



# FEEDING THE FUTURE

Systemic Solutions for School-Based Food Relief and Household Food Security



OzHarvest's submission to the SA Social Development Committee's 2025 Inquiry into the prevalence and effectiveness of programs in preschools and schools to ensure children and young people don't go hungry during the day.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recommendation 1

Introduce school food programs in all schools and offer them to all students. Universal access reduces stigma and increases the likelihood that children who need it most will participate.

## Recommendation 2

Support and fund food organisations such as OzHarvest to prepare meals off-site and deliver them to schools for reheating.

## Recommendation 3

Provide grants to schools to develop and expand kitchen infrastructure, enabling them to store, prepare, and serve greater quantities of food - supporting increased access to school meal programs for students.

## Recommendation 4

Support increased food rescue capacity for OzHarvest and other food rescue organisations, to enable the delivery of more rescued food to schools. This will reduce the amount of good food going to waste and increase the volume of nutritious food available to students.

## Recommendation 5

All schools receiving food relief or delivering meal programs should be offered access to food and nutrition education programs, such as OzHarvest's FEAST, to ensure students gain both nourishment and lifelong healthy eating skills.

## Recommendation 6

Consider schools a useful site to alleviate household food insecurity and explore the capacity to provide take-home food relief for households through schools, such as through hampers.

## Recommendation 7

Expand the scope of school meal programs to include wrap-around services that connect children and families to social support (e.g. mental health, housing, or family services), to deliver meaningful impact beyond immediate food relief and provide a long-term pathway to food insecurity.

## Recommendation 8

Advocate to the Federal Government to raise the rate of income support payments to at least \$80 per day.

## Recommendation 9

Support state and national programs to improve housing access, affordability and security, critical to reducing food stress in vulnerable households.



## Introduction

OzHarvest thanks the Social Development Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this important inquiry. This submission outlines OzHarvest's experience and insights regarding food programs in schools, and highlights opportunities for effective interventions and innovations, supported by three case studies.

OzHarvest stands alongside academics, educators and communities to strongly encourage the South Australian Government to invest in school meal programs (SMPs) to boost educational outcomes, reduce food insecurity among families, and create a fairer start for all children. Crucially, these programs should incorporate food education and wrap-around support services wherever possible, and make use of rescued food to minimise waste and reduce costs. Partnering with experienced food rescue organisations can help deliver these benefits efficiently and sustainably.

As a provider of school food education programs, a supplier of food to schools running SMPs and food education, and a leader in addressing food insecurity in South Australia, OzHarvest welcomes the opportunity to engage further with the Committee or contribute to hearings on these critical issues.

# About OzHarvest: Australia's leading food rescue organisation

Founded in 2004, OzHarvest rescues surplus, quality food and delivers it to charities that help feed people in need. Nationally, OzHarvest collects quality surplus food from more than 3,000 businesses, including supermarkets, restaurants, cafes, hotels, retailers and retail food outlets.

OzHarvest saves over 300 tonnes of food from landfill every week, delivering it to 1,900+ partner charities, agencies and schools free of charge. Since inception, OzHarvest has delivered over 280 million meals and saved over 100,000 tonnes of food from landfill.

We deliver to 241 schools across Australia, a total of over 409,000kgs in the 12 months to June 2025.



OzHarvest is committed to ending food waste and tackling systemic food insecurity through relief, education and advocacy, including through delivering the following programs:

- **FEAST schools program:** a curriculum-aligned program for primary (years 5 –6) and high school (years 7- 8) students. During the program, students learn about the issue and impact of food waste on our environment, and how to plan, prepare and cook healthy and nutritious recipes.
- **NEST nutrition education:** a 6-week public health initiative that teaches people experiencing disadvantage essential food literacy skills for healthy eating. NEST blends nutrition education with hands-on cooking activities, culminating in shared meals that foster a sense of community and support. NEST is typically delivered in partnership with a charity, community hub, or education site.
- **Nourish:** A free hospitality training program for young people facing barriers to employment, who graduate with a Certificate II in Cookery, life skills, community connections and pathways to employment.

OzHarvest has offices in every state and territory across the country, as well as operating a free restaurant in Sydney and free food supermarkets in Sydney and Adelaide.



## OzHarvest in SA

OzHarvest began operations in South Australia in 2011. Every week, five vans rescue around 20,000kg of quality surplus food, and deliver more than 40,000 meals to people in need throughout Adelaide.

