

# good school food

Helen Hayward talks to Julie Dunbabin about the challenges of improving school canteen food.

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After complaining bitterly to the Principal of Albuera Street Primary School about the quality of the Canteen's food for three years straight, Julie Dunbabin was given a challenge. Either take on the running of the School Canteen and start selling healthy food at a profit, or stop complaining. Julie took the challenge and went cold turkey. Overnight soft drinks, sweets and microwaved frozen foods were out, and wraps, soups, home-made hamburgers and muffins were in.

Fears that healthy food couldn't make a profit were soon confounded. The Albuera Street Primary Canteen, run just one day a week, currently has a turnover of \$500 to \$700. An initial 20 lunch orders in 2007 has climbed to 90 in 2011. Instead of harping on about the risks posed by saturated fats, processed foods and snacks with extended shelf-lives, Julie just took them off the counter. And in doing so she proved her critics wrong. It is possible to serve students healthy food, which they jostle in line for, and also to make a profit.

Meet her made-that-morning meatball sub: antibiotic-free beef mince, grated zucchini and carrot, chopped herbs and fresh tomato sauce, all tucked inside a wholemeal roll and topped with melted cheese. The price? \$3.50. Or \$6 in a lunch pack with a 100% fruit juice or milk and piece of fruit. What parent who scrambles to make a wholesome packed lunch over breakfast can argue with that?

Brought up in the UK, Julie Dunbabin has fond memories of two-course school dinners eaten at long tables amongst friends and teachers, and of getting up after them feeling warm and pleasantly full. Of course not all the food was good, no food cooked on a large scale can please everyone. However her overall memory is of the pleasure of sitting down in the middle of the day, and ploughing through two courses before scraping back her chair and rushing out to play on a full tummy.

This still is her vision. A background as a Home Economics teacher has given her a genuine sympathy with the demands of teaching real students in real classrooms. Further studies in Public Health has increased her awareness of the constraints posed by questions of hygiene, nutrition, budget, and management. But it's also given her the authority to stand up for her principles of providing healthy, local and affordable food, and the courage to hold on to her vision of sociable school eating - despite the pressures and easy-ways-out that so often compromise canteen food. After all why should canteen food be fast food?

Offered a senior role in the Tasmanian School Canteen Association - a not-for-profit health promotion organization funded by the Departments of Health and Education - she immediately took it. Instead of just wishing things were better, she was now able to effect real change. But while she's passionate about getting the upcoming generation to eat better, she's also patient. She knows

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that our reluctance to follow healthy eating guidelines, the old five servings of fruit and five of vegetables per day, can't be explained by socio-economic differences. She's conscious that much of the hot food available in many Independent School Canteens, just like their Government School counterparts, consists of heated-up packets of frozen food from the mainland. Not because the people running these canteens are ill-informed, but because heating up frozen food just is much easier than cooking with raw ingredients.

This is where Julie's vision of kids sitting down to a proper school lunch, amongst friends and teachers, is so valuable. Stephanie Alexander has a similar vision - combining gardening, cooking, and social skills - that has been met with significant federal funding. While Julie applauds The Kitchen Garden project, she's aware that her own mission, to improve the quality of food available in Tasmanian school canteens, is rather different.

Of the 290 schools across this State, 215 have a canteen. Of these 215 schools, 82% are run by Parents and Friends Associations, while the other 18% are outsourced. For all these canteens, whether volunteer or professionally run, the Tasmanian School Canteen Association can only offer guidelines. Schools can't be forced to ditch the easily-heated frozen-food options that undiscerning hungry students so readily choose over healthier options - but they can be given real alternatives.

The problem Julie faces is complex. She knows that healthy food is often perceived by students as boring. If children are presented with the choice of a meat pie or a salad bowl, children will go for the food that's quick and that they know best - and that's usually the meat pie. Good food, the kind that makes you feel good for having eaten it, just does take more effort and creativity. '90% of cooking is prep', Jamie Oliver remarked, only exaggerating a little.



Julie Dunbabin



However the battle is far from over. A whopping 76% of our nation's young fail to meet the recommended number of servings of fruit and vegetables. Hardly surprising really, given that vegetables hardly feature in lunch-boxes brought from home, as well as most in canteen food. And how many families eat five servings of vegetables at their evening meal? Just as an experiment, try hiding 350 grams per person of vegetables in your next pasta sauce.

All this begs a deeper question. Does what school students eat at lunch-time really matter? A cheese sandwich grabbed between classes isn't supposed to be the culinary highpoint of their day. Rather it's to tide them over until they get home from school, tired and hungry. But there's another thing, too - and this may turn out to be *the* thing. It's not just school kids who underestimate the value of a good lunch. 'Breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince and supper like a pauper' is the old and still wise saying. Yet how many of us lunch like princes these days? Lunch has lost its importance for lots of us - many grown-ups struggle to fit a decent lunch snack in the middle of their busy day.

And yet for Julie Dunbabin what school children eat at lunch-time really does matter. In her role so far she's encouraged just over half the State's school canteens to favour local, fresh and seasonal food. Given all the obstacles that guidelines like these throw up, a 53% uptake is an impressive figure.

