

# FEEDING THE NEED

*More than 270,000 New Zealand children live in poverty and many go hungry every day. A growing number of organisations are stepping up to help address the issue, including programs in schools where gardens are providing food for the table, as well as an education.*

Words by **Carolyn Enting** Photography by **Andrew Coffey and Carolyn Enting**

**T**ears well up in Kerry Owen's eyes for the umpteenth time. "I'm sorry," she says, digging into her handbag for a tissue. "I just can't help it.

When I think of kids going to school hungry it just really upsets me."

The Auckland-based mother of four runs a corporate café and online school lunch company, The Lunch Club. She's also the founder of Feed the Need charity, which aims to ensure children in New Zealand have access to sufficient and nutritious food.

Originally from Manchester, England, Owen was shocked to discover when she moved to New Zealand that despite living in a "land of plenty", there are many children here who face food insecurity.

"I assumed there was a system here where the Government would provide school dinners for those in need. I ideologically thought it would be the case," Owen says. "I didn't sleep easy about it. I thought something had to be done."

Instead of throwing her hands up in despair, she decided to do something about it and set up The Lunch Club and Feed the Need. To date, Feed the Need has been funded through The Lunch Club profits.

From August to September Feed the Need will be running a pilot scheme in a number of selected decile one and two schools, providing a hot and healthy nutritious vegetable soup and bread roll per child. The long-term goal is for it to become a universal program in schools.

"We're hoping to reach all the kids. In every school there is a need and I think it does need to be looked at. If families are struggling then they need help and that's when the Government, businesses and charity can come together to find a solution because kids are suffering."

According to the Education (Breakfast and Lunch Programmes in Schools) Amendment Bill, New Zealand has 270,000 children in poverty and 40 per cent of those are from homes of working families.

Charities are already providing food each week to some schools. KidsCan provides food for more than 4500 children facing food insecurity each day. Fonterra and Sanitarium have teamed up to provide Weet-Bix and milk in more than 400 schools but it appears that the need is much greater than this.

## MAKING CHANGES

The bill, proposed by Mana Party leader Hone Harawira, currently before the House and its committees, would introduce a state-funded breakfast and lunch program into all decile one and two schools and other designated schools in New Zealand.

It points to evidence that hunger has a significant impact on children's cognitive development, learning and classroom behaviour.

A 2005 study by New Zealand researchers Quigley and Watt Ltd concluded that a significant number of New Zealand children's diets were so poor that their brain functioning was affected.

The New Zealand Food and Nutrition Guidelines for healthy children recommend that for activity, growth and to maintain a healthy body size, children must eat regularly over the day and that means having breakfast, lunch and dinner, as well as including in-between snacks for young children or if hungry.

In May, the Government announced funding to expand Fonterra's and Sanitarium's KickStart Breakfast program, committing \$9.5 million over five years. Plus, a grant of \$1.5 million over three years

to KidsCan, targeted at its clothing and healthcare programs.

"There is a common misconception that child food insecurity is the result of parental inadequacy and poor budgeting. Yet, a review of relevant research has shown that low income seems to be the main driver for food insecurity," Owen says. "People can say it's the parents fault but to be honest I don't care, it's about the kids. They don't have a choice. They're vulnerable and have what they're given."

Owen also challenges the notion that implementing a "food in schools" program will encourage people to rely on the system and expect handouts.

Her father, George Robinson, grew up in poverty with his parents and 10 brothers and sisters in a state house in Manchester. It was a loving family and his parents worked hard but food was scarce; their saviour was free school meals. "As kids, when we moaned about eating our vegetables, he'd say 'Be grateful for your food' and he'd talk about how he didn't have any." Robinson went on to become general manager of an insurance company and his siblings also went on to be successful in business.

"They have not relied on the social system," Owen says. "People say if people get handouts they will just rely on the system but I don't believe it. It wasn't true in my dad's case. Kids are kids. If their basic needs are not being met and they're hungry, how can they concentrate at school? Of course they are going to get ratty. It's hard for the teachers and parents.

"We're not there to judge. People might not be in a position to feed the kids and it's happening and I think the Government has to look at it seriously."

Meanwhile, programs like Feed the Need are taking action. ▶



## GETTING INVOLVED

Silverdale Stella Maris teacher Carol Byrne (centre picture) helps look after the "Green Team", aged five to seven, who have planted a whole range of vegetables to make soup for the Feed the Need program. The school joined the initiative after a school parent read about it in a newsletter.



