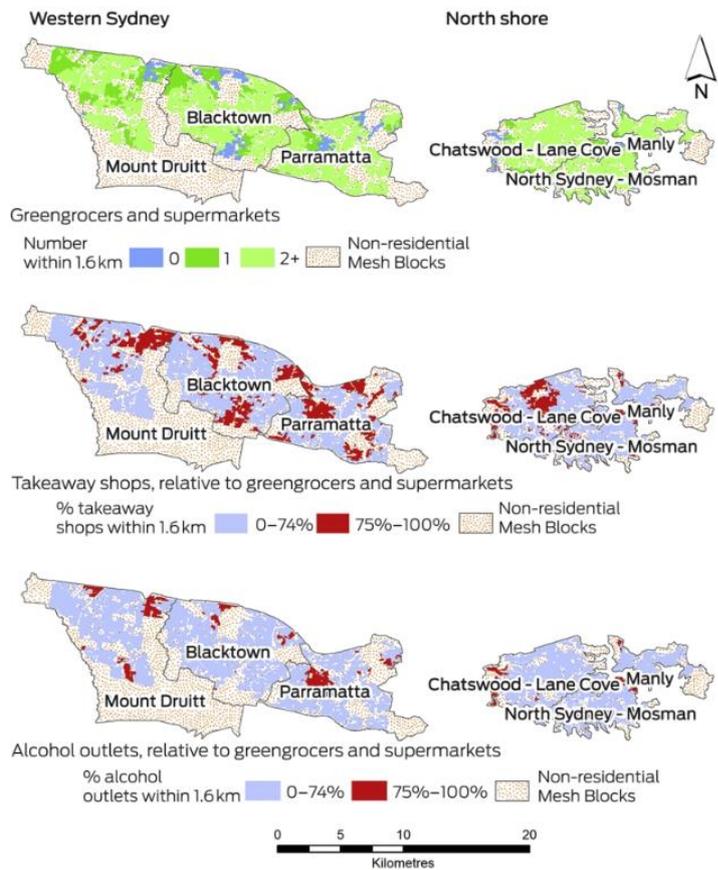
<sup>13</sup> Santiago et al. 2016. *OECD Reviews of School Resources: Estonia 2016*. OECD Reviews of School Resources, OECD Publishing, Paris

<sup>14</sup> European Commission. 2008. *School Food Policy Factsheets: Estonia*

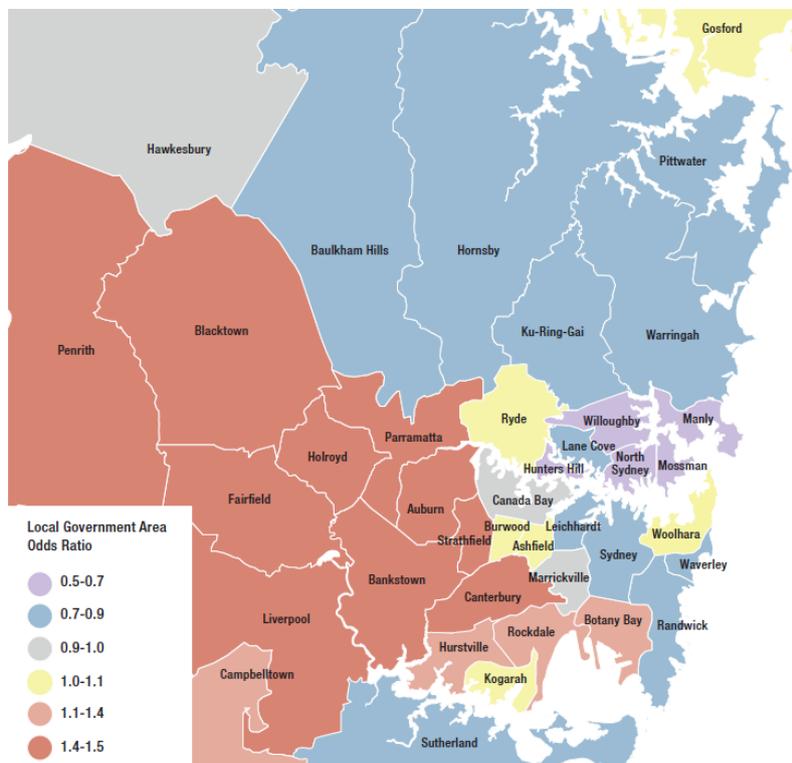
<sup>15</sup> Human Development Index global ranking 2016: Australia – 2<sup>nd</sup>; Brazil – 79<sup>th</sup>; Estonia – 30<sup>th</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Astell-Burt and Feng. 2015. Geographic inequity in healthy food environment and type 2 diabetes: can we please turn off the tap? *Medical Journal of Australia* Vol. 203(6): 246-248