The cumulative impact of our work in SA (concentrating around Metropolitan Adelaide and the Adelaide Hills) includes:

- Food delivered to 270 charity partners (including 9 schools)
- Food rescued from 930 food donors
- Over 20 million meals delivered
- Over 100 schools deliver our school food education program FEAST(reaching 9,000+ students)
- NEST nutrition education delivered to over 120 parents across 5 community hubs and 5 children's centres
- 17 cohorts of young people completed OzHarvest's Nourish hospitality training program.

Our OzHarvest Market in Adelaide opened in August 2024 in response to skyrocketing demand for food relief. It is a social supermarket which runs on a 'take what you need, give if you can' philosophy providing fresh produce, pantry items and cooked meals to people in need.

OzHarvest Adelaide operationally supports the provision of food relief programs in schools. We're currently working with 9 education sites in metro Adelaide, providing over 16,000kgs of produce in the last 12 months.

# Food insecurity in South Australia remains at crisis levels



In the last year, 36% of South Australians have experienced food insecurity – that is, changing the quality or quantity of their meals, or skipping meals entirely<sup>1</sup>. This is disproportionately impacting single parent households and low-income families:

- Nearly 7 out of 10 (69%) single parent households have experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months, with 41% experiencing the most severe form of food insecurity.
- Nearly half of all low-income households (48%) experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months.

Supporting households to move into food security has far-reaching benefits for children and families<sup>2</sup>, including improved:

- Physical health (e.g. improved development and reduced risk of chronic disease)
- Mental health and wellbeing (e.g. reduced stress, anxiety, and depression)
- Cognitive development and concentration
- School attendance, engagement, and academic performance
- Workplace engagement and job satisfaction
- Social inclusion and overall quality of life

Long-term household food security can only be assured through broader structural legislative interventions, such as increasing income support or investing in affordable housing.

However, the immediate impacts of food insecurity can be alleviated through targeted food relief initiatives, including school breakfast and lunch programs.

These programs provide not only nutritious food but also routine social connection, and an equal start to the school day for all students.

# The SA food relief sector is under immense strain

OzHarvest conducts an annual survey<sup>3</sup> of charities and agencies providing relief with food rescued by OzHarvest, with the following findings for SA in 2025:

- There's been a huge uptake in those accessing food relief - 82% of our SA charities experienced an increase in the number of people seeking food.
- Demand outweighs supply - charities are unable to support an average of 51 people each month (increased from 39 people per month in 2024).
- Single-parent families are increasingly seeking food relief, and households with children are the most-often seen cohort.
- Children and youth are a significant group receiving food relief (over 70% of charities supporting people under 19), highlighting the impact of child poverty and issues with food access for young people.
- Cost-of-living pressures combined with low wages are reported by charities as the biggest drivers of food insecurity at present.
  - Grocery prices (78%)
  - Low/insufficient income (69%)
  - Housing affordability and access (68%)
- Parents skip meals, parents experience guilt and shame when sending kids to school with no food, with many families experiencing such shame that they are unable to receive support.

Additionally, Foodbank's latest Hunger Report<sup>1</sup> outlines that more people are aware of formal food relief services and less are accessing informal food relief services (e.g. friends and family). This indicates the increasingly essential role of food relief in helping households overcome food insecurity.

## Why don't people access food relief?

Fear of social stigma continues to be the main barrier for accessing formal food relief, with nearly half (48%) of the households experiencing food insecurity saying feelings of embarrassment and shame are a barrier.<sup>1</sup>

This presents an important opportunity for the SA government to strategically invest in the provision of school food programs, to take the pressure off the already-strained sector, alleviate budget pressures in single-parent and low-income households, and support food relief across the community.



School meal programs have proven positive impacts and are recommended by experts

The broadly positive effect of breakfast intake on diet quality, weight status and school-related outcomes is clear across the literature. Breakfast consumption improves nutritional intakes of the most vulnerable young people and “may help to address inequalities in educational outcomes”<sup>4</sup>.

A recent assessment<sup>5</sup> of Victoria’s School Breakfast Program (SBP) noted:

- 95% of teachers note an improvement in concentration
- 90% have observed greater levels of engagement and focus for students
- 88% of teachers report improvements in student’s social skills
- 85% of teachers note a positive impact on the academic outcomes.

