



Case studies of sustainable school canteen models in the ACT: Summary Report

The 'Summary Report' provides an overview of the full research report 'Case Studies of Sustainable School Canteen Models in the ACT' prepared for ACT Health by the Sax Institute.

Case Studies of Sustainable School Canteen Models in the ACT

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Abbreviations

NHSCG	National Healthy School Canteen Guidelines
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
HKA	Healthy Kids Association
P&C	Parents and Citizens' Association
P&F	Parents and Friends' Association

Executive Summary

Background

In 2010, the National Healthy School Canteen Guidelines (NHSCG) were developed to help Australian school canteens to supply healthier food and drink choices. The ACT was one of three jurisdictions to adopt the Guidelines. In 2014, a report prepared by the Healthy Kids Association (HKA) for ACT Health recommended refining existing school canteen models and developing new school canteen models to address the financial viability problems faced by traditional canteens. This evaluation was commissioned to examine a range of school canteen service models operating in the ACT and develop practical tool(s) to assist schools to select the most appropriate canteen model for their school.

Project aims and methods

The aim of this evaluation was to understand how schools can deliver a sustainable food service that complies with the NHSCG.

Within this, there were three focus areas:

1. Examination of how the different school canteen service models are implemented in the ACT (including any key barriers and enablers to operation).
2. Sustainability of the different school canteen service models (including acceptability, embeddedness within the school community, healthy food and financial viability)
3. Critical success factors for sustainability and implementation of the school canteen service models

The evaluation used a case study approach to examine a relevant sample of different school canteen models operating across the ACT. Of the 14 schools who participated in the study, ten were ACT public schools (five primary schools, three K-10 schools and two high schools) and four were Catholic schools (three primary schools and one high school).

Definitions

The following definitions were used when evaluating the school canteen service models:

- **Acceptability:** assesses the extent to which different school canteen service models are perceived as suiting schools' needs and are consistent with school culture.
- **Embeddedness within the school community:** assesses the extent to which the different school canteen service models are 'embedded' within the school community. It includes the school canteen service workforce structure (e.g. parent and student volunteers), whether the school canteen service is used for other school events and fundraisers, whether the school canteen service has links to the curriculum and other aspects of 'embeddedness' identified by key stakeholders (e.g. Principals, P&C/P&F representatives, canteen managers and external providers).

- **Healthy food:** assesses the extent to which the different school canteen service models comply with the National Healthy School Canteen Guidelines.
- **Financial viability:** assesses the extent to which the different school canteen service models cover their costs (e.g. canteen staff wages, food costs, kitchen facilities and equipment).
- **Sustainability:** assesses the key dimensions of sustaining the different school canteen service models including examining whether acceptability, 'embeddedness' within the school community, healthy food and financial viability are identified as key dimensions by stakeholders and whether there are any other identified dimensions of sustainability.

Data sources

The evaluation data sources included:

1. Interviews with key stakeholders in each school:

- School Principal
- President (or nominated representative) from the school P&C/P&F Association
- Onsite canteen manager and/or
- External provider/external business manager

A total of 36 interviews were conducted including:

- 12 Principals, 1 Acting Principal and 1 Executive Teacher
- 10 P&C/P&F representatives
- 8 onsite canteen managers
- 4 external providers/external business managers

2. Pre-interview survey completed by Principals in each school (N=14) about the implementation of their school canteen service

3. Nutrition Australia ACT canteen menu assessment data (2018) from each school (N=14)

Note: at the time of the evaluation, ACT Catholic school canteens did not have to comply with the National Healthy School Canteen Guidelines as there was no overarching policy requiring compliance. In contrast, ACT Public Schools' compliance with the mandatory *ACT Public School Food and Drink Policy* was monitored by the Education Directorate.

Canteen service models

The evaluation examined five canteen models in operation in the ACT. Detailed descriptions of each of these models appear on page 9.

