

Victorian Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee (LSC)

Inquiry into food security in Victoria

Submission

Terms of Reference:

The Committee will inquire into, consider and report, by 14 November 2024, on the impacts and drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria, including but not limited to —

(2) options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food

Who is Eat Up?

Eat Up provides **free lunches** to children who come to school without adequate food from home improving their health and nutrition and their educational outcomes (9). Nationally, Eat Up supports 912 schools delivering almost 1 million lunches p.a. In **Victoria**, Eat Up reaches 22% of Victorian government schools and delivers 344,833 lunches to 350 schools, 157 (45%) of which are in **regional Victoria**. Importantly, Eat Up delivers school lunch box meals economically at \$1.35 per lunch.

Eat Up's program of providing simple healthy meals has evolved over a decade and delivers strong improvements in:

- Wellbeing >123%
- Nutrition >109%
- School Attendance >95%
- Classroom participation >71%
- Academic performance >68% (9)

Eat Up is currently completing a feasibility study on a 'whole-school lunch model' that would provide a hot lunch to **all** students at Victorian schools which have the highest rates of disadvantage and food insecurity. This is a practical and financially viable option for equitably providing school lunches to Victorian children who are most in need. The final report is due in early August 2024.

Eat Up has identified the urgent need for a whole-school lunch program that targets schools with very high rates of food insecurity. The preliminary recommendation from Eat Up's feasibility study is to pilot a geographic cluster model that will allow Eat Up to efficiently support multiple schools in a cluster of disadvantages.

Upon the completion of the feasibility model, Eat Up will engage stakeholders to understand if there is sufficient interest to advance to the pilot stage with 3 - 5 schools with the highest rates of food insecurity (short term) and pending success, expansion of the whole school lunch model pilot to a larger number of schools who experience high rates of food insecurity. Further exploration will be required for the resourcing model including role of partnerships, role of school, role of charity and role of funders (i.e. including government).

Recommendations

Eat Up recommends the State Government:

1. Reach school children with the highest needs of food insecurity using a full lunch program for the entire school by

- Taking an equitable, financially viable approach to school food insecurity, providing school lunches to students most in need.
- Resourcing a whole-school lunch model pilot, focusing on 3 - 5 schools with the highest rates of food insecurity (short term) and pending success, expansion of the in-school meals model pilot to a larger number of schools who experience high rates of food insecurity.

2. Expand the number of school lunch providers to reduce costs and extend the reach of school children in regional Victoria.

- Taking an equitable approach to school food insecurity by reaching more disadvantaged school children in regional and remote areas in Victoria.
- Increasing the number of providers will enable the Victorian government to take advantage of lower-cost program providers that incorporate volunteers.

Key rationale

Why children?

- Children have the greatest opportunity to make long-term changes. School children require food to optimise their learning ability and break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.
- Addressing food insecurity at school will create a systemic change of equality in education and health outcomes, resulting in a reduced burden on the state given children's duration of life.

Why school lunches?

- In 2024, children in Victoria will be at school for approximately 187 days per year representing 53% of lunches for the year.
- Schools provide the ability to deliver a consistent quality controlled and accessible food program to children.
- Meals in schools provide a supervised, social eating opportunity.

Why regional?

- In 2021, more than 80% of council shires in rural and regional Victoria experienced poverty rates over 10%. (12)
- Regional communities are affected by choice, availability, and cost of food, combined with isolation, distance, and logistical issues which can make them difficult to reach.

1. Reach school children with the highest needs of food insecurity using a full lunch program.

Children who cannot access enough safe food that meets their nutritional needs and food preferences are considered food insecure. They are at a much higher risk of having health or developmental problems (1), **including being over three times more likely to miss school or activities and over two times more likely to have behavioural problems (1).**

Food insecurity is a growing problem in Australia and worldwide with 36% of Australian households experiencing food insecurity (4). Recent cost-of-living increases, natural disasters, and the pandemic have left many children and their families vulnerable (2). Families with low household incomes, those who are newly unemployed, and international students have an increased risk of experiencing food insecurity (1,3).

