

Webinar: Ka Ora, Ka Ako: What is the evidence that free school lunches are worth investing in?

What have we seen, and what can we expect?

Connecting observed outcomes to internationally evaluated impacts

Dr. Kelly Garton

Research Fellow, School of Population Health
The University of Auckland

National
Science
Challenges

A BETTER
START

E Tipu e Rea



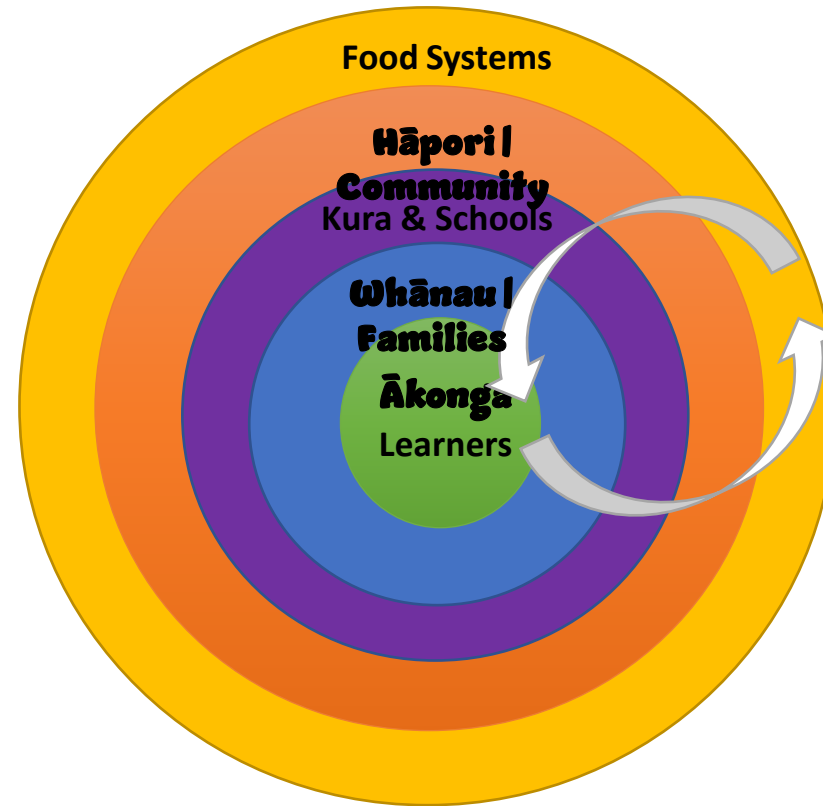
Ka Ora, Ka Ako: the programme

- **Objective:** reduce **food insecurity** by providing a **nutritious** lunch **every day**, so that students are in a good place to **learn**
 - Alleviating hunger at school
 - Improving diet quality
 - Reducing barriers to education
 - Local employment
- Whole-of-school approach
- 3 lunch delivery models: internal, external, Iwi/hapū provider
- Menus determined by schools & suppliers but must meet nutrition requirements developed with Ministry of Health
- Schools encouraged to move towards zero-waste policy

Ka Ora, Ka Ako: the numbers

- Announced 2019, Piloted 2020; Expansion to 25% of schools by end of 2021
 - Eligibility based on Equity Index – students facing greatest socio-economic barriers to school achievement
- 2023 Budget funded Ka Ora, Ka Ako to continue until the end of 2024, with an allocation of \$323.4m.
- In 2023 >230,000 learners received daily lunches in 998 schools and kura.
- 2024 cost per lunch (covering food, preparation & delivery, paying staff working on lunches):
 - \$5.56 - \$5.78 for learners Years 0-3
 - \$6.52 - \$6.77 for learners Years 4-8
 - \$8.29 - \$8.62 for learners Years 9+
- Staff must be paid at least \$26 per hour

Measuring the effects: a Social Ecological Model informed by Systems Thinking



Inputs → Activities → Outputs → Outcomes → Impacts

Reviewing the domestic evidence

Commissioned Evaluations

- Interim (pilot) evaluation (2021): food availability, consumption, hunger reduction, wellbeing & attendance – primary schools
- Evaluation (2022): meal nutrition
- Expanded programme evaluation (2022): wellbeing, attendance – secondary schools
- Kaupapa Māori evaluation (2023): Iwi/ hapū model outcomes
- Supplementary attendance evaluation (2024): attendance for at-risk learners

Independent NZ studies

- Qualitative in-depth research of impact (Hawke's Bay): experiences of students, whānau, school principals

Reviewing the international evidence

Narrative review based on a **5-level** (child, whānau/household, school or kura, community, food system) **theory of change** developed in consultation with Ministry of Education and several other government agencies.

