

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

**5 May 2026**

### **“Every child, every day” National Summit calls for urgent action on school food**

Leaders from across health, education, research, government and community sectors have issued a clear message following the National School Food Summit in Hobart. Australia can no longer afford to treat food in schools as optional.

Held on 4 May at Hobart’s C3 Convention Centre and co presented by School Food Matters and the Federation of Canteens in Schools (FOCIS), the Summit brought together a cross section of the system to address a growing reality: access to nutritious food at school is inconsistent, underfunded and largely dependent on families.

A national survey of Summit delegates revealed the scale of the challenge.

85% identified financial constraints as the leading barrier to accessing nutritious food at school. More than 60% pointed to weak policy commitment and lack of national coordination and 90% said insufficient and unsustainable funding is the single biggest barrier to delivering meaningful school food programs.

Food insecurity was identified as the dominant issue to address, alongside poor diet quality and high intake of ultra processed foods.

At the same time, there was strong consensus on what works. More than 70% of delegates supported mandatory nationally recognised school food guidelines. More than 75% backed free school lunch programs and a similar proportion prioritised preventing child hunger as the primary outcome of school food design.

Leanne Elliston, Honorary Chair of the Federation of Canteens in Schools and Chief Executive Officer of Nutrition Australia ACT, said the Summit collectively reinforced what the sector has long known.

“What we heard clearly from across the sector on a national level is that the barriers are not new.

Cost, infrastructure and fragmented policy continue to limit access not because we do not know what works, but because we have not yet committed to it at a national level.”

The Summit heard from researchers across Deakin University, Flinders University, Queensland University of Technology, the University of Wollongong and the Menzies Institute for Medical Research, highlighting a strong and growing evidence base showing that school meal programs improve diet quality, increase participation and support better learning outcomes, particularly for students who would otherwise go without.

Tasmania's School Lunch Program demonstrates what is possible when school food is treated as core infrastructure, delivering more than 21,000 meals each week, or around 750,000 meals each year.

Despite this, Australia remains one of the few high-income countries without a coordinated national approach to school meals.

The Summit marked a clear national way forward through the progression of the Australian School Meal Alliance (ASMA). The Alliance will drive a coordinated national approach, focused on aligning policy, supporting delivery models suited to Australian contexts and strengthening the case for long term investment.

Delegates of the National School Food Summit were clear that the next steps to improve access to food in schools must move beyond discussion to action, with priorities centred on sustainable funding, embedding school meals as core education infrastructure and scaling models that are already delivering results.

“We have the evidence, we have the models and we have a growing coalition ready to act. What is needed now is leadership and commitment to bring this together at a national level.”

“This is an opportunity to create a system grounded in a shared national vision ***that every child, every day, can access a nutritious meal while at school.***”

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