- In Australia, 3.7 million households experience moderate to severe food insecurity (4)
- Households with children are more likely to be affected by food insecurity, especially single parents
- An estimated 8,000 Victorians are unable to be provided with food relief each month due to a lack of resources (4)

27% of Australian households with dependents under the age of 18 reported severe levels of food insecurity (4)

1 in 5 Australian children experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months (4).

“When kids are hungry, they can’t concentrate; when kids can’t concentrate, they can’t learn!” - Linda Richards, Primary School Principal

Classroom hunger is a **huge** issue in Australia. Missing meals greatly impact a child’s growth, development, and learning - leading to fatigue, illness, challenging behaviour, and poor learning outcomes. Hunger contributes to the disadvantage cycle, with children falling further behind their peers in school.

Through Eat Up’s evaluation, schools report that students who access Eat Up lunches regularly attend school without food, often from families who go without food for days.

The rising cost of living has substantially increased the need for regular school lunches, and demand for food relief *increases* year-on-year. Eat Up is supporting more schools in greater volumes than in 2022.

- In July 2024, the number of schools enrolled in Eat Up’s lunch support program increased by a staggering **32% with 357 on the waiting list.**
- Nationally, Eat Up has seen a **22%** increase in the number of lunches needed by the schools that it supports (when compared FY21-22 to FY22-23)(9).

“We see the Eat Up program as a crucial need. Our students regularly come to school without school lunches, and it’s an ongoing battle we are trying to conquer.” - Teacher

Eat Up often hears of parents *“keeping their kids at home from school because [they] didn’t have enough lunch food”*.

Exploration of a whole-school lunch model:

Through Eat Up’s experience in delivering its program and engaging with schools, it has become increasingly aware of the need for a targeted and cost-effective approach to meeting the nutritional needs of Victoria’s most disadvantaged and food-insecure students (i.e schools in the top 5% of SEA disadvantage).

School meals have the potential to reduce the impact of household food insecurity and ease lunchbox burdens by providing a guaranteed, nutritious, and substantial meal on each school day (5). Other benefits for children identified internationally include improved school attendance and classroom attention (6, 7, 8).

Systematic reviews have found positive associations between universal school lunch and academic performance, with these improvements being attributed to a combination of improved nutrition and increased attendance at school (6). The same review also found improvements in children’s behaviours and social skills with the provision of school meals (6).

Other likely benefits of an in-school meals model include:

- Increase teacher retention and attraction
- Enhanced connection between school and parents
- Social connection through shared meals

Australian Lunch Meals Program Pilots:

There are several pilots taking place across Australia, in states other than Victoria:

- ‘School Food Matters’ & ‘Loaves & Fishes’ (TAS) – government funded pilot across 30 primary and secondary schools in Tasmania. An additional 15 schools in 2025 and another 15 schools in 2026 will be added to the program (\$14.6 million commitment).
- ‘Meals in Schools’ (ACT) – government funded pilot program addressing 5 primary and secondary schools across ACT
- ‘School Food Project’ (NSW) – Small pilot program in one primary school in regional NSW, driven by a partnership between the school and a small food relief organisation. Commenced in early 2024 with a view towards expanding into more schools
- ‘Budding Lunches’ (SA) – Small pilot in partnership between Flinders and one primary school in metropolitan Adelaide

The Victorian government has an opportunity to take a leadership position as there are gaps in the pilots completed in other states. To date, none of the Australian pilots have directly addressed socioeconomic disadvantage.

Case Studies:

Recommendation 1: Reach school children with the highest needs of food insecurity using a full lunch program for the entire school

International Case Study: New Zealand's Ka Ora Ka Ako program

Early evaluations of New Zealand's Ka Ora Ka Ako program demonstrate it has the following positive impacts on the most disadvantaged children:

- 2 day per term improvement in attendance
- 14% improvement in mental health and wellbeing
- 9% improvement in social functioning (10)
- 20% improved school functioning for secondary students

These benefits extend beyond students, with positive benefits to communities and families.

