

Submission to the Parliamentary inquiry into the potential for developing opportunities for schools to become a focus for promoting healthy community living, July 2009

Approaching healthy community living through home economics in schools

Established in 1958, Home Economics Victoria is a vital and progressive organisation, seeking to professionally support the approximately 1000 Victorian teachers among its membership and to address a wide range of curriculum issues. Our scope includes active membership of the International Federation for Home Economics, and the hosting of the IFHE World Congress 2012 in Melbourne.

Home Economics Victoria has over many years been active in planning and managing health promotion in schools, and in linking programs to the broader community, including families, other not-for-profit groups and business organisations. These health promotion activities have included government funded programs as well as those that are incidental to the teaching practices of our membership.

Our approach to 'healthy community living' is integrated and holistic, encompassing physical, mental and social wellbeing. Home economics aims to build human capacity, including knowledge, hands-on practical skills, social connections, and the ability to make independent decisions. Such human resources are essential to the attainment of optimal health and development outcomes related to food and nutrition, lifestyle choices and the responsibilities of global consumer citizenship.

We believe that home economics offers a unique and well-proven approach to the promotion of healthy community living, and that schools – both primary and secondary – are ideally placed as a focus for this promotion. It is our position that home economics professionals have long been building sound foundations for healthy communities, and are an invaluable resource for both present and future government health promotion strategies.

The benefits of home economics to individuals, families and communities have sometimes been overlooked by government and other decision makers, and our profession has at times been disenfranchised, including within our education system (particularly at tertiary level). We believe it is time redress this: to value, strengthen and broaden the contribution of home economics professionals.

It is our position that communities that no longer value the skills and practices inherent to home economics suffer a loss that is both detrimental and dangerous to healthy community living. In an age of unprecedented transition from industrial to knowledge-based culture and global economics, the key imperative of home economics is to retain the elements of society that are valued, while looking ahead to improved and sustainable living for all¹.

This submission emphasises the benefits of a home economics focus in the pursuit of healthy communities, through the presentation of several case studies outlining successful health promotion activities. It also presents evidence that international recognition of the benefits of home economics is currently resurgent, most notably among government policy makers in the United Kingdom.

¹ *International Federation for Home Economics 2008, Position statement: Home economics in the 21st century*

Specific health promotion program case study 1: Food Design Challenge

The Food Design Challenge is an annual program initiated by Home Economics Victoria and facilitated by teachers. Participating students learn how to prepare and cook a range of food items, to handle food safely, to apply healthy eating principles and develop their sensory awareness. Underpinning these practical aspects are the creative, social and emotional dimensions to the students' experiences, achievements and wellbeing.

Students use a design brief – tailored to suit their age group – to adapt a recipe to create their own healthy, tasty, well-presented variation. They also submit a product presentation (usually in the form of a photograph). Depending on the year level of the student, other components include product review, sensory analysis and written evaluation of the design and production process. The judging criteria stipulate that the recipe must be healthy and original.

The challenge is open to all students from Prep to Year 12 across Victoria, with three categories for primary schools and three for secondary schools. Launched in 2006 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of our flagship publication *Cookery the Australian Way* (a textbook now in its seventh edition), numbers of participating students have grown each year from less than 200 to over 400 in 2007, and over 800 in 2009.

Each participating student receives a certificate, and category finalists (and their supporters from schools, families and beyond) attend an award ceremony, held each year during Education Week. The Food Design Challenge is well supported by its sponsors – currently Sunbeam and Macmillan Education Australia – who supply generous prizes for the winning students and their schools.

The Food Design Challenge has immense capacity to increase student participation and interest in food preparation and health. In primary schools, there is also provision for input for parents, thereby building on the potential for learning to become even more meaningful and to translate into long-term health-promoting behaviours within families.

Equipping young people with the confidence to take a standard recipe and adapt it according to their own resources, tastes and creative flair gives them a powerful tool for their future negotiation of everyday living. Likewise, to give them experience in trying new ingredients and applying fresh ideas demystifies the cooking process. This activity transfers the ownership of cooking from the realm of chefs or adult authority figures and into the personal realm. In the spirit of creativity and enjoyment among peers, good, healthy food becomes fun. At the same time, it becomes an achievable goal.

