

Public support for healthy food in schools

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Strong public support for the Government to take a lead on healthy food in schools and childcare services is revealed in a recent poll.

Results showed 78 percent are in favour of the government requiring schools and childcare services to implement a [healthy food](#) policy.

The Horizon Research Poll on healthy food was carried out for the University of Auckland and funded by the Heart Foundation and the Cancer Society of Auckland.

Another question in the same poll also had 78 percent of the public in favour of the Government stopping or restricting the practice of using unhealthy food and drinks as fundraisers in schools.

In both cases, only 22 percent thought the Government should not intervene.

"The messages is clear - the New Zealand public wants strong government leadership to ensure that what is served in the [school](#) canteen matches what is taught in the curriculum about [healthy eating](#)," says Professor Boyd Swinburn, who specialises in population nutrition at the University of Auckland.

"It seems the public think this is a no-brainer and indeed it makes a lot of sense to have schools acting as role models as part of a serious approach to reducing the unacceptably high rate of childhood obesity," he says. "They create a kind of 'lighthouse effect' for healthy eating

which shines far beyond the school gates."

"A diet low in sugary drinks and packaged snacks and instead, high in fruit, vegetables and healthy meals, not only helps prevent unhealthy weight gain, but is also linked with happier moods and better behaviours," says Professor Swinburn. "Contrary to what the adverts tell the kids, junk food is sad food not happy food."

He says that while many New Zealand schools are already engaged in programmes to promote healthy food to their school community, a large proportion are not engaged.

"The latest figures from the Heart Foundation show that about 60 percent are engaged in promoting healthy food policies in the school curriculum and at the school canteen or tuck shop," says Professor Swinburn. "They have some great examples to share of schools doing great things with the support of their students and their wider school communities.

"The Heart Foundation is working with [early childhood](#) centres, primary, intermediate and secondary schools on some excellent programmes to raise the profile of healthy food in their school communities," he says. "These include student-led activities such as sugar free initiatives, planting vegetable gardens and developing a school orchard."

"But there are about 40 percent of schools not engaged in any healthy food voluntary scheme. This could lead to increasing inequalities in nutritional health, if some schools are not proactive enough to provide a healthy food environment for their students," says Professor Swinburn.

"Healthy eating has multiple benefits for physical health, mental health, attention and better behaviours too, so it is a big plus for students, families and schools," he says.

The Heart Foundation, in partnership with the Ministry of Health, offers two policy-based programmes for schools and [early childhood education](#) services. These free programmes aim to create healthy environments for children and include improvements to the education environment to promote healthy eating and increased physical activity.

These programmes are: Heart Start: Toitōi Manawa and Healthy Heart Award for Early Childhood Education: Tohu Manawa Ora – Kōhungahunga.

"Children need environments which make healthy eating and physical activity the easy, normal and preferred options," says Justine Munro, Heart Foundation Education Setting Manager. "It is vital that schools and early childhood education services are armed with policy-driven programmes and initiatives that deliver healthy food environments to our children.

"A policy-level requirement from the Minister would require all schools and early [childhood education](#) services to develop a comprehensive healthy food policy," she says. "That is certainly a step in the right direction towards creating healthy food environments for our children."

Provided by University of Auckland

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