1. P&C/P&F Association managed canteens (n=4)
2. School managed canteens (n=2)
3. Onsite sole trader operated canteens (n=2)
4. Onsite externally operated canteens (n=3)
5. Offsite externally operated canteens (n=3)

Results

Factors for successful operation:

Across all models the following factors were identified as being important for successful operation:

- **Support from the school executive**
- The **pricing and promotion of healthy food** to ensure it was affordable, competitively priced and appealing
- **Financial viability** was seen as a basic requirement. This involved getting the right balance between days of operation, food options, price and utilisation.
- **Good communication** between key people managing the canteen
- **Online canteen ordering systems were generally viewed positively** and as a success factor

Achieving a sustainable school canteen service:

The following elements of sustainability were identified in the evaluation:

Acceptability

In relation to acceptability, most school Principals considered their current canteen service arrangements were acceptable. School Principals did not consistently prefer or more highly regard one canteen service model over another.

Financial viability

Financial viability was perceived as the key to sustainability, and in onsite canteen services, the recruitment and retention of a skilled canteen manager was observed as a critical factor.

Overall, most school canteen services were currently fulfilling their financial goals and were perceived to be financially viable. The financial viability of one government school with an external NGO managed canteen was uncertain as it had reported a loss in the previous two years.

P&C canteen models presented the most financial risk for schools, with many reporting that covering costs was challenging and sometimes required the support of fundraisers or other subsidies – only one P&C managed canteen reported making a profit.

Catholic schools had greater financial capacity to subsidise the canteen service. One Catholic high school was happy to subsidise the school managed canteen service (including wages and equipment).

Schools were not necessarily aware of the exact financial outputs of external providers (non-government organisations and commercial providers). However, it appeared that most external providers perceived the canteen service to be financially viable. One onsite external provider (commercial 'chain') was not able to make a profit and was supported by the school who provided the facilities at no cost.

Staffing

A skilled canteen manager and appropriate paid and volunteer staff levels were essential for onsite canteen services. P&C/P&F managed canteen services were more likely to rely on volunteer canteen staff than onsite sole traders or onsite external providers.

Feasible management arrangements

What was considered viable and feasible in terms of management varied considerably across schools and models.

Meeting the National Healthy School Canteen Guidelines

Of the ACT public schools who participated (n=10), 7 complied with the Guidelines (>50% Green and 0% Red). Of the Catholic schools (N=4) who participated in the project, 3 undertook a menu assessment, their first ever, and none were compliant with the Guidelines at the time of assessment. As mentioned previously, Catholic schools were not required to comply with the NHSCG at the time of the evaluation.

Embeddedness within the school community

Overall, canteen services were embedded in the school through staffing and volunteers and in supporting other school events and functions. Canteen service links to curricula were rare. 'Embeddedness' was not consistently seen as a key dimension of acceptability or sustainability.

Key findings: barriers and enablers for school canteen models

Adequate kitchen facilities and support

- All schools with onsite canteen services reported adequate kitchen facilities and equipment.

Recruiting and retaining a skilled canteen manager

- The canteen manager was identified as central to the success of onsite canteen services (including P&C/P&F managed, school managed, sole trader, onsite Healthy Kids Association managed canteen services and onsite external providers/commercial 'chain').

Adequate paid and volunteer staff in onsite canteen services

- Difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteer staff was a major barrier for P&C/P&F Association managed school canteen services.
- Having students in the canteen services was perceived to be too difficult due to the burden of supervision and health and safety requirements.

P&C/P&F Association support and workload

- Schools that had, or previously had a P&C/P&F managed canteen service reported that the workload for volunteers was significant and was a barrier to implementing this school canteen service model.

Executive support and workload

- Executive support for the school canteen service model is essential.
- P&C/P&F and school-managed canteen services created the greatest workload for the school Executive, with this being cited as one of the barriers to implementing and sustaining these types of service models.

Ensuring compliance with regulations and insurance

- The complexity of ensuring compliance with regulations and insurances was reported to be a barrier in schools that have, or have previously had a P&C/P&F managed canteen service.

Complying with the National Healthy School Canteen Guidelines

- A number of ACT public school across different canteen models found it challenging to comply with the National Healthy School Canteen Guidelines.
- Pricing and promotion of healthy food was perceived to be important across all service models.
- Nutrition Australia ACT was described by key stakeholders in ACT public schools as a helpful resource to assist them to implement the NHSCG. Stakeholders particularly valued telephone advice about classification of specific menu items.

Financial viability

- Financial viability was perceived as a basic requirement of sustainability. Financial viability was seen as the result of an adequate degree of use, with the right balance of days of operation, food options and price.

