

# MONITORING TRENDS IN FOODS AVAILABLE IN SCHOOL CANTEENS

Beth Stickney, Elizabeth Reay and Karen Webb  
Department of Public Health and Community Medicine  
University of Sydney

This article describes a kit designed to standardise the way in which health workers assess the success of their work with school canteens in NSW<sup>1</sup>. The kit was developed as part of the NSW Food and Nutrition Monitoring Plan<sup>2,3</sup>. When it has approval from the NSW Department of Health and the NSW Department of School Education, the kit will become the recommended method of assessing and monitoring work with school canteens in NSW.

## WHY WORK WITH SCHOOL CANTEENS?

School canteens have been identified by authoritative groups as an important setting for nutrition promotion among children<sup>4,5,6</sup>. Canteens and other food services have been identified by the Food and Nutrition Unit of the NSW Health Department as a priority area of work in NSW<sup>7</sup>. The prevention of childhood obesity and of diet-related chronic diseases in adult years depends to a large extent on healthy food habits established during school years<sup>8</sup>. School canteens, through snack and lunch sales, may supply one-third or more of a child's daily nutrient intake. Preservation of food choice is fundamental to the development of healthy eating habits. Therefore, effective nutrition promotion in school canteens is based on maintaining a range of food choices, including the availability of healthier food choices.

## WHY DEVELOP A STANDARD METHOD FOR ASSESSMENT AND MONITORING OF THE FOODS SOLD IN SCHOOL CANTEENS?

In recent years community nutritionists and health promotion personnel have worked with school canteen managers in NSW to improve the nutritional quality of foods sold in canteens. However, no suitable methods have been developed for monitoring and documenting the results of these efforts. A variety of methods has been used to assess canteens and evaluate interventions, and this makes it difficult to compare the results of different studies or combine them.

The kit will enable those working with school canteens to:

- assess how practice in their schools or Areas compares with recommendations;
- report on their Area's progress in relation to Statewide nutrition indicators for school canteens, as outlined in the NSW Health Department's model performance contract for Area Health Services; and
- contribute to a Statewide assessment of the effectiveness of work with school canteens.

## WHAT IS THE KIT?

The kit is a set of methods to assess and monitor trends in:

- **factors that influence the foods sold** in school canteens (school canteen policies and practices); and
- the **availability** (and prevalence) of healthier foods in school canteens relative to the availability of less healthy foods.

## FOR WHOM IS THE KIT?

The kit is designed for use by health workers, including community nutritionists and health promotion personnel in local Area Health Services, who are working with canteen staff and schools (or planning to do so) to improve the nutritional quality of the foods sold in school canteens.

The kit potentially will provide beneficial information to many groups, for example:

- **canteen managers**, who will have more information about their past improvements and others still required, in relation to the products they sell and the promotions they conduct;
- **health workers and those involved in health-promoting schools projects**, who will be better able to tailor their assistance to particular schools or to particular aspects of the canteen menu, as identified by the kit;
- **principals, school councils, parents and citizens groups and health-promoting schools committees**, which will have a periodic summary of school canteen progress for accountability to parents; and
- the NSW School Canteen Association and the NSW Health Department, which will be able to monitor trends in school canteen policies and practices among those schools in NSW that wish to work with the health services to apply the kit.

## WHAT DOES THE KIT CONTAIN?

The kit contains:

- questionnaires about canteen policies and practices (including letters to school principals and canteen managers, seeking their participation);
- a menu assessment tool (checklist) and guidelines for classifying foods into categories according to nutritional criteria (including forms and tables for data collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting); and
- instructions on how to use the kit, including how to
  - identify schools,
  - seek participation of schools,
  - administer the questionnaires and checklist,
  - follow up schools to ensure adequate data collection,
  - analyse and interpret the results,
  - feed the results back to the school community, and
  - become part of the Statewide tracking of progress towards healthier school canteens in NSW.

An example of the nutritional criteria used to classify foods into the healthier and less-healthy categories is shown in Table 3. The kit contains tables and graphs that can be used as templates to summarise and present in simple form the information from one school or a number of schools. An example is shown in Table 4. Summary information will not identify any schools: those who use the kit and supply information to Area Health Services will remain anonymous.

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## Monitoring foods in school canteens

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### WHAT INFORMATION WILL THE KIT PROVIDE?

From the questionnaires and the menu assessment tools in the kit, the following questions can be answered:

- To what extent does a school or schools have policies and practices that support a healthy canteen? For example, what proportion have:
  - an appropriate nutrition policy and canteen committee?
  - links with the NSW School Canteen Association and the Health Promoting Schools Association?
  - staff trained in nutrition and hygiene?
  - regular promotions of the canteen and the healthy foods it sells?
- What proportion of school canteens:
  - have at least two-thirds of their foods as healthier choices (that is, foods that meet nutrient criteria)?
  - provide sufficient variety of healthier foods, such as breads, fruits and vegetables, on a daily basis?
- Among which food groups (such as hot foods, beverages, snacks) sold in a school canteen, are the choices:
  - predominantly healthier choices (that is, meeting nutrient criteria)?
  - predominantly less healthy choices (not meeting nutrient criteria)?
  - requiring improvement?

### HOW WAS THE KIT DEVELOPED?

There were several steps in the development of the kit, as follows:

1. Wide consultation was used to identify the extent to which there was a common set of criteria for defining a "healthy school canteen" and a "healthy food choice". While there was general agreement about these, the details varied among groups and organisations. Consultations also sought information about current practice and need for a monitoring system<sup>3,7</sup>.
2. An extensive literature review highlighted the lack of uniform methods for evaluating school canteens.
3. Existing canteen checklists and food criteria of authoritative organisations (the Federation of Canteens in Schools and the NSW School Canteen Association) were adapted to improve their suitability for monitoring and their ease of use<sup>8</sup>.
4. A set of instructions for local health workers was devised to assist them in applying the questionnaires and as a menu assessment tool in schools. These were pilot-tested with selected health workers to improve the clarity of instructions and fine-tune the data collection and analysis procedures<sup>8,9</sup>.

### NEXT STEPS

We are planning the implementation of the kit, in consultation with key interest groups. While approval by the Department of School Education is being sought, the kit will be made available for use by health workers in NSW. Roles for the NSW School Canteen Association, the Area

TABLE 3

EXAMPLE OF NUTRIENT CRITERIA USED TO CLASSIFY FOODS INTO HEALTHIER AND LESS HEALTHY CATEGORIES

5.0	Hot foods
5.1	Soups All soups are considered to be healthier food choices
5.2	Combination foods, for example, pasta dishes, rice dishes, pizza, lasagne, instant noodles, pies and sausage rolls Fat: 10 g or less fat per 100 g Sodium: 600 mg or less sodium per 100 g
5.3	Hot chips Fat: 5 g or less fat per 100 g

TABLE 4

MATRIX USED TO CLASSIFY FOOD GROUPS INTO HEALTHIER AND LESS HEALTHY CATEGORIES IN SCHOOL CANTEENS

Food category		Healthier foods <i>n</i>	Less healthy foods <i>n</i>
1.0	Bread	x	x
2.0	Breakfast cereals	x	x
3.0	Vegetables	x	x
4.0	Meat and alternatives etc	x	x
5.0	Hot foods	x	x
6.0	Snack foods	x	x
7.0	Drinks	x	x

Health Services and other organisations will be negotiated. Use of the kit by schools and by health workers will be voluntary. A guided implementation phase should begin late in 1997 or early in 1998, involving selected Area Health Services in NSW who wish to apply the kit in selected schools.

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