

POSITION PAPER | SEPT 2026

THRIVING STUDENTS

The Missing Foundation in Mental Health, Behaviour and Learning in Schools

A 5 minute read for education leaders, teachers,
health professionals, policy makers and parents.



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REFERENCES CITED IN THE PAPER

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Across Australia, schools are investing heavily in student wellbeing, mental health and resilience programs. Their learning support teams are growing. Extensive wrap around supports are provided. Yet many communities continue to experience rising stress, behavioural challenges, attention difficulties and emotional dysregulation among children.

This begs the questions: **What are we missing? What is it about wellbeing that we haven't been told about or thought about?**

THE MISSING PIECE: FOOD AS A FOUNDATIONAL INPUT TO WELLBEING

Food is not peripheral to wellbeing — it is a foundational input. And nutrition starts before eating — the messages, environments and experiences children have around food shape their relationship with it long before anything reaches their lunchbox or plate.

Evidence reveals something often overlooked or avoided: what children eat is linked to their capacity to learn, regulate emotions, and engage in classrooms. Drawing from a decade of work in schools across Australia, academic research, and emerging evidence from school-based interventions, this paper offers a strategic reframing: recognising food as a foundational input to wellbeing, learning and behaviour — and makes the case that School and Wellbeing Plans can no longer afford to overlook this.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

Research consistently shows the quality of the food consumed impacts mental health, behaviour and learning. A landmark 2025 Lancet Series, co-led by University of Sydney's Dr Phillip Baker, confirms UPFs — foods classified furthest from nature under the internationally recognised NOVA system — are a major driver of diet-related chronic disease globally. ¹

Ultra Processed Food (UPF) impacts on wellbeing

UPF's are nutrient poor - they tend to contain more than 6 ingredients, including non-standard manufactured ingredients, high sugar, high salt, additives, preservatives.



Mental Health

22-48%*

increased risk of depression & anxiety in adults ²



Behaviour & ADHD

24%

more likely to exhibit ADHD like symptoms with high junk food consumption ³



Learning & Cognition

28%*

faster cognitive decline in with UPF consumption in adults ⁴

For context: Australian UPF Consumption

56.4% of the energy in household grocery purchases are UPF ⁵

47.2% of daily energy intake of children aged 8-12 ⁶

* For understandable ethical reasons, much of the existing research has been conducted with adult populations. The associations between UPF consumption and mental health, behaviour and learning remain consistent and compelling.

AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS ALREADY DEMONSTRATING IMPACT

The School Food Matters School Lunch Program and The School Food Project at Berrima Public School demonstrate what becomes possible when schools work with children's biology rather than against it — creating conditions that enhance learning, regulation and engagement.

The Flinders University led ARC Linkage project in 2025 commenced evaluating school provided meals across NSW, SA and Tasmania. Their findings will inform future policy development.

Whilst a national position is still some years away, St Mary's Parish Primary School in Hay shows us something important: *meaningful change doesn't require a new program or additional funding.*

While we await national policy direction, schools are not powerless.

By recognising that multiple environments shape and influence children's food experiences, schools can act strategically.

A simple change in any one environment can improve performance and wellbeing — no change in food, no extra budget.

“BUT OUR HANDS ARE TIED”

Principals and teachers consistently share:



Our hands are tied when it comes to talking to parents about food. We can't tell them what to pack in lunchboxes.

— John, School Principal



It's not a hill I can die on at the moment. Our canteen is being run by someone external and it doesn't have food I approve of

— Leanne, Vice Principal

Schools don't need to tell parents what to pack. The conversation about food in schools extends beyond the lunchbox and canteen — it lives in the messages, routines, language and environments that shape how children think and feel about food every single day.

This is the hidden food education curriculum in schools.



Tasmanian Pilot - School Lunch Project ⁷

Over 20,000 meals a week, across 60 Schools

22% perceived increase in attendance

Calmer classrooms

Improved engagement

Reduced anxiety

Better social connections



Berrima Public School, NSW ⁸

Providing hot cooked lunches since 2024

Children are **ready to learn**

School wide **healthy eating culture**



St Mary's Parish Primary School, Hay

Playtime, then eating time at recess and lunch has been implemented following pilot results:

Students release energy first, then eat in a calmer environment — returning to class refreshed and ready to learn