The Food Design Challenge is unquestionably one of the highlights of our annual program for our members and the young people they work with. Students apply themselves to the task with extraordinary enthusiasm. Anecdotally, some schools that offer home economics in the second semester (i.e. after the closing date for the Food Design Challenge) are adapting their curriculum to stage their own versions of the challenge, at the request of students who have indicated that they feel disadvantaged by not participating.

Importantly, the Food Design Challenge is readily applied to a wide cross-section of existing Victorian school curriculum, and as a result is embraced by schools that may have concerns about accommodating activities organised outside the school. As stated by one of our members in a recent evaluation report:

The project required the students to use a range of different skills: brainstorming, problem solving, recipe production, teamwork/working effectively with others, information technology skills, literacy skills, sensory evaluation and many more. I was also able to collaborate with other teachers in different subject areas.²

² Theologous, G 2009, 'An applied curriculum project case study: Food Design Challenge, Victorian Journal of Home Economics, Vol 48, No. 1, p. 33

We consider the Food Design Challenge to be a good example of a health promotion program that integrates health knowledge in a practical and accessible way – enjoyable for young people, who will be self-motivated to internalise, repeat and refine the activity in the future.

Specific health promotion program case study 2: The Fruit + Veg Program

Home Economics Victoria's Fruit + Veg Program is a partnering program of Kids – 'Go for your life' funded by the Department of Human Services and managed by the Cancer Council Victoria and Diabetes Australia – Vic. The program aims to increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables among Victorian primary school aged children and to build positive attitudes around eating fruit and vegetables. We have run the program successfully in Victorian schools since the 2003 pilot.

The Fruit + Veg Program features annual workshops for teachers and members of school communities, and a range of activities centred around Fruit + Veg Week. The overriding aim of the program is to provide opportunities for children to plan, prepare, taste and be creative with fruit and vegetables. The program links in with school canteens and facilitates the development of relationships between schools and local fruit and vegetable retailers. It encourages links with community resources and networks.

The Fruit + Veg Program has involved widespread participation across all educational regions of Victoria. According to the 2008 report on the previous three years of implementation, from 2005–2007, the Fruit + Veg Program was delivered to 112,952 primary school students. A total of 377 schools attended the Fruit + Veg professional development workshops during that time.³

Qualitative and quantitative feedback is continually sought from participants and regularly reported on as part of Department of Human Services funding parameters. Reportable data includes observations collected upon visits to schools during Fruit +Veg Week, reports and comments from participants, stakeholders and organisers, requests for consultation workshops, and feedback to the HiP (Health in Primary) newsletter. All schools participating in the program are asked to complete extensive program evaluations. Reporting also takes place via telephone interviews.

In the 2008 report, of all components of the program the one most consistently rated as 'excellent' by teachers and other community participants (at 62 per cent) was the practical cooking demonstration delivered during the professional development workshops. This demonstration aims to show educators how to teach valuable cooking skills to children within the constraints of the average primary school classroom. It is important to demonstrate the possibilities to teachers and to provide them with appropriate resources, with 76 per cent of schools reporting that they had involved their students in practical cooking activities.

Our reputation for successfully delivering the Fruit + Veg Program and – a recent extension to the program – Lunch with Punch workshops has generated requests from schools, parent groups, community health organisations, local festivals/community events, municipal councils and mothers' groups to deliver consultation workshops that focus on practical food preparation and cooking. Participants include students, parents, canteen staff, teachers, local council workers, new mothers, social club members and members of the public. Topics have included healthy lunchboxes, practical cooking skills, preparation of healthy meals for children and families, safe food handling, nutrition, and cooking meals for a family on a budget.

Importantly, our evaluation of the Fruit + Veg Program overwhelmingly points towards schools being an ideal setting in which to deliver the program. As stated in the 2008 Fruit + Veg evaluation report:

³ Home Economics Victoria, 2005–2007 Fruit+Veg Final Evaluation Report

The Fruit + Veg Program recognises the opportunities schools offer as an effective health promotion setting and more importantly the unique position held by teachers as potential facilitators of change. Employing a whole-of-school approach, Fruit + Veg maintains a particular emphasis on student centred, curriculum-based activities as a means of increasing students' knowledge and skills in healthy eating. In addition, the program acknowledges that effective, long-term behaviour change requires the support and involvement of parents/carers, canteen managers and the wider school community.⁴

Other successful health promotion programs

A primary focus of this submission – the link between cooking skills and health outcomes – has been subject to increasing scrutiny throughout the world. There is widespread belief that diminishing the value and focus on practical food skills and knowledge – both in school curriculums and within changing and ever-busier households – has led directly to the burgeoning of health problems. The result is now community urgency that the lack of attention on food skills – life skills, essentially – be redressed.