A commissioned sector engagement and evidence review project recommended the SA government “Consider provision of universal free school meals”<sup>6</sup>, which was acknowledged by Minister Cook at a recent Community of Practice meeting.

# School Meal Programs are growing in SA, but stigma is still a barrier



In South Australia over the past 12 months, there has been a notable increase in awareness and uptake of School Breakfast Programs (SBPs), with a 32% rise in awareness, a 30% increase in the number of schools offering the program, and a 66% increase in student participation<sup>1</sup>.

The primary reason families use SBPs is to ease household budget pressures, cited by more than 50% of participants. However, the most common barrier to access is the absence of a program at the school – this highlights a clear need to support more schools to implement SBPs.

Normalising school food programs as a benefit for all children may help reduce the shame or reluctance that still prevents some families from accessing support. One in four (25%) food-insecure households report feeling too embarrassed to utilise school food programs or believing that other children are more in need than their own<sup>1</sup>.

This underscores the need to address the stigma around food insecurity – such as alignment with the 'breakfast-for-all' approach of an inclusive, communal breakfast club<sup>5</sup> to ensure that no child misses out due to fear of judgment.

## Recommendation 1

Introduce school food programs in all schools and offer them to all students. Universal access reduces stigma and increases the likelihood that children who need it most will participate.

# OzHarvest supports school breakfast provision in SA with rescued food

OzHarvest plays a vital role in connecting rescued food with food relief efforts in schools. We currently deliver to nine schools across the Adelaide metropolitan area, including Brompton, Salisbury, and Christies Beach, ensuring food reaches students who need it most. Weekly, we deliver an average of 60kg to these schools, typically fresh fruit and vegetables (50%), as well as bread, pantry staples, and some meat. This is rescued from mostly supermarkets, and is nutritious, high-quality produce.

Delivered food is then prepared in school kitchens for consumption, which raises a barrier: currently only schools with kitchens are able to accept food from OzHarvest. Moreover, staff are often busy teaching and are unable to accept deliveries at all times of the day, creating a logistical barrier between relief providers and schools. However, given OzHarvest rescues over 20,000kg per week in Metro Adelaide, there is huge potential to expand and better-support this program with government assistance.

## Recommendation 2

Support and fund food organisations such as OzHarvest to prepare meals off-site and deliver them to schools for reheating.

Most schools are equipped with microwaves, allowing easy service of these meals without adding pressure to school staff. This approach ensures consistent quality, high nutritional value, and reduces the burden on school resources. See Case Study 1 at the end of this submission for information on a similar program.

## Recommendation 3

Provide grants to schools to develop and expand kitchen infrastructure, enabling them to store, prepare, and serve greater quantities of food - supporting increased access to school meal programs for students.

## Recommendation 4

Support increased food rescue capacity for OzHarvest and other food rescue organisations, to enable the delivery of more rescued food to schools. This will reduce the amount of good food going to waste and increase the volume of nutritious food available to students.

# Pair school meals with food education for lasting impact

The provision of school meals has been shown to improve students' physical health, mental wellbeing, academic performance, and classroom behaviour. To maximise these benefits, there is a valuable opportunity to complement meal provision with food education.

By teaching children how to prepare healthy meals at home, food education programs build essential life skills, foster a deeper connection to the food system, and create more holistic, long-term outcomes. When curriculum-aligned, food education is easy for teachers to integrate into the school day.

OzHarvest's FEAST program provides an example: FEAST is a curriculum-aligned schools program for primary and high-school students, delivering measurable outcomes including increased kitchen confidence and greater fruit and vegetable consumption. See Case Study 2 for more information.



## Recommendation 5

All schools receiving food relief or delivering meal programs should be offered access to food and nutrition education programs, such as OzHarvest's FEAST, to ensure students gain both nourishment and lifelong healthy eating skills.

# Amplify SMP impact through take-home food relief, and wrap-around services

School Meal Programs (SMPs) are community connectors and, if utilised appropriately, can provide flow-on benefits to vulnerable families. Research has found that school meal programs are highly valued by school communities for their social, wellbeing, welfare, and educational impacts<sup>7</sup>. Participants (including students and young people) noted the value of social eating for relationship-building, increased connection, improved engagement and classroom behaviour.