A NEW WAY TO THINK: FOOD AS INFORMATION

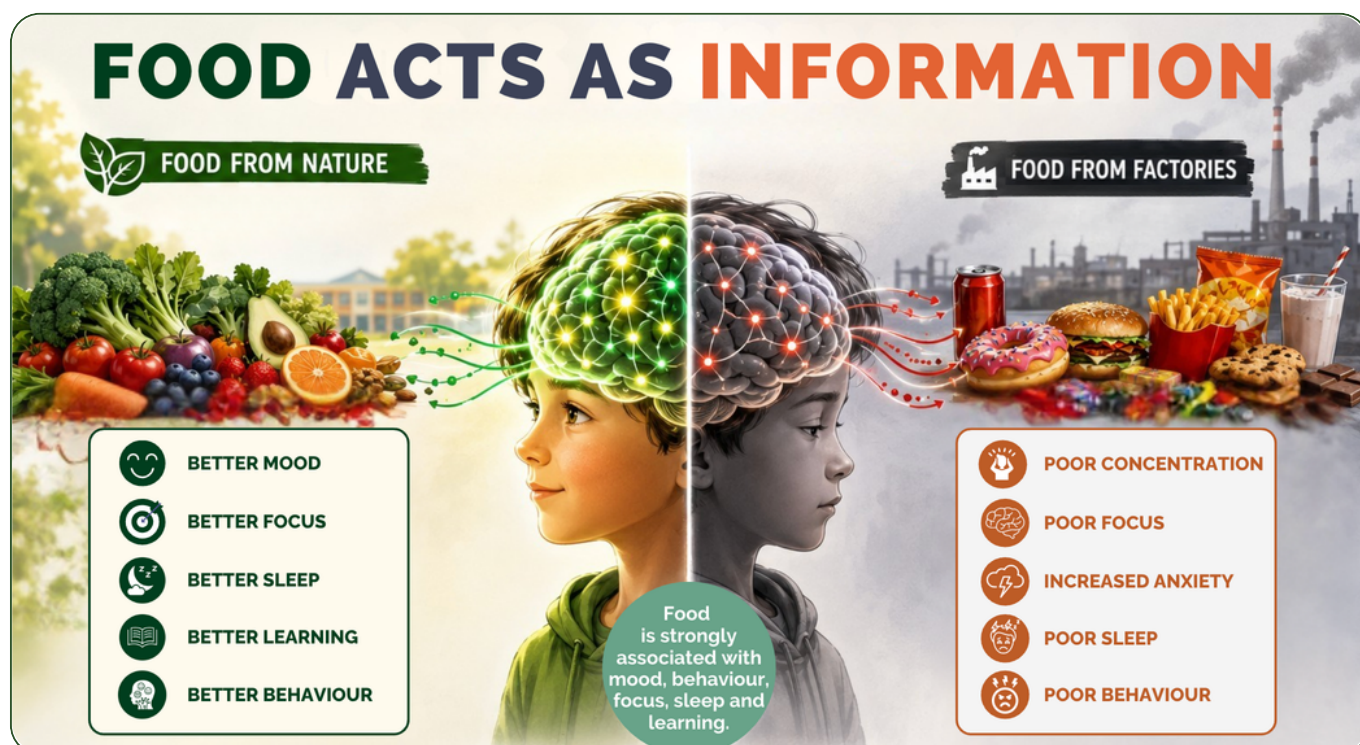
Food is often addressed in schools through practical or policy-based approaches, such as, Health and Physical Education outcomes, canteen guidelines, gardening programs or cooking skills. While valuable, these approaches assume a level of food knowledge and understanding that many students, teachers, parents and caregivers rarely have.

Traditional food literacy has given us 'what to eat', 'how and what to garden and cook', canteens guidelines and what to pack in a lunchbox. **Food literacy must now evolve beyond this.** We must understand how the environments children move through — from classrooms to homes to communities — shape their relationship with food and, consequently, their capacity to learn and thrive.

Food acts as information for the body and brain — sending signals that influence mood, behaviour, energy, focus, sleep and learning readiness. When people understand this connection, food becomes less about rules or control and more about awareness, curiosity and agency.

A “food as information framing” removes emotion, stigma and judgement. It gives educators and families a shared language to make sense of what they observe in children every day — without blame, fear or pressure.

“ **Food literacy must evolve. It must address the why and how to navigate today's complex food culture at school and beyond the school gate. Our communities must become empowered to understand food as information.** ~ Bel Smith



AN INVITATION TO RETHINK



This paper doesn't argue that food is the answer to every wellbeing challenge, nor that schools should become nutrition educators or lunchbox police.

It offers something simpler: a reframe. **If wellbeing is the goal, food may be one of its most under-utilised foundations** — and understanding food as *information* rather than *rules* is where that reframe begins.

I invite you to consider how "Food as Information" could be woven through your School and Wellbeing Plan. Not as an additional program. Not as a new initiative competing for time and resources. But as a foundational input to wellbeing.

SOME QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE



Is food the missing piece in our wellbeing approach, and are our hands really as tied as we think?



What would change for our students & teachers if we had the knowledge, language and support to utilise food in our wellbeing approach?



Do we have the tools and understanding to bring food into our wellbeing conversations in a way that feels manageable and judgement-free?

TAKE THE NEXT STEP

If this paper has sparked a question or two, I would love to hear from you.

Sometimes a 15-minute chat is all it takes to see where food might fit in your school's wellbeing approach.



Scan or [click here](#) to book your 15-minute chat with Bel

FOR READERS WHO WANT MORE

The Thriving Students White Paper extensively explores the evidence linking nutrition to wellbeing, the hidden food education curriculum in schools, and provides practical nudges schools can take.



Scan or [click here](#) to receive the white paper.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bel Smith is a Children's Health Advocate, Food Literacy Strategist, Speaker and Author. Her work addresses one of education's most overlooked questions: **Is food the missing foundation in children's mental health, behaviour and learning?**

Since 2013, her programs have reached over 80,000 children, parents and educators across Australia. Bel is now reframing how food is understood – not as rules, but as information for bodies and brains.

She has given evidence to parliamentary committees, been cited in Australian Parliament, and featured in national media – positioning her at the forefront of **one of education's most urgent conversations.**

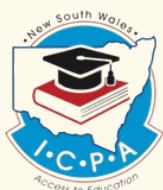
TRUSTED EDUCATION PARTNER

Bel is the founder of The Root Cause, a trusted education partner to 300+ Australian Schools for over a decade. [View the schools they have partnered with for 12 months or more.](#)

AS FEATURED BY



SOME ORGANISATIONS BEL HAS WORKED WITH



NSW North Coast
Primary Principals Association



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