Household: Households that participated in New Zealand's Ka Ora, Ka Ako program saved approximately \$1000 (for a family with 1 child in primary school)

Community: In New Zealand, 2,455 jobs were created or retained as a result of the program – the majority of which were full-time. The program also created opportunities for Māori business owners, who supply 126 schools.

A Victorian Case Study: Mooroopna Park Primary School

The success of Mooroopna Park Primary School's (MPPS) in-school meals model provides an inspiring example of how such a model can provide enormous benefits to schools with the highest rates of food insecurity.

MPPS is among the top 3 percent of the most disadvantaged schools across the country.

- 43% of families have experienced significant Family Violence.
- 46% of families have Department of Families Fairness and Housing/Child Protection (DFFH) involvement.
- 16 students are in out-of-home care.
- Over 60% of students come from single-parent homes.
- 40% of their students are from an Indigenous Background - one of the highest % in Victoria.
- Another 8% are from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds (13).

MPPS has independently started a healthy food program after discovering 80% of their students were coming to school with no food or small amounts of food with low nutritional value. Providing students breakfast, morning tea, a cooked lunch and afternoon tea has meant tremendous change, with behaviour issues in and out of the classroom on the decline.

While the short and long-term benefits of adequate nutrition at school are well documented, by

providing meals to all students, rather than singling out those in need, MPPS has eliminated the stigma associated with food relief at school and has thus been able to foster a more inclusive and supportive school environment. The model also provides an opportunity to involve parents, local businesses and food relief agencies to create a sense of collective responsibility and well-being of students.

2. Expand the number of school lunch providers to reduce costs and extend the reach of school children in regional Victoria.

Regional Lunch Support:

Eat Up delivers lunches to children in regional and remote areas thanks to its proven and unique Regional Community-led model. By engaging and working with volunteers from 36 local community groups, Eat Up supports children in need at **392** schools in regional areas around the country.

In **Regional Victoria**, Eat Up partners with 14 local organisations, including Rotary, Lions, Corrections Victoria, and private schools.

Areas supported include: Ballarat; Bendigo; Shepparton; Mornington Peninsula; Horsham, Mildura; Gippsland; Geelong; Colac; and Lakes Entrance.

In FY24, Eat Up distributed 140,683 lunches to 157 schools across Regional Victoria.

Eat Up's unique, tried, and tested **Community-Led Regional Model** is locally based and run by passionate, on-the-ground committee volunteers who see the direct effect our lunches have. By working with local communities, the model is cost-effective, sustainable, and able to respond on the ground to locally identified needs and demands.

Eat Up's **Community-Led Regional Model** provides additional benefits to the community. Evaluation of the program has found:

- 71% of regional volunteers have met new friends or deepened friendships through volunteering with Eat Up
- 90% agreed volunteering with Eat Up has helped them feel a greater sense of social connection/belonging
- 95% agreed volunteering with Eat Up has helped them feel a greater sense of purpose

Eat Up and Otway Rotaract Club, Colac:

“The Otway Rotaract Club in Colac, in south-west Victoria, has been running an Eat Up sandwich-making program to support local school kids since 2017. The initiative has helped our club members connect with community members of all ages from our two local Rotary Clubs, scouting groups, breast cancer support groups and more, to help feed children who'd otherwise go without lunch at school. The Eat Up project has also enabled the promotion of casual volunteerism within our town - local residents are more than welcome to attend our sessions and bring their friends. We've been able to collaborate with the local taxi company, which helps us with sandwich deliveries; the residents' action group, which auspiced a grant for the program; and the community foundation, which sponsored the program for three years. When lockdown hit, Eat Up Australia gave us the opportunity to pivot from sandwich-making workshops to emergency food boxes, partnering with RACV to transport the food boxes from Melbourne to Colac, then using our volunteer network to distribute the boxes to families in need. Since 2017, we've made more than 7000 school lunches and delivered them to six schools in our region. None of this would be possible without the partnerships that we have with Eat Up Australia, local groups and kind-hearted individuals.”

