



FACTSHEET

Providing Healthy Food for Children in Schools in Aotearoa

Who is this factsheet for?

This factsheet is for: local and national policymakers; people involved in food programme policy, development and creation; and food producers.

Overview

There is a disparity between the volume of food grown in Aotearoa New Zealand and the ability of our students, whānau and wider communities to access nutritious, healthy ingredients, such as fruit and vegetables. This research project investigated a variety of community- and school-led meal programmes being undertaken around the motu. It sought to understand what influences the way people access food and what they choose to eat.

The study proved these meal programmes are vital for bridging gaps in nutrition and helping to alleviate food poverty. But they only work when they are tailored for the communities they serve.

The most successful community- and school-led meal programmes:

- ▶ Enhance peoples' positive experiences of food
- ▶ Reduce feelings of shame
- ▶ Reconnect people to their cultural knowledge systems

Yet many "healthy meal" programmes are based on our current healthy eating guidelines. The study found these are impractical because they only consider nutrition content, rather than whether healthy foods are affordable, available, and accessible.

To improve access and availability, food growers in Aotearoa New Zealand could reserve some product for domestic consumption and build stronger relationships with meal suppliers to provide healthy ingredients for culturally appropriate, tailored meals.

Successful meal programmes are a pathway to affordable nutrition

The research began with a review of national and international literature about Aotearoa New Zealand's food production and distribution system and related issues of food (in)security, focusing on community- and school-led meal programmes. Interviews, workshops and/or site visits were then conducted with different community organisations, involved in food provision for individuals, whānau and wider communities.

These case studies helped identify what makes a meal programme successful. It found that when community- and school-led meal programmes work, they do so by:

- ▶ Tailoring meals to include what students like to eat at home or in their community or culture
- ▶ Getting teachers/principals on board to include relevant food-related education or activities in the school's syllabus/classes
- ▶ Investing in an in-built kitchen to get fresher meals to the table faster, making them more appealing to students than delivered food
- ▶ Making the kitchen or food hub a safe space for any student to get food or advice at any time
- ▶ Upskilling the students in growing, preparing and cooking ingredients for the meals – life skills which they can then use to support whānau and community.

The most successful meal programmes reconnect rangatahi to cultural knowledge systems about culturally meaningful foods – from growing through to cooking and preserving. As well as helping to rebuild cultural identity and wellbeing, they also support food resilience for the wider community.

Meal programmes don't work when they are designed and assessed based on nutritional content alone. Instead, by also including foods that people normally prefer to eat, this results in less food being thrown away.

How following healthy eating guidelines reduces meal programme success

Most meal programmes are informed by healthy eating guidelines. Yet the research shows that these guidelines are not realistic because they are focused on nutrition alone. They do not consider what else influences people's food choices, such as whether healthy foods are available, accessible or affordable in the first place.

Fruit and vegetables are an example of unaffordable food. People experiencing food poverty are more

concerned about feeding their kids three filling meals a day on a meagre budget, and so are less likely to buy and include fruit and vegetables in their meals.

It is why meal provision programmes run by communities or schools are vital as they bridge this gap in nutrition and also aid in food preparation knowledge.

Growing affordable food for Aotearoa New Zealand's population

Annually, we grow enough food to feed 40 million global consumers, according to New Zealand Trade and Enterprise¹. Indeed, we have more than enough capacity to grow the healthy foods our communities and whānau need and make them more affordable and accessible.

Yet to achieve this, the research found that food needs to be grown to cater for local eating preferences, not overseas. These food producers can then build stronger relationships with meal programme developers/deliverers as suppliers of fresh, relevant ingredients for tailored meals.

Meanwhile food security could be improved by helping meal programmes to work with community gardens or to grow their own ingredients. These initiatives are more food secure because they are less reliant on either expensive or unavailable produce from supermarkets.

This research was produced by the Aotearoa Food Cultures programme funded by the Our Land and Water National Science Challenge. <https://ourlandandwater.nz/project/aotearoa-food-cultures/>

References

- ▢ Hardy, Derrylea; Palakshappa, Nitha; Venkateswar, Sita; Henry, Matthew; Morris, Carolyn (2024). *Beyond the Unicorn Eater: Social Approaches to Healthy Eating and Food Security in Aotearoa New Zealand*. AgResearch. <https://doi.org/10.57935/AGR.26002501.v1> (research summary)
- ▢ Hardy, Derrylea; Palakshappa, Nitha; Venkateswar, Sita (2024). *School- and Community-Based Approaches to Healthy Eating and Food Security in Aotearoa New Zealand*. AgResearch. <https://doi.org/10.57935/AGR.26001535.v1> (technical report)

¹ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/131311360/by-the-numbers-who-is-eating-all-of-our-food-if-we-make-enough-to-feed-40-million-people>