These benefits could be expanded through the provision of take-home food relief for vulnerable families via the school. This proactive solution allows families to provide food for their own kids, bringing benefits into the home. OzHarvest WA has been piloting such a program (Nourishing Our Schools) which combines in-school and at-home food relief for families in need. See Case Study 3 for more information.

Additionally, when delivered concurrently with other services, school meal provisions have the potential to provide benefits beyond the temporary alleviation of food insecurity. The wrap-around model has a strong theoretical underpinning (see: National Wraparound Initiative 2017). Connected with SMPs, wrap-around services can help strengthen the safety net around vulnerable households and provide a long-term pathway to food security. See Case Study 4 for a relevant example.

## Recommendation 6

Consider schools a useful site to alleviate household food insecurity and explore the capacity to provide take-home food relief for households through schools, such as through hampers.

## Recommendation 7

Expand the scope of SMPs to include wrap-around services that connect children and families to social support (e.g. mental health, housing, or family services), to deliver meaningful impact beyond immediate food relief and provide a long-term pathway to food insecurity.



## Most importantly, tackling food security requires a whole-of-government response

Food insecurity cannot be addressed in isolation - it is a symptom of broader systemic issues such as poverty, economic inequality, inadequate income support, and housing stress. While food relief, including via SMPs, plays a critical role in reducing hunger, improving access to nutrition, supporting childhood development and educational equity, they do not resolve the root causes of food insecurity in the long term.

Those in households relying on welfare payments are 14 times more likely to lack a substantial meal at least once a day than those in the general population<sup>9</sup>, and more than one in three households nationally are experiencing food insecurity. Bold, structural reform is needed to reduce inequality and lift families out of poverty to end hunger for good.

### Recommendation 8

Advocate to the Federal Government to raise the rate of income support payments to at least \$80 per day.

### Recommendation 9

Support state and national programs to improve housing access, affordability and security, critical to reducing food stress in vulnerable households.

# CASE STUDY 1

## Nourishing communities through prepared meals: a scalable model

OzHarvest receives generous support from Support + Feed, a US-based not-for-profit organisation, to fund a dedicated team of OzHarvest chefs and volunteers who cook and prepare high-quality, nutritious meals. These feature a variety of culturally diverse, plant-based recipes- including nasi goreng, gnocchi, Thai yellow pumpkin curry, and ratatouille, which are crafted with care using rescued ingredients and when necessary, purchased food items.

In Adelaide, these ready-to-eat meals are distributed through OzHarvest's free food relief supermarket in Hindmarsh as well as our charity network via our vans, where they provide immediate nourishment to individuals and families experiencing food insecurity.

This model (where a funder supports a food rescue organisation such as OzHarvest to cook and deliver ready-to-eat meals) is highly adaptable, efficient, and scalable. It is particularly valuable for charity partners such as schools, that lack kitchen facilities or food storage infrastructure. By removing barriers to food preparation, this approach ensures that vulnerable community members, including children and students, can enjoy nourishing whole-food meals.

## Why it works:

- Makes use of rescued food, reducing waste while meeting urgent food relief needs
- Funding allows supplementary purchasing of food as needed, for meal consistency and not needing to rely on an inherently inconsistent rescue income
- Bypasses infrastructure gaps in partner organisations
- Delivers culturally inclusive, high-nutrition meals ready to eat
- Is flexible, scalable, and replicable across urban and regional settings

The model presents an opportunity for the South Australian Government to fund and facilitate cross-sector collaboration - supporting both food rescue and prepared meal delivery that meets school and community needs with dignity and impact.



# CASE STUDY 2

## FEAST: Inspiring the next generation of future changemakers

OzHarvest's FEAST (Food Education and Sustainability Training) program is an evidence-based<sup>9</sup> program aimed at empowering students with the skills and knowledge to prepare nourishing food, reduce food waste and eat a variety of foods.

Program evaluation in partnership with Monash University and BehaviourWorks Australia demonstrated that participating in FEAST leads to measurable behavioural change in both primary and secondary school students.

### After participating in FEAST, primary students showed:

- Increased confidence in following recipes and preparing meals
- Increased confidence in using food that needs to be used up (and reducing food waste)
- Higher fruit and vegetable consumption

### Secondary students demonstrated:

- Greater confidence and involvement in preparing meals using food from home
- Increased consumption of fruits and vegetables
- More frequent checking of the fridge and pantry for food that needs to be used up

These results highlight FEAST's effectiveness in fostering lifelong food literacy, reducing household food waste, and supporting healthy eating habits, while aligning with national curriculum outcomes.