- Systematic reviews (n=5)
- Individual studies (n=37)

Specific references are available in published papers (links provided in chat function)

Child-level: reduced hunger, improved diet quality

Ka Ora Ka Ako:

- Large reductions in hunger at school (particularly for food insecure students)
- Eating more nutritious food
 - Lunches are nutritious and 78% of nutrients meet >1/3 daily requirements
 - Learners eating more vegetables, fewer snacks and sweets
- Improved nutritional awareness & reduced appetites for junk food outside of school; opportunities for food cultural practices

International studies:

- Strong evidence for significant reductions in food insecurity (especially for hungry children) in high income countries;
- Suggest potential benefits to long-term eating behaviours

Child-level: diet-related health metrics

Ka Ora, Ka Ako:

- Improved **mental health** and wellbeing (6-14% improvement)
- Improved **emotional functioning** (feeling sad, anger, fear)(5-12% improvement)
- Small but significant improvement in **social functioning** (3-9% improvement) and **physical functioning** (3-16%)
- Significantly improved overall **health quality of life** (up to 14% for most underserved)

International studies:

- Strong international data supports mental health outcomes; potential effect on weight and growth
- 2 long-term studies [in US & Sweden] observed positive impact on adult health status for former school lunch recipients

Child-level: attendance, attention & learning

Ka Ora, Ka Ako:

- Improved attendance for the most underserved learners (average 3 additional days in school per year; another 2 days per term for the 10% most hungry)
- In specific schools and kura, the programme contributed to increased attendance for ākongā Māori
- No data on learning
- Improved attention and focus
- Improved school functioning for secondary students (3.6% – 20%)

International studies:

- A systematic review of 47 studies examining universal free school lunches reported that most found **positive associations with students' academic performance.**
- Findings are mixed when looking at attendance as an outcome.
- Long-term impacts: universal primary school lunch provision increased educational attainment (years of schooling completed) [Sweden, 10 year study]

Children & whānau : household food security

Ka Ora, Ka Ako:

- Kids reliably getting at least one healthy meal per day, 5 days/week
- Household savings on grocery bill: annual savings between \$1000 (1 child in primary school) and \$5000 (3 children in secondary school)
- Qualitative findings of reduced hardship, food insecurity and time burden

International studies:

- Strong evidence for significant reductions in household food security (esp for food insecure households with hunger) in high income countries;
- US & Swedish studies found long-term impacts on recipients' adult income and education; improved equity and social mobility

Community-level: local economies

Ka Ora, Ka Ako:

- 2,455 jobs created or retained as a result of the programme (March 2022 data)
- More than half are full-time; all living wage
- >180 business providers; Māori business providers supply 126 schools; iwi/hapū model supplies 40 schools

International studies:

- School lunch programme in Scotland partnered with local, small-scale & organic producers yielded substantial economic benefits for local suppliers;
- **Social Return on Investment was estimated to be £6 for every £1 invested.**

Community-level: Iwi and hapū benefits

Ka Ora, Ka Ako: Iwi and hapū social procurement and partnership model

- Fosters a sense of community in schools, including within classes, between learners of different year groups, and between learners and kaiako;
- Provides a vehicle for the incorporation of mātauranga and tikanga Māori concepts, both at school and at home.
- Gives substantial effect to a Te Tiriti o Waitangi based way of working;
- Provides an equitable opportunity for iwi and hapū to become suppliers for Ka Ora, Ka Ako;
- Supports the development of iwi and hapū capability and capacity at local levels;
- Supports rangatiratanga and the mana of iwi and hapū in looking after their own tamariki and rangatahi;
- Supports the development and/or strengthening of relationships between schools/kura and iwi/hapū;
- Has enabled iwi and hapū to respond to the needs of ākongā;
- Has increased trust between iwi and hapū and the Ministry of Education; and
- Provides family-friendly employment opportunities for some whānau.

Food system-level

Ka Ora, Ka Ako:

Encourages reformulation, reduced packaging, composting, local growing

International studies: improving local foodscapes

- Partnering with local, small-scale & organic producers resulted in reduction in food miles (by 70%)[Scotland]
- Strengthening food systems resilience locally [Scotland & Canada]

Importance of universal (whole-of-school) provision

All children benefit, not just those most disadvantaged – they just benefit more.

Whole-of-school approach promotes self-esteem, increases social cohesion, helps broaden taste preferences, creates the leverage to encourage food system change.

International evidence that targeting food assistance:

- Creates stigma, low self esteem (for children and families)
- Reduces uptake → Increases waste
- Compromises learning & academic performance (for all children)
- Increases behavioural incidents at school

Summary

- NZ evidence shows that Ka Ora, Ka Ako is having positive effects at multiple levels of impact
- Strong & credible international evidence indicates these outcomes will lead to substantial impacts at scale, over time (if investment is sustained)
- Whole-of-school approach is critical to ensuring benefits are realised