**HELPING HANDS**

Stella Maris school in Silverdale has joined the crusade and has planted a garden to supply the Feed the Need program. The initiative to grow vegetables at the school for the soup grew after school parent Alexis Purvis read about the program in a newsletter. With the support of Stella Maris teachers Carol Byrne and Amanda Bates, the school's "Green Team" (aged five to seven) have planted carrots, beetroot, parsnips, potatoes, celery and pumpkins for the soup. The school also has a worm farm and has started a compost bin.

The children are keen to help others their age who are less fortunate. The project is also teaching them about gardening and where food comes from.

Another program that is addressing food education and reaching low- and high-decile schools is Garden to Table. The Garden to Table Trust, established in New Zealand in 2008, currently supports 14 schools across the country, including Dawson School and East Tamaki School in South Auckland, and has 60 more schools on the waiting list. The not-for-profit organisation teaches primary-school children how to grow, harvest, prepare and share their food via a curriculum integrated scheme.

The program is modelled on the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation in Australia and is designed for children aged between seven and 10.

Its vision is to make food education accessible to all New Zealand children through a hands-on kitchen program. The Langham Auckland has just partnered with Garden to Table and hopes its involvement will help the Trust roll out the program to more schools across the country.

"The program changes the way children think about food and teaches basic life skills. It's important children know where their food comes from and Garden to Table encourages them to grow their own food, then prepare it to share with their peers and families," says managing director of The Langham Auckland Jeffrey van Vosselen.

Participating schools have created innovative vegetable gardens. An old dingy has been used as a vegetable bed at Dawson School while East Tamaki School has filled

in its decommissioned outdoor swimming pool. The area is now a flourishing vegetable garden and the former pool changing rooms are used to store the school's bountiful harvest of pumpkins. The program has encouraged many families to plant gardens at home, which is what was hoped would happen, says Dawson School principal Angela Funaki. "It has proved to be extremely popular with the children, especially boys. They love it because it's learning with real purpose. Boys love getting in there."

Cooking shows have also added interest and inspiration. "Kids love *MasterChef* and watch it at home," Funaki says.

**CELEBRITY SUPPORT**

Former *MasterChef* winner Nadia Lim is a big supporter of the Garden to Table program. She has participated in fundraising events for the Trust and thinks the program should be compulsory in all schools. "I'm strong of the opinion that cooking is one of life's most important skills, as well as learning about food and where it comes from," says Lim. "It's really good to get kids to try all these different vegetables, particularly in a peer-pressure environment where they are more likely to try things they wouldn't normally try."

At Edendale Primary School, the Garden to Table program has become the kids' favourite program of choice, outdoing physical education in popularity.

"The children love it, it's their absolute favourite thing to do," Edendale Primary School principal Rosemary Vivien says. "When you've got children engaged with a program, 100 per cent with what they are doing, you can't ask more than that."

Next year, Edendale will continue with the program but will have to fund it themselves. "That's always a challenge, looking for funding, however it's something we are committed to and I hope it's a program that will be enduring as part of the school community program. It just adds another dimension to student learning," Vivien says.

Schools participating in Garden to Table receive \$60,000 over a period of two years to get the garden and curriculum established.

**HOW TO HELP**



- Feed the Need is looking for on-the-ground volunteers to help with this year's projects. Or if you'd like to make a donation, go to [feedtheneed.co.nz](http://feedtheneed.co.nz) for more information
- Support a New Zealand child. It costs \$15 a month to support one child through KidsCan and 100 per cent of your donation goes to the kids. Go to [kidscan.org.nz](http://kidscan.org.nz) or call 09 478 1525.
- There are currently 14 Garden to Table schools in New Zealand. After two years on the program, schools must support themselves. You can help by supporting the Garden to Table Trust or donating to your local school. For a list of schools, visit [gardentotable.org.nz](http://gardentotable.org.nz) or call 09 377 8925.

**MINDFOOD.COM**  
 Find out more about the good work KidsCan is doing in schools. **KEYWORDS:** KIDSCAN, SCHOOL

**GROW AND LEARN**  
 Garden To Table – hailed by *MasterChef* winner Nadia Lim, second row, fourth from left – teaches primary school children how to grow and prepare food. There are 14 schools involved, including (rows, top to bottom): Dawson School; East Tamaki School; Edendale Primary; Meadowbank Primary and Owairaka School.