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## Most school tuck shops miss mark

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Study finds just 3.3% of shops at New Zealand schools hit 75% healthy goal

**Jamie Morton**

**J**unk foods like soft drinks, lollies and sausage rolls have been found to dominate healthier options in New Zealand's school tuck shops, with a tiny fraction of those surveyed meeting nutrition guidelines.

Massey University researchers behind the first-of-its-kind snapshot now argue there's potential to follow Australia with bolder policy measures for schools.

One in eight Kiwi children and one in three adults are today considered obese, with some of the highest rates found among Māori, Pasifika people and our most disadvantaged kids.

Although half of intermediate and secondary school-aged youths buy their lunch from their cafeteria, the researchers say there has been a lack of Government-driven nutrition policies aimed at adolescents.

Schools are meanwhile encouraged to align with national food and drink guidance that uses a colour-coded system to rate foods based on nutritional value.

That means school menus should ideally contain at least 75% "green" foods – like fruit, vegetables and those lower in processed ingredients, sugar and unhealthy fats – while excluding "red" ones. Those include items such as chocolate, lollies, soft drinks, sausage rolls, deep-fried foods, sweetened milk drinks and unhealthy packaged snack foods.

After surveying about 60 intermediate and secondary schools, the researchers found a mere 3.3% met the 75% goal – while nearly all offered a worrying amount of those "red" items, which were often sold in combo deals.

On average, school menus had just over 50 items for sale, with 53% falling in the most unhealthy category and just 13.5% being "green" items. The rest were "amber" items – like sushi and less healthy full-fat milk products – which had some nutritional value but were often more processed.

While nearly 97% of the surveyed schools had "red" items on their menus, 10% had no "green" items.

Some other worrying trends stood out among the data.

Schools in higher-decile areas were more likely to meet nutritional standards, offering a higher proportion of "green" foods.

The study's lead author, Professor Ajmol Ali of Massey's College of Health, said these better-off schools might have more support from parents, staff and sponsors and funding to promote nutrition.

But low-decile schools, which often served students from less affluent communities, faced challenges in stocking healthier options.

"There may be concerns about decreased profit and revenue from stocking healthy options as these items may be out of budget for the providers – especially if the perception is that these items will not sell well to students," Ali told the *Herald*.

"Going forward, addressing these disparities will be important in ensuring equitable outcomes so that all schools are able to provide healthy, well-balanced meals to their students."

Ali's team earlier revealed a similar picture after analysing canteen menus from more than 130 primary schools, finding most items sold were categorised as "amber" (41%) or "red"

(40%).

Ali and his colleagues pointed out Australia had made greater strides, having adopted a national policy towards nutrition in 2008.

As a result, they noted, Australian schools now averaged about 50% "green" menu items – well above New Zealand's average of 13.5%.

The Ministry of Education's acting general manager for school policy, Alanna Sullivan-Vaughan, said schools were required to promote healthy food and nutrition under national regulations.

"However, there is discretion in how schools choose to implement this requirement so that they can effectively meet the needs of their students and community," she said, adding there was no current policy work under way.

The New Zealand Principals' Federation has been approached for comment.

Ali and his co-authors argued there was potential for a mandatory policy to be successful, as it put responsibility on to the schools to provide healthy options.

"However, support from a nutrition promotion workforce would be required to assist schools in meeting the requirements for 75% green items."

In 2009, Sir John Key's National Government scrapped a ban on the sale of unhealthy food at school tuck shops on the grounds schools should not have to be "food police". In repealing the regulation brought in by Labour, it said instead schools were required "to promote healthy food and drink".



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