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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**National Roundtable to Save School Canteens Highlights Urgent Need for Systemic Support**

The Federation of Canteens in Schools National Roundtable has brought together voices from across Australia to address the pressing challenges and opportunities facing school canteens. On February 25, over 90 stakeholders, from parents and canteen managers to health experts and policymakers, participated in 11 breakout sessions, underscoring canteens' vital role in community wellbeing, student health, and educational success.

In response to the critical insights gathered from the National Roundtable, a National Consensus Statement is currently being drafted. This statement will capture the unified voices and strategic recommendations from all stakeholders and outline a clear vision for the future of school canteens, emphasising the need for systemic support, policy consistency, and government investment in this space.

Canteens are more than food providers—they are the heart of school communities, fostering connections and supporting student wellbeing.

For some students, the canteen meal is the only healthy meal they eat each day, noted Federation of Canteens in Schools Chairperson and CEO of Nutrition Australia ACT Leanne Elliston, highlighting the crucial role canteens play in ensuring food security and supporting academic success.

“Despite their importance, school canteens face significant challenges, particularly staffing, financial sustainability, and regulatory compliance. A consistent theme across all sessions was the struggle to recruit and retain volunteers, with many canteens relying on outdated volunteer models,” said Leanne.

Gemma Quinn, CEO of the Parent and Friends Association NSW, echoed this sentiment and emphasised that “evidence from communities and financial data indicate that community-run canteens yield the best outcomes for children, families, and the wider community.”

Canteens do more than serve meals, they create a sense of belonging, support families juggling busy lives, and contribute to the local economy.

“By nourishing our children, they nurture the wellbeing of entire communities.”​

Many children rely on canteens as their primary source of nutritious meals, so the significance of these services extends far beyond lunchtime.

“The reliance on volunteers is unsustainable, especially as most parents are now working. I often think about volunteering at my local primary school, and then the reality hits that I don’t have the ability to do so with workplace demands,” said Stacey, a mother of two primary school children.

Rising food costs and complex compliance requirements further compound the issue. It was noted that the rising cost of food makes it difficult to keep menu prices low, impacting access for students in disadvantaged areas. Additionally, canteens are subject to stringent food safety regulations, placing immense pressure on volunteer operations.

The roundtable identified community engagement, policy consistency, and professionalisation as key drivers for sustaining school canteens. Real buy in from the whole school community is essential, emphasising the need for support from school leaders, parents, and staff.

Another pivotal recommendation was to transition from volunteer-run to professionally staffed canteens. Moving to a paid staffing model was highlighted as necessary for improved food safety and operational efficiency. This reflected a growing consensus that paid, skilled staff are crucial for long-term sustainability.

Participants called for national consistency in policies and greater government support to ensure the long-term viability of school canteens.

Amanda Ferguson FOCIS Executive Member and Project Development Officer from Foodcore Nutrition Services Inc stressed the need for federal support for all school canteens that includes human resources, infrastructure and training; ensuring they are seen as a vital part of the school community to ensure equitable access to nutritious food for all students.

Participants also advocated for increased funding and subsidies, which would allow canteens to maintain affordable, nutritious menus without compromising financial sustainability.

“This National Consensus Statement will be presented to leaders, changemakers, and government representatives ahead of the looming election urging policymakers to prioritise school canteens as a fundamental pillar of student health, learning, and wellbeing.

By influencing policy at this pivotal time, the Federation of Canteens in Schools aims to secure a sustainable future for school canteens across Australia,” said Leanne.

***About the Federation of Canteens in Schools National Roundtable***

The Federation of Canteens in Schools National Roundtable was a collaborative platform that brings stakeholders across Australia to discuss, share, and advocate for sustainable and healthy school canteen practices. The roundtable provided a voice for schools, parents, and communities, driving positive change in student nutrition and well-being.

For more information on the Federation of Canteens in Schools, visit [www.focis.com.au](http://www.focis.com.au)

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