

HUNGRY AT SCHOOL

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HUNGRY AT SCHOOL

Plea for free lunches to feed 75,000 kids living in poverty

COLIN JAMES
EDUCATION EDITOR

EXCLUSIVE

THE Education Minister will consider a push to provide free lunches at school to help feed an estimated 75,000

children living in poverty. Commissioner for Children and Young

People Helen Connolly is calling for schools to provide free lunches, and says food insecurity is a “chronic issue”.

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Commissioner's call to supply free lunches for 75,000 children living in poverty

FEED OUR HUNGRY SCHOOL STUDENTS

EXCLUSIVE

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A FREE breakfast program in state schools needs to be extended to include lunches for an estimated 75,000 children living in extreme poverty, says a prominent advocate.

SA Commissioner for Children and Young People Helen Connolly has called for the Education Department to examine providing lunches in primary and secondary schools to improve educational performance.

Ms Connolly said teachers in disadvantaged state schools were “regularly providing large numbers of children with breakfast and lunch, as well as sending them home with dinner”.

“Food insecurity is a chronic issue in South Australia and

a symptom of chronic poverty,” she said. “One in four families are below the poverty line. We have 75,000 children living in South Australia’s poorest households, the majority of who are school aged.

“They would all benefit from a lunch program being introduced at their school.”

Ms Connolly said the Red Cross had estimated one third of SA schools were providing free breakfasts for students.

This was supported by a national survey commissioned by food charity Foodbank, which found 1.2 million children across Australia regularly went hungry last year, with the pandemic exacerbating the situation. Ms Connolly said she was raising the issue because inadequate nutrition had been directly linked to poor educational results and bad behaviour within schools.

“The benefits of feeding hungry children to improve education outcomes and address behaviour issues at school have not been adequately explored in South Australia,” she said.

“One of the rarely discussed possibilities for education shortfalls might have something to do with increased numbers of South Australian children going to school hungry or, in some cases, not going to school at all simply because they have no food to get them through the day.”

Ms Connolly said a common reason for children experiencing food insecurity was because households received unexpected bills or expenses that had to be given priority.

“Almost half of the parents deemed to be severely food insecure reported that their child went for an entire day

without eating at least once a week," she said.

Ms Connolly said countries such as New Zealand, Sweden, India and the United Kingdom were "recognising the improvement in education outcomes that feeding children during the hours they are at school can deliver".

"Children who are hungry are distracted, disruptive and disengaged," she said.

"They are therefore less able to concentrate or regulate their emotions, and are very unlikely to be in a state that enables them to be receptive to learning."

Ms Connolly said overseas and interstate school food programs should be examined by the Education Department, which was responsible for 176,847 students at 894 educational facilities.

"While the department does not provide direct funding to schools for provision of meals, it does help fund break-

fast programs," she said.

"Some charities and other organisations already are providing free breakfasts to students who need them."

These included Foodbank and Kickstart for Kids, a charity which was delivering 60,000 breakfasts and 10,000 lunches to hundreds of South Australian schools each week.

Kickstart for Kids founder Ian Steel said volunteers dropped off breakfasts to 360 schools, with lunches also delivered to 250 schools.

"All the work we do for breakfast gets undone if the kids don't have any lunch," he said. "We know that if they are going to school without any breakfast, then they aren't going to have any lunch."

Mr Steel said the food was stored in fridges and handed out by teachers, starting with cereal, toast and fruit for breakfast and cheese sandwiches for lunch.

Education Minister Blair Boyer said it was "an import-

ant part of supporting the wellbeing of students". Mr

Boyer said the government would provide \$1m to Foodbank and Kickstart for Kids over the next four years.

"This financial support will contribute to the continuing supply of food to some of the most vulnerable children in South Australia, allowing them to fulfil their potential," he said. "If the wellbeing of children and young people doesn't improve, we can't expect academic performance to

improve. While the program has obvious health benefits, we know it also has a positive effect on social, cultural and emotional wellbeing."

Mr Boyer said he would seek a briefing from Ms Connolly on the need for a school lunch program. "I will carefully consider this proposal and how we can build upon our investment in school breakfast programs," he said.

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BLAIR BOYER
Education Minister



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IAN STEEL
Kickstart for Kids founder



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HELEN CONNOLLY
SA Commissioner for Children and Young People



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PUTTING A DECENT MEAL ON THEIR PLATES

FREE school meal programs have been trialled in Australia and overseas with considerable success.

A New Zealand program, Ka Ora Ka Ako, supplies school lunches to the country’s most disadvantaged schools.

Free lunches are available for all students, with the option to bring packed lunches if that is their choice.

The scheme is designed to reduce stigma for students who feel ashamed for not coming to school with their own lunch.

Another program was trialled in Tasmania in 2020, where free hot lunches were provided at three government schools.

While it showed rolling out the program across all schools would be costly, there were

marked improvements in student attendance and behaviour.

The trial found the average daily cost of providing lunch to each student was \$4.72.

This figure varied from \$3 per child to \$7 per child, with the cost dropping when more students became involved.

Parents said the program reduced the amount of time and money they spent on

providing breakfast and lunch. It also helped expand the range of foods being eaten by their children.

Teachers reported how attendance rates and behaviour improved

The Tasmanian trial was expanded to include another 15 schools this year, with a further 15 schools likely to be included from 2023.

- Colin James