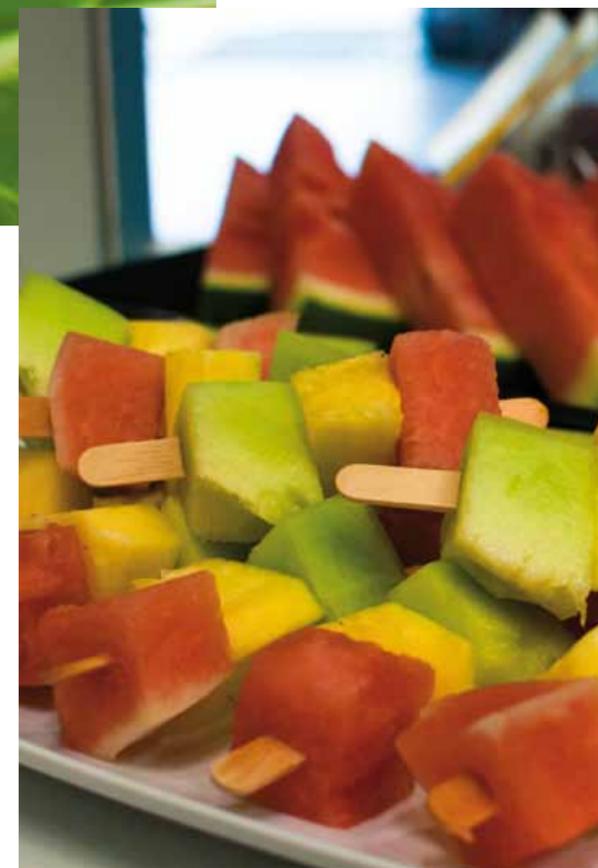
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What then is the real issue? The real issue, highlighted by our kids' failure to eat well at lunchtime, reflects a much broader social failure for all of us to eat well at lunchtime. We too, as adults, struggle to meet the nutritional guidelines trotted out by the CSIRO, The Cancer Council, and The Heart Foundation. Just like our kids, we duck the scary statistics relating to the 'chronic disease time bomb' that well-intended organizations see fit to trumpet every other week.

For all these reasons the link between food and health isn't getting through. We simply don't want to be told, on picking up the weekend paper, that being overweight in adolescence is a strong predictor of chronic disease as an adult. Nor do we want to be forced to make the connection between what we eat today and lifestyle-related diseases in years to come.

What then would we like this generation of Tasmanian schoolchildren to eat for lunch? An in-house meatball sub followed by a freshly-baked, fibre-rich berry muffin? Or heated-up chicken nuggets and hot chips, chased down by a 5-teaspoons of sugar carton of fruit juice from concentrate - in packaging that may never break down in the soil? I exaggerate, but sadly not wildly.

Even if you don't feel personally responsible for the brain functioning and bone structure of this generation of school-kids, good school food gives pause for thought. We may not be able to halt global warming, and we may be powerless to decide how much GST is handed from Federal to State governments, but it is in our power to ensure that our kids are sufficiently well nourished to be among the next generation of hopeful and productive Tasmanians. Or will we stand by as, over time, they risk joining the first generation of Australians to die sooner than their parents?



Although Julie Dunbabin confesses to not being a Jamie Oliver, she does share many of his passions. She's aware that healthy food options will end up as compost unless the food prepared actually looks and tastes good. She knows that a student's suspicion of a new food is often greater than their curiosity to try something new. She understands the power of peer pressure - that students are more likely to eat pumpkin soup from a mug if their friends are slurping it too, or if they've grown the pumpkin in the school garden. She also knows that it's futile to call salt and sugar 'white death', given a child's natural taste for sweet and salty things - but that a home-made raspberry muffin will hit the same spot provided the Mars Bars are off the counter.

Proving that healthy canteen food can be profitable is of course important. But even more important for our kids' future is the link between good eating and good learning. There are now numerous studies that draw a direct link between eating a proper breakfast and enhanced cognitive and metabolic functioning across the day. Dr Michael Carr-Gregg's opening remarks to a packed-out audience of Year 12 parents in Hobart, were extremely simple: 'if you do

nothing else but ensure that your kids have an egg or yoghurt for breakfast, you'll have helped to increase their ENTER scores.' Regulating blood sugar levels, consuming the right fats and proteins for good brain functioning, bone and cellular growth - these have always been important. But now we have the science to prove it.

Why then do findings like these so often end up in the too-hard basket? Could it be that our kids are picking up on what we do (grabbing quick meals on the go), rather than on what we should be doing (preparing our meals from well-sourced natural ingredients)? Could it be that we're spending too much time watching Masterchef, and not enough time sharpening our own knives and exploring new dishes? And are we just too busy to think outside the square when it comes to packing our kids' school lunches (notwithstanding the incredible pickiness common to many kids)? Or could it be that we struggle to believe statistics which link low fibre intake with colon cancer, or blood sugar spikes with insulin dependence and Type 2 Diabetes? Or are we switched off by what seems like scare-mongering and nanny-ish government warnings?