

NATIONAL CONSENSUS STATEMENT ON THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL CANTEENS AND TUCKSHOPS

The Federation of Canteens in Schools (FOCIS) is Australia's leading advocate for school canteens, working in collaboration with school communities, canteen networks, industry, and all levels of government to promote best practices in the provision of nutritious food in schools.

Over recent years, FOCIS has consistently observed increasing challenges for school canteens nationwide resulting in many reducing days of operation or closing. This places a greater burden on families preparing meals from home and prevents reliable access to affordable and nourishing meals for children at school.

Recognising the need for coordinated national action, FOCIS convened the National Roundtable on School Canteens on 25 February 2025, bringing together over 90 stakeholders across the sector. Attendees included canteen operators, health and education professionals, local government representatives, parent organisations, academics, non-government organisations, and the food industry — all united by a shared commitment to supporting nutritious, accessible, and sustainable food in schools.

The Roundtable reinforced that school canteens are more than just food providers—they are at the heart of the school community, fostering connections among students, parents, and staff. They play a vital role in nutrition and food security, ensuring children have access to nourishing food at school that supports their health, wellbeing, and academic success.

The Roundtable provided a national platform to identify key challenges and develop practical solutions to ensure the sustainability of school canteens. Key challenges raised during the Roundtable included:

- Staffing and volunteer shortages making it difficult to retain workers alongside low wages and limited hours leading to high burnout rates.
- Financial instability with rising food costs and limited funding making it difficult to provide healthy food options at affordable prices.
- Outdated infrastructure and inadequate equipment hindering the preparation of fresh, nutritious meals.
- Complex regulations and compliance requirements that differ across each jurisdiction.

Building on these insights, FOCIS has worked with key partners to develop a set of National Recommendations to support and sustain school canteens. These recommendations provide a

framework for coordinated action to address the most pressing issues canteens are facing to ensure school canteens remain a vital part of the school community.

CALL TO ACTION

We are calling for National Cabinet to coordinate efforts across federal and state governments to take responsibility to ensure children have access to quality food during school time that supports their learning and long-term health and wellbeing.

In order to do this, we ask governments to commit to the following steps to ensure that school canteens continue to nourish and support Australian students now and into the future.

1. Adequately resource school canteens

- 1.1. Establish fully funded positions for canteen staff to reduce reliance on volunteers.
- 1.2. Pay canteen workers fairly as a recognised member of school staff.
- 1.3. Provide training tools and resources to build the capacity of canteen staff.

2. Create a consistent national approach to regulation and compliance

- 2.1. Mandate standardised canteen guidelines across all states and territories focused on nutrition and safe food.
- 2.2. Adequately staff government positions to coordinate monitoring and compliance; and work with non-government organisations to increase access to free support and guidance for individual schools.

3. Establish feasible national procurement infrastructures

- 3.1. Coordinate bulk-purchasing arrangements to improve affordability, access and quality for essential food items.
- 3.2. Facilitate opportunities for canteens to develop relationships with quality food wholesalers and local food providers.

4. Guarantee nutritious meals are available for all students in schools

- 4.1. Adequately resource canteens to build food security in disadvantaged communities.
- 4.2. Recognise the role canteens play in strengthening school communities and fostering healthier eating habits that support educational outcomes and long-term health and wellbeing.

5. Fund the Federation of Canteens in Schools as a conduit between government and canteen providers

- 5.1. Support FOCIS as the national coordinating body to provide oversight, coordination, knowledge sharing and advocacy.
- 5.2. Leverage established networks to represent and support school canteens and tuckshops nationwide, ensuring their needs are prioritised in policy discussion and decision making.
- 5.3. Fund research capacity to gather and interpret data relevant to canteens in schools across Australia.

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