

HELPING STUDENTS TO ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN HEALTHIER LIFE CHOICES

Presented by Sandra Fordcye-Voorham
President, Victorian Home Economics and Textiles Teachers' Association
23 October 2002

Promoting **healthy eating** and an **active lifestyle** undoubtedly contributes to the prevention of obesity.

This presentation will outline the contribution of the Home Economics discipline and the role of teachers working in Victorian Home Economics education to promote healthy eating, firstly within the **curriculum** and secondly within the broader **school community**.

I will suggest strategies and make recommendations, which can promote healthy eating and play a valuable role in obesity prevention now and in the future.

Definition of healthy eating

Healthy eating is defined as being "...not only about the consumption of a healthy diet and the health benefits this offers, including protection against chronic disease. It is also about the **cultural** and **social** significance of **cooking, eating and feeding** and the **health and social benefits** of **preparing and sharing food with others.**"

(VicHealth's position statement on healthy eating)

In representing Home Economics teachers working primarily in secondary schools, I am proud to say that the subjects within our discipline actively develop this **integrated and holistic approach** to quality of life issues including healthy eating.

Home Economics subjects focus on the 'consumption of a healthy diet' the 'cultural and social significance of cooking and eating' through the 'preparation and sharing of food with others' principally in a classroom setting.

Only within the **unique and safe environment** of a Home Economics class will students learn about the variety of foods suitable to promote health and wellbeing whilst engaging in the tactile and socio-cultural experiences of food in addition to being provided with the opportunities to develop and refine cognitive, affective and psycho-motor skills in a safe environment. No other discipline in the curriculum demonstrates this depth of **practical application** regarding healthy eating.

These opportunities **empower** our students to become skilled **decision makers** in order to gain the maximum out of their lives.

Most secondary students in Victoria undertake Home Economics through the **Technology** and **Health and Physical Education** key learning areas at some stage during year 7 and 8. The time and quality of these programs varies according to local school curriculum priorities. A student's experience in home economics may only be 15 hours over a 10 week term for their entire secondary schooling! Some schools may offer Home Economics courses only as electives in years 9 and 10.

Home Economics, as an important discipline has lost its **unique identity** since being channelled into the technology key learning area. This has unfortunately encouraged a focus on food from a technology perspective. Perhaps this is why some children think tomatoes come from a can!

We sometimes hear that home economics shouldn't be in two key learning areas, but how can you have a key learning area called Health and Physical Education which doesn't explore food and healthy eating in a practical skill based way? Subject specific curriculum must be promoted.

Home Economics must be a core subject in the curriculum. A K-10 approach needs to be designed and implemented. This solution would be ideally linked with the Victorian governments 'Best Start' strategy, which is a program aiming to improve the health, development, learning and well-being of all children across Victoria from pregnancy through transition to school (taken to be children 0-8 years of age).

In Queensland, educators are recognising the deficiencies with the key learning area structure and are currently piloting three subject specific syllabi, which cross over a number of key learning areas – one of these is home economics. This pilot home economics program has three strands, **becoming independent, living in the wider society** and **promoting futures for wellbeing**.

Victoria could investigate this initiative because Home Economics is the only subject specific curriculum which provides experiences for students, that links knowledge about healthy eating with practical skills whereby they are empowered to make decisions that enhance individual, family and community quality of life.

It is crucial for students to be equipped with skills that empower them to make **healthy food choices and to prepare healthy food**. Home Economists advocate that this is not limited to what a child consumes but includes:

- making decisions about selection and purchase of food
- developing practical cooking skills in order to prepare quick, simple, hygienic, safe and healthy meals for themselves and others
- becoming an educated consumer by developing **literacy skills** that enable reading and understanding of food labels and media reports
- **managing** resources such as time, money and energy
- developing resources such as food and nutrition knowledge and skills
- establishing, implementing and evaluating work/life balance
- understanding the importance of balancing **healthy eating** with an **active lifestyle**
- attaining a desirable **quality of life**

The importance of providing practical based opportunities for students to experience the 'significance of cooking, eating and feeding and the health and social benefits of preparing and sharing food with others' can never be overstated and must be an essential component of any curriculum and is strongly advocated and supported by the Victorian Home Economics and Textiles Teachers' Association (VHETTA).

Obesity is a potential problem for all our students. All people make choices about their own food consumption and are involved in food provision and preparation. Therefore it is important that practical learning activities are provided without gender bias, across year levels, particularly throughout the Primary years to Year 10.