Research is now being carried out to investigate the links between cooking skills and health, with particular interest in new findings that the much-reported link between poorer diet and lower socioeconomic status (and subsequent poorer choices in food purchasing) can also be linked not just to lower levels of education but also to reported 'lower confidence to cook'.⁵

In the United Kingdom in particular, substantial attention has been paid to lack of cooking skills within households – to the extent that from September 2008, compulsory cooking classes were imposed for all 11–14-year-old students in the 85 per cent of schools that already had home economics facilities in place. Schools Secretary Ed Balls stated when making the announcement in January 2008 'Teaching kids to cook healthy meals is an important way schools can help produce healthy adults'.⁶

A subsequent health program put in place in the UK – Let's Get Cooking – was in April 2009 awarded prestigious endorsement by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH). An important feature of this program is a national network of 5000 (and growing) cooking clubs teaching children and their families how to teach good, healthy food. Funding for this program comes from the proceeds of a national lottery. Chief Executive of the RSPH, Professor Richard Parish said upon endorsement of the program:

Let's Get Cooking encourages children in good eating habits which can last a lifetime. Equally importantly, the children can then take the healthy eating message back to their families and the wider community.

⁴ *Home Economics Victoria, 2005–2007 Fruit+Veg Final Evaluation Report*

⁵ *Winkler, Elizabeth 2008 (PhD thesis), Food accessibility, affordability, cooking skills and socioeconomic differences in fruit and vegetable purchasing in Brisbane, Australia, Queensland University of Technology*

⁶ *Donald McLeod, 'Cooking lessons to be made compulsory in schools', The Guardian, Education section, 22 January 2008*

Conclusion and recommendations

At Home Economics Victoria, we have been frustrated to have witnessed over many years the erosion of the status of practical, life-affirming subjects in schools. Curriculum has been moulded by the winds of fashion and impulse into new groupings and terminologies that have undermined the identity of unique subjects such as home economics. A subject which, nevertheless (unsurprisingly to us) remains extremely popular in schools (with 82 per cent of schools offering it as compulsory at Year 7–8)⁷.

The documented shortage of qualified home economics teachers in Victorian schools and the impending retirement of many who are practising today give us enormous concern.⁸ Tertiary institutions in this state have progressively cut and diminished undergraduate pathways to home economics teaching. As a Registered Training Organisation, we offer a Vocational Graduate Diploma in Home Economics Education (endorsed by the Victorian Institute of Teaching) to qualified teachers who wish to upskill and retrain. However, we feel strongly that state and federal governments need to be decisive and pro-active in addressing this shortage.

We must differentiate here between the vocational skills associated with the hospitality industry (which are also important to our operations and to the professionalism of our membership) and the life skills for everyday living that are at the heart of the home economics discipline. We emphasise that home economics is dedicated to the wellbeing and social functioning of the individual within family and community contexts.

Home Economics Victoria recommends that the Victorian Government:

- recognises schools as ideal settings in which to facilitate and deliver health promotion initiatives, and as appropriate focal points for the extended community
- recognises that home economics teachers currently working in Victorian schools, along with the school infrastructures that support them, are an invaluable and experienced resource for present and future health promotion strategies
- strengthens and develops health promotion programs with strong practical food preparation components, given the evidence of links between the level of practical food skills (and 'confidence to cook') and the prevalence of community-wide health problems
- initiates and facilitates inquiry and action to address the shortage of qualified home economics teachers in Victorian schools, and the present inadequacies of teacher training in this field
- considers the exemplary United Kingdom model of imposing compulsory cooking classes in schools, in the interests of future community health and wellbeing

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⁷ Corstorphan, C, Warren, C, Fordyce-Voorham, S 2005, 'Where have all the home economics teachers gone?', *Victorian Journal of Home Economics*, Vol 44, No. 2, pp. 2–9

⁸ Ibid.