

Parents call for more green please in Australian school canteens

Menus at Australian state schools could do better according to the results of research compiled for online advocacy group The Parents' Jury. A review of 263 school menus across Australia identified that 30% of surveyed primary schools and less than 19% of surveyed secondary schools are compliant with nutrition guidelines.

Based on feedback from concerned parents, The Parents' Jury with the support of Monash University and VicHealth undertook research to investigate the nutritional composition of online government school canteen menus across Australia.

It found vast differences in compliance among different states and territories. Western Australia, where compliance is compulsory, leads the way with 62% of surveyed menus adhering to the state's Healthy Food and Drink policy. The next best performing states/territories are South Australia and the Northern Territory where, respectively, 35% and 29% of surveyed schools adhere to their school nutrition policy.

The poorest performing states/territories are the ACT with 5%, Victoria with 16% and Queensland with 18% of surveyed menus complying with their individual policies and guidelines.

In spite of the healthy eating messages consistently taught in Australian schools, the survey found that 56% of all surveyed menus feature chocolate or other forms of confectionary and over 96% surveyed schools feature pastry products as a regular part of the menu. Over 38% of menus across all surveyed secondary schools feature soft drink.

The study also looked at menu pricing and found that 87% of all surveyed schools serve pies regularly on their menus, whereas 69% serve salads. The average price for a pie is \$3.17 and the average price for a salad is \$3.83. In some states and territories, the difference was over \$1.00 with the salad item as the more expensive option.

Parents are now calling for 60% of all school canteen menus to have healthy foods, commonly referred to as 'green' or 'everyday' items.

The Parents' Jury Manager Corrina Langelaan believes schools should be endorsing healthy eating messages in everything they do: "While at first glance, these results might seem worrying, we found that it would take very little effort to ensure Australian school menus offer children healthier choices.

"From our snapshot, menus generally contain 48% green (everyday) items, 49% amber (select carefully) and 3% red (not recommended) items.

“Of course we want kids to have the occasional treat and we’re not suggesting they be removed from the menu. However, amber and red items should not exceed green. Green food can be fun and profitable for school canteens. Increasing it would help school menus easily become compliant and give kids the opportunity to make great food choices.”

Parents also want to see canteens introduce a traffic light, front of pack food labelling system and require all government schools to work with canteen support services.

Well-resourced school canteen support services should be part of the solution. Lucinda Hancock from Nutrition Australia, which provides a service in Victoria, QLD and the ACT said: “School canteens can play an important role in supporting healthy eating messages for students. Healthier foods can definitely be profitable, and there’s support available for schools to introduce healthier foods and drinks that will appeal to children and teenagers.”

Ms Langelaan concludes: “Parents want to work with schools to help build a culture in which students actively choose nutritious foods and a healthy lifestyle. However they can’t do this alone, parents need the support of government to ensure schools and their canteens are in a strong position to deliver the healthy eating message.”

Ends

Notes to Editor

- 263 menus from across Australia were assessed (approximately 4% of all state schools).
- Each menu was analysed in accordance with the relevant state/territory guidelines. However, the research was unable to ascertain exact portion size, or whether food items were home-made or manufactured.
- Compliance was determined based on the amount of green items on a menu. To be compliant, canteen menus must also have no red items on the menu (on more than two occasions per school term, as defined in individual policy/guidelines). Some states have banned food or drink items, such as soft drink, and this was also taken into account.
- The Parents' Jury is an online network of parents, grandparents and carers, who are interested in improving the food and activity environments of Australian children. We were formed in 2004 and we now have thousands of members registered nationally. We provide a forum for members to voice their views and collectively advocate for change.

Interview opportunities are available. For further information, contact Corrina Langelaan, 0423 791 194 or 03 9667 1742 or Angela Mallon on 03 9667 1783 enquiries@parentsjury.org.au