Otways Rotaract Club

Eat Up and Loddon Mallee Corrections, Bendigo:

“This program has provided a positive outcome across both our staff and client group since we commenced servicing the Bendigo area. While Community Work was shut down due to COVID restrictions, commencing the program with staff making the sandwiches and delivering to the schools helped them to keep a sense of community engagement that is so important in the work our Field Officers do when they supervise community corrections clients in our programs. Staff have commented how it has opened their eyes to a need they didn't realise was so big in our local community and they have also commented of the great value they found in assisting to get the program up and running before we were able to have clients assist with the work again.

.....Eat Up provides us with an opportunity to provide a meaningful and engaging task for people needing to complete court ordered community work hours. Due to the nature of the work being a simple task that can be completed seated and indoors, it provides the opportunity for a wide variety of participants to engage with the program, regardless of their skill set or physical capacity. Our staff are able to teach clients the value of the work and associated skills around food hygiene and food preparation. Additionally we have been able to include a basic food handling course into the program to provide some additional skills for the clients making the sandwiches.

Partnering with Eat Up has been a great addition to the Loddon Mallee community work program and one we hope to continue and even expand across the region where the need arises.”

Loddon Mallee Community Work Program, Bendigo, VIC

Case Study

Recommendation 2: Expand the number of school lunch providers to reduce costs and extend the reach of school children in regional Victoria.

Regional Case Study: Eat Up

Design: Eat Up's core lunch delivery model has been built with significant collaboration with teachers - a key characteristic of the design feature of this program is teacher-led. Specifically, lunches require little preparation, while the dispensing of food to children in need is done so in a way that eliminates the stigma associated with food insecurity. Eat Up lunches have strong student appeal, while still being of high nutritional quality.

Eat Up lunches (sandwiches and snacks) are specifically designed to appear that they come right out of the lunchbox and therefore reduce any potential embarrassment by students needing lunch support.

Eat Up lunches are delivered fresh every three weeks. Sandwiches are frozen and easily defrosted, giving teachers control over how they distribute them, with shelf-stable or refrigerated snacks as needed.

Eat Up Core Benefits:

Low Cost: Since its inception, Eat Up has been acutely aware of financial sustainability, which is reflected in the low unit cost of delivering its core lunch program to children in need—each lunch delivered costs \$1.35 (average cost). This is due to long-established in-kind partnerships and significant volunteer involvement.

Volunteer Engagement: Eat Up works with over **15,000 volunteers** each year from the community and corporate sectors who assist by making sandwiches that Eat Up delivers together with nutritious snacks, provided in-kind by Eat Up's long-established partners.

Equity: Lunches are delivered to schools where there are students who often go without. The average ICSEA of schools supported in Victoria is 977. Sandwiches are delivered fresh and then frozen on-site, which gives teachers control over defrosting and distributing the lunches to those in need. In this way, scarce resources are directed towards those students in need.

Partnering with a range of organisations and businesses, together with a proven volunteer model enables Eat Up to sustainably provide almost **1M free, healthy lunches to disadvantaged students at 912 schools in the past year alone** (520 Metro and 392 Regional schools) and 374 schools are on a growing waiting list.

Metro Lunch Support:

Eat Up works with workplace and school volunteers in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, and Perth, who assist in making sandwiches that Eat Up then delivers to schools along with **nutritious snacks** which include: yoghurt, low-sugar muesli bars, baked beans and fresh fruit.

Over the last decade, Eat Up has developed a deep understanding of the issues surrounding childhood food insecurity at school and have sadly seen a significant increase in demand for our program as a growing number of families struggle with cost-of-living pressures.

Eat Up addresses food insecurity by optimising the learning environment for children who would otherwise be hungry at school.

Outcomes: Eat Up's evaluation of its school lunch program demonstrates that providing lunch to students who would otherwise go without results in a significant improvement in student concentration, classroom participation, academic performance, school attendance, and peer interactions (9).

"Some students were quietly going hungry. By being fed, they are more engaged and attentive. There is also an avenue for them to get well-being support and touch base with caring staff on a daily basis. This has enabled us to address other wellbeing concerns such as lack of warm clothing in cooler months." - Administration Assistant, Secondary School

In **Victoria** in FY24 Eat Up delivered 344,833 lunches to 350 schools, 157 (45%) of these are in regional Victoria.

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