

The role schools play

The school environment provides an excellent opportunity to teach children and teenagers about healthy eating. We know that incidences of ADHD and ADD are on the rise and we also know that these behavioural issues are affected profoundly by the diet. In allowing kids to access sugary, nutrient-devoid foods and drinks – in particular between 1st and 2nd breaks – the management of children by teachers becomes an almost impossible task. This leads to teachers requesting the use of medications (like Ritalin and Concerta) in order to control the class environment.

In essence, when a school allows food to be served or sold on its grounds, it's condoning and promoting those foods. Since part of the curriculum taught to learners deals with healthy eating, it makes sense that the message delivered in the classroom should coincide with that delivered outside of it, in order for learners to believe the importance of the message. Actions speak very loudly!

Currently, school tuck-shops and lunches tend to sell and serve what's most popular with kids – sweet food and drinks and processed, carbohydrate-rich foods. While the intention behind allowing a tuck-shop appears to be as a means of offering children and adolescents an opportunity for a 'treat' every now and then, many parents confronted with a mass of information and opinions about what constitutes 'healthy', rely on the school to provide this for their kids (sometimes not realising what's sold or served). Combined with the daily challenge of preparing lunches amongst the morning chaos, tuck-shops can become a convenient eating option.

An excerpt from Vitality's 'Wealthy Active Kids Report Card 2014', mentions the following on tuck-shops:

- Children still make use of tuck-shops at their schools, even those with limited resources.
- Most tuck-shops sell largely unhealthy items, such as sweets, crisps, chocolate, and sugary drinks with few offering healthy snack options or fruit.
- Learners who buy from the tuck-shop appear to be more likely to overweight or obese.

In summary, schools can play a critical role in our communities by ensuring that children and teenagers have healthy bodies, healthy minds and a healthy approach to eating.