Online canteen ordering systems

- Online ordering systems were generally viewed positively and as a success factor across the different canteen service models.

Good communication between key people managing the canteen service

- Effective communication between key people managing the canteen service e.g. School Executive – Canteen Manager – External provider – P&C/P&F representative was important across all models.

Guides to choosing canteen services

There is not one model of canteen service provision that is recommended, nor one model that suits all ACT schools.

As such, a set of short guides has been developed to assist schools in considering which models of canteen services may be appropriate. The guides, which are attached to this Executive Summary, are:

- [Summary of School Canteen Service Models](#) listing challenges and possibilities of each (page 9)
- [Quick Reference Guide](#) highlighting the essential elements to be considered for each model (page 12)
- [A Guide to Optimising Your Canteen Service](#) (page 13)

More information on school food service models is available on the Fresh Tastes section of ACT Health's website at: <https://www.health.act.gov.au/about-our-health-system/healthy-living/fresh-tastes/canteens>.

Summary of canteen service models in the ACT

Model	Features	Challenges/risks	Possibilities
P&C/P&F/Community Council managed canteens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Canteen is managed and funded by the P&C P&C may need to subsidise the canteen Recruiting and retaining a good canteen manager Kitchen may be shared with Outside School Hours Care operators which is managed by school Can limit time/resources P&C has to spend on other issues in the school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment of volunteers P&C may need to subsidise the canteen Recruiting and retaining a good canteen manager Kitchen may be shared with Outside School Hours Care operators which is managed by school Can limit time/resources P&C has to spend on other issues in the school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity for increased embeddedness of the canteen within the school community Volunteering provides opportunities for family engagement in the school community
School managed canteens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Canteen manager employed by the school Supported by paid staff or volunteers Kitchen facilities provided by school School is responsible for costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment of volunteers Depending on the financial model, the school may cover the cost of the canteen manager and/or other paid staff Kitchen may be shared with Outside School Hours Care operators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity for increased embeddedness of the canteen within the school community Volunteering provides opportunities for family engagement in the school community
Onsite sole trader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Onsite sole trader manages the canteen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May be challenging to find and retain a suitable sole trader School may agree to waive rent in order to maintain a food service onsite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity for increased embeddedness of the canteen within the school community

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May utilise paid or volunteer staff • Kitchen facilities are rented from the school by negotiation • Depending on the agreement the school may be responsible for the cost of equipment, repairs and maintenance • The sole trader covers the operating costs of the canteen 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School not responsible for legislative compliance/governance of the canteen operation
Onsite externally operated canteen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Onsite canteen operated by an external provider (can be for profit or not-for-profit) • Paid canteen manager • May utilise paid or volunteer staff • External provider covers the operating costs of the canteen • Kitchen facilities are rented from the school by negotiation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There may be risks associated with the financial viability of the chosen external provider service • Ensuring understanding of and compliance with relevant food and drink policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School not liable for financial costs • School not responsible for legislative compliance/governance of the canteen operation
Offsite externally operated canteen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offsite externally managed canteen ('spoke') with the main 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canteen limited to lunch service • Ensuring understanding of and ongoing compliance with relevant food and drink policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School not liable for financial costs • School kitchen facilities not required • School not responsible for legislative

	<p>canteen service located elsewhere</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Usually canteen operates 1-2 days per week to optimise utilisation• Volunteers required to distribute lunches (teachers, students or parents)• External provider covers all operating costs• No kitchen or equipment needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use by school for catering/events/fundraising usually comes at a cost.	<p>compliance/governance of the canteen operation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Opportunity for student and family volunteers in distribution of lunches
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Quick reference guide

A key question to consider in selecting a canteen model is:

What do the Executive and the school community want from their canteen service?