<sup>17</sup> Western Sydney Diabetes 2015. Taking the Heat out of our Diabetes Hotspots.



Indicators of food environment within a 1.6 km road network distance of residential Mesh Blocks in selected areas of western Sydney and the north shore (Source: Astell-Burt and Feng, 2015)



Odds ratio of having diabetes in Sydney (Source: Western Sydney Diabetes, 2015.)

For areas outside Sydney, there is a relative paucity of data into the availability of fresh food. Investigations in other States/Territories suggest that food deserts can arise even in agricultural areas due to the large distance people may have to travel to stores and the costs of petrol needed to make such travel.<sup>18 19</sup> In regional or remote areas with little agriculture, such as the drier areas of far west New South Wales, it is likely that this problem is particularly acute.

This means that people who want to provide fresh food for themselves and their children may be unable to do so, due to the unavailability of fresh foods within a readily accessible distance from their homes. This can only exacerbate the alarming obesity levels in Australian children, which P&C Federation has written on previously.<sup>20</sup>

Given the adverse long-term health impacts on children that can result from poor access to nutritious foods, we would also suggest the State and Local Governments work with developers to improve the accessibility to fresh foods in existing communities. Moreover, when a new community is being developed, the developers should be required to ensure a supermarket and green grocer are present. We concur with the Director of Public Health and Health Sciences at the University of Western Sydney, Dr Thomas Astell-Burt in saying *"We would hesitate if we were going to build a community without adequate sanitation or sewerage or without roads, so we should hesitate if we're going to build communities without all the other things which we know are conducive to a healthier, longer life."*<sup>21</sup>

A related issue is that it is commonly the case that purchasing fresh produce is more expensive than processed foods. This results in counter-intuitive situations where freshly grown food is financially out of reach for some families who may live near a green grocer or supermarket. Some reasons for this include the higher costs of growing, transporting and storing. Consequently, children from low-income households may be consuming unhealthy foods for the simple reason that their parents may not have the funds to regularly purchase fresh foods. In some areas, this can be exacerbated by the fact that there is often a single supermarket or green grocer servicing the community (monopolies may further increase prices), and by the fact that ostensibly higher transport costs can make fresh food more expensive in remoter areas. Although it is beyond the remit of P&C Federation to craft policies to reduce fresh food costs, we do reiterate that it is the responsibility of the Government to mitigate against the social impact of parents and families being exposed to high food prices. The Healthy School Canteen requirements and programs to encourage people to grow fresh food directly are commendable, however these will have only limited impact in low-income areas if fresh food prices are outside the range of families, or if there are little to no fresh food outlets. The possibility of state-wide breakfast or lunch programs suggested above is one such potential strategy to mitigate against the impact of this on school children.

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<sup>18</sup> Le et al. 2013. *Tasmanian food access research coalition TFARC: research report*: Tasmanian Food Access Research Coalition, Hobart

<sup>19</sup> National Rural Health Alliance. 2016. *Food Security and Health in Rural and Remote Australia*

<sup>20</sup> P&C Federation. *Submission in Relation to the Review of Childhood Overweight and Obesity*. Submission to Standing Committee on Social Issues. August 2016.

<sup>21</sup> *'Food deserts': Healthy food stores must be an essential part of city planning, says researcher Dr Thomas Astell-Burt*. ABC. 2015, 8 July.