Students require frequent reinforcement and continuous opportunities to develop practical food preparation and decision making skills. It should be remembered that knowledge about healthy eating is not enough, students must have practical opportunities to utilise theoretical knowledge and make informed decisions as essential life skills.

The ability to maintain current programs and to expand the opportunities for development of these skills is placed in jeopardy by **extreme teacher shortages**. In 1980, there were two institutions training home economists, with one institution producing over 80 teacher graduates. (In 2002, Deakin University predict only 11 graduates with a home economics/health teaching method, decreasing to only 9 in 2003 – this is the only tertiary course now available in Victoria)

As a result of a postgraduate survey conducted by VHETTA and Deakin University in 2001, we are collaboratively working with both Deakin University and RMIT University to promote undergraduate courses and flexible postgraduate options. However, more must be done.

More tertiary places must be made available and the lack of specialist teachers across all sectors: from formal childcare through to pre-school, primary, secondary and university must be addressed.

Now, I would like to make the following **recommendations** regarding promotion of healthy eating in the education of our children and the issue of teacher supply within Victoria.

Recommendation 1: To promote healthy eating by ensuring that **all** students have opportunities to learn about food and nutrition through the practical, social and cultural experience of preparing and sharing food with each other.

Courses that include these skills should be considered core curriculum and opportunities to include further units which offer a combination of practice and theory throughout the curriculum and across year levels should be encouraged and adequately resourced.

Recommendation 2: Strategies need to be formulated to address **teacher shortages** in specialist discipline areas such as home economics.

I would like to now move my focus from the curriculum to the broader school community

PROMOTING HEALTHY EATING THROUGH SCHOOL CANTEENS and SCHOOL FOOD POLICIES

Home Economics teachers can and do play an important role in promoting healthy eating practices within the whole school environment.

Learning about healthy eating within the classroom can either be undermined **or** strengthened by the support of food and eating practises promoted within the school environment in its **food service policies and canteens**.

Exciting opportunities exist now for the state government to develop both **food and nutrition policies** for schools alongside Food Services and Canteen policies.

In **New South Wales**, the Canteen Association supports all school communities operating economically viable, hygienic and nutrition oriented school canteens. To encourage healthy eating, the Association has developed a Healthy School Canteen Award Program. The Program demonstrates to school communities that schools are promoting a healthy lifestyle and reflecting classroom teaching about nutrition and healthy eating.

In **Tasmania**, the School Canteen Association employs a home economist as a project officer, who is developing a school canteen accreditation program called Cool CAP (Canteen Accreditation Program) and provides standards and professional development in canteen management, foods offered, marketing and promotion, food safety and linking the canteen with the school curriculum.

VHETTA is currently undertaking research in Victorian schools on **school food services, canteens** and to what extent **nutrition principles** are promoted within schools. This is enabling us to gather information and better inform our ability to address these issues via the implementation of strategies and programs within school communities.

Our Association is seeking to implement programs (similar to the models in NSW and Tasmania), which support school canteens and ensure a whole school approach to healthy eating, which links strongly to the school curriculum and the wider community.

In addressing healthy eating, it is also important to gain an understanding of the factors that influence food choices of children as they go through transitional periods, such as adolescence and to investigate an adolescents' perceptions of healthy food choices.

VHETTA is working in collaboration with **Deakin University**, who is currently undertaking research into the 'Influences on Adolescents food choices'.

This highlights the importance of developing and maintaining strong **partnerships** which enable current research to be undertaken and incorporated into **teaching and learning strategies** and **policies and practices**.

VHETTA is a proactive association which has been in operation for 44 years.

- We would like implement programs and awards, which support school canteens through information and professional development.
- We also wish to ensure a whole school approach to healthy eating, which links strongly to the school curriculum and the wider community

Recommendation 3:

To *develop food and nutrition policy*, which guarantees that food supplied to children at school is consistent with healthy eating and nutrition principles, as taught in the school curriculum and supported by national food and nutrition strategies.

Recommendation 4:

To *implement a school canteen award program*, which reflects classroom teaching about nutrition and healthy eating and recognises school communities which operate economically viable, hygienic and nutrition oriented school canteens.

As home economics educators, we promote the development of individuals skills, particularly in the context of healthy eating – skills in management, decision making and practical cooking skills, let's call them **life management skills**, in order empower our young people and enable them to become more active and informed members of society.