KEY		CANTEEN MODEL				
		P&C / P&F managed	School managed	Onsite sole trader	Onsite external provider	Offsite external provider
Required						
Possible requirement						
Not relevant						
MODEL FEATURES						
Funding	P&C /P&F/Community council funds the canteen service	Required	Not relevant	Not relevant	Not relevant	Not relevant
	School funds the canteen service (schools may subsidise onsite providers through low rent, no charge on utility services, provision of equipment)	Not relevant	Required	Possible requirement	Possible requirement	Not relevant
	Food service provider funds the canteen service	Not relevant	Not relevant	Required	Required	Required
Resourcing requirements	School must have kitchen facilities	Required	Required	Required	Required	Not relevant
	School/ P&C /P&F/Community council responsible for recruiting and retaining paid canteen manager	Required	Required	Not relevant	Not relevant	Not relevant
	Paid staff supporting canteen operation	Possible requirement	Possible requirement	Possible requirement	Possible requirement	Not relevant
	Volunteers required to support canteen operation	Required	Required	Possible requirement	Possible requirement	Not relevant
	School process, may involve volunteers, required to distribute lunches	Not relevant	Not relevant	Not relevant	Not relevant	Required
	High level of school executive commitment required to support canteen	Not relevant	Required	Possible requirement	Not relevant	Not relevant
	School community representatives with business skills to oversee and support a canteen service	Required	Required	Not relevant	Not relevant	Not relevant
Governance	School/ P&C /P&F/ Community council responsible for the canteen's governance and legislative compliance	Required	Required	Not relevant	Not relevant	Not relevant
Financial risk	School liable for financial loss	Not relevant	Required	Not relevant	Not relevant	Not relevant
	P&C/P&F/Community council liable for financial loss	Required	Not relevant	Not relevant	Not relevant	Not relevant
	Food service provider liable for financial loss	Not relevant	Not relevant	Required	Required	Required
Embeddedness	Opportunity for integration of the canteen within the school community	Required	Required	Possible requirement	Possible requirement	Not relevant
	Opportunity for canteen to support extracurricular activities	Possible requirement	Possible requirement	Possible requirement	Possible requirement	Not relevant

Optimising your canteen service

STRATEGIES		Checklist		
		Yes	No	N/A
Canteen manager/Food service provider/P&C/P&F	Ensure the relevant parties have a commitment to healthy eating and a sound understanding of the relevant school food and drink policy.			
	Ensure relevant parties have appropriate small business and catering skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • human resource management • financial management • stakeholder management • sales and marketing • menu planning • ordering 			
	Establish a welcoming environment with friendly canteen staff who will be approachable for students and volunteers			
Operations & management	Determine the optimum number of days of operation consider balancing school size, student use of the canteen and the availability of paid and/or volunteer staff			
	Use online canteen ordering systems			
	Utilise policy implementation supports and resources (see references at end of document)			
	Ensure common understanding and transparency regarding financial arrangements with any external providers e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expectations of profit & loss • clear profit-sharing arrangements • how financial information will be reported to the school 			
Pricing & promotion	Canteen needs to be financially accessible to the school community and menu should be designed to consider items that can be sold across a range of price points			
	Pricing should be competitive with local food outlets			
	Use a relative pricing approach e.g. healthier items priced more attractively			
	Promote the canteen service and menu through all available school communication channels			
	Identify your menu items with traffic light symbols indicating the healthier choices (green) and less healthy choices (amber).			
	Create appealing food displays promoting healthy choices			

STRATEGIES		Checklist		
		Yes	No	N/A
Communication	Maintain clear lines of communication between the canteen manager/food service provider and Executive and P&C/P&F Association (where relevant)			
	Maintain ongoing engagement with external providers to ensure they continue to meet school policy and the menu reflects the whole school approach to healthy food and drink			
Student & family engagement	Promote the canteen service and the canteen roster in school newsletters and school social media channels			
	Promote the canteen service and volunteering opportunities at Kindergarten family orientation sessions			
	Create a welcoming and friendly canteen environment			
	Create an appealing social space for students as part of the canteen service			
	Involve the canteen service in fundraisers, catering for in house training, school events to increase the visibility and viability of the canteen service			
	Engage students in designing healthy choice menu items to be sold as weekly specials and/or posters promoting healthy choice items			

Resources and supports

There are a range of resources to support schools and school canteens in the ACT in relation to providing healthy food and drink choices. For more information see:

- [ACT Health Fresh Tastes program](#)
- [ACT Nutrition Support Services](#)
- [Healthy Kids Association](#)
- [Go for Green: using the traffic light system](#)
- [Marketing food at school; using the 5 P's](#)