Recently, OzHarvest partnered with School Food Matters in Tasmania, to ensure that students receiving school lunches also have the opportunity to participate in FEAST. By engaging in hands-on food education, students become familiar with a wide variety of ingredients, making them more open to trying new foods (improving their nutritional intake) and less likely to waste, important for making food go further in households.

Building food literacy in schools not only supports immediate outcomes for students, but also plants the seeds for long-term, generational change.



**FEAST**<sup>™</sup>  
FOOD EDUCATION AND  
SUSTAINABILITY TRAINING

# CASE STUDY 3

## School-centred, family-focused food relief through Nourishing Our Schools WA

The Nourishing Our Schools (NOS) program extends OzHarvest's food rescue and relief model with engagement, innovation and education to tackle child and youth food insecurity, both in school and at home. NOS was the result of close collaboration between OzHarvest, several schools across Perth, and community organisations.

Food for the program is supplied by OzHarvest food rescue operations and is supplemented by Telethon funding to ensure consistent food supply.

OzHarvest delivers weekly food relief free of charge to primary and secondary schools across Greater Perth and Peel regions through:

### 1. Food for Learning

Food supplied for onsite school programs and typically includes rescued fruit, vegetables, bread, cereal, dairy and snacks.

### 2. Food for Thriving

Hamper boxes of non-perishable food items for school families in need, to take home.

Across 116 schools and 13 hubs, over 1,000 students are supported through the program, and 250 families receive hampers every week. Over 150,000kg were delivered last financial year.

There are currently over 20 schools on the waitlist to receive food through OzHarvest's NOS program.



Rescued food supplied by OzHarvest supports a range of school needs – breakfast, lunch and snack provisions, as well as cooking programs. Vulnerable school families are supported at home through food hampers, collected and distributed by the school. Take-home food relief proactively minimises the instances of kids coming to school hungry or without food and gives families an option of providing food for their own kids, at home.

"It's helped families on low income as well as students at educational risk due to low attendance rates, many are coming to school regularly now because they feel supported and have food to get them through the day. It enables us to build relationships with families."

**Hillman Primary School**

"OzHarvest food helps us to engage with our disengaged students, we work in the lowest socio economic area of greater Perth, having healthy, exciting foods available makes hungry kids happier and more able to learn."

**SMYL Community College**

# CASE STUDY 4

## Nutrition training for parents improves household food security

OzHarvest's NEST Program is a transformative 6-week public health initiative designed to tackle food insecurity and empower adults experiencing disadvantage to eat healthy. With a focus on improving food literacy and dietary habits, this program equips participants with essential nutrition knowledge, cooking skills, and behaviour change tools directly aligned with evidence-based public health guidelines including the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

Led by certified nutritionists and dietitians, NEST workshops aren't just informative sessions—they're social experiences that utilise the power of food. NEST blends essential nutrition education with hands-on cooking activities, culminating in shared meals that foster a sense of community and support. OzHarvest ensures inclusivity with resources translated into 10 languages, and incorporation of diverse learning methods like storytelling and visual aids.

OzHarvest delivers the NEST program to parents of preschool and school children through community hubs and children's centres. Since 2023, OzHarvest has delivered NEST to over 120 parents across 5 community hubs and 5 children's centres including Elizabeth Vale Community Hub, Lockley's Children's Centre and Renown Park Children's Centre.



Data collected through pre and post-surveys has shown:

- 24% of parents reported improved food security
- 76% increased their vegetable intake with 17% of parents increased their fruit and vegetable consumption to meet the recommended intake of 2 and 5 serves per day.
- 79% increased their nutrition knowledge and 86% increased their cooking confidence.

“NEST allows mothers and women to gain easy access to knowledge that not only benefits their health but their families health. They teach in an easily engaging way with fun games that I observed helped the women get involved in their learning as well as help them retain the new information. Overall, I loved watching the women be proud of the new things they had learnt and having fun making and trying new foods.” – Community Hub Staff Member

“The NEST program - an amazing resource. It changed what we think about food, creating lasting change for our family. Saves us time, money, my partner's & my future health, creating a healthy path for our kids. Taking part will help our family eat better every week, saving money & enjoying healthier food more often.” – Community Hub NEST participant.



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