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Parents' perceptions of the Tasmanian School Lunch Project - interim findings

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Most Australian school students take a packed lunch to school⁽¹⁾. However, parents have reported many barriers to packing a healthy lunch⁽²⁾. Subsequently, foods eaten during school hours are not consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines, with discretionary foods providing about 44% of energy consumed during this time⁽³⁾. In addition, some children go to school without any food for lunch or money to buy lunch. The Tasmanian School Lunch Project provides free nutritious cooked lunches for Kinder to Year 10 students attending 30 government schools (15 commenced 2022, 15 commenced 2023) in areas of high socioeconomic disadvantage. The lunches were provided 1-3 days/week. The menu and recipes were designed by dietitians. This analysis aimed to describe parents' perceptions of the School Lunch Project during the first year. Six of the 15 schools that commenced in term 2 2022 were invited, and agreed, to participate in the evaluation. During term 3 or 4 2022, parents completed online or written surveys (n = 159) and/or participated in discussion groups (n = 26) to share their thoughts on the menu, their concerns, likes, and willingness to pay. Survey data were analysed descriptively and open-ended survey responses and discussion group data thematically. During 2022, 78,832 nutritious cooked lunches were provided to 1,678 students. Most parents felt there was enough variety on the menu (66%) and the right amount of food was served (69%). Most students (79%) ate the lunches every day they were provided yet 52% of parents continued to provide a packed lunch. Parents enjoyed that their child was having a healthy lunch (66%) and trying new foods (74%). Some parents in the discussion groups indicated positive flow on effects at home with students trying new foods and sitting down together as a family to eat the evening meal. Half the parents (50%) had no concerns about the school providing lunches. The most commonly reported concerns were their child might not like the food (36%) or their child does not try new foods (8.6%). These concerns were also raised in the discussion groups. Most parents (93%) were prepared to pay for the lunches in future (median \$3, range \$1-\$12) and 85% thought there should be a family discount. Parents acknowledged some payment was necessary for the sustainability of the program but some expressed concern for those who may struggle to pay. More direct communication with families about the meals offered, the availability of bread (from term 4 2022) for students who choose not to eat the cooked lunch or want more to eat, and allowing families time to adjust to the new lunch system, may address some of the concerns raised. Further data on parents' perceptions of the school lunches will be collected during term 3 2023.

Keywords: cooked school lunches; parents; perceptions

Ethics Declaration

Yes

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