

# What young people think about the environmental sustainability of school canteens

Members of the South Australian Student Representative Council (SA SRC) want all South Australian schools to be environmentally sustainable. This includes improving the waste and recycling practices of their school canteen to reduce food waste going to landfill and carbon emissions going into the atmosphere.

School canteens are important places where schools can show commitment to being environmentally sustainable. Students want school canteens that not only provide fresh and affordable food options, but which are also committed to eliminating the use of plastic packaging and to reducing the volume of food and organic waste being sent to landfill.

Currently, there is no state-wide approach being taken by government to support schools and their canteens to adopt environmentally sustainable practices. But this doesn't mean that greening school canteens in South Australia is unachievable.

Greening school canteens is something every school can decide to take immediate action on. By including young people in the planning and decision-making schools will be working with their students to decide how best to reduce their school's collective waste levels, and introducing sustainable practices around how food is being managed and supplied to students.

Practices could range from supplying organic waste bins to introducing recyclable/compostable canteen packaging products such as mugs and cutlery to investing in a school community garden. Adopting one or all practical actions of this kind will make a difference to the environment.

Students want to be part of the change schools can make towards building a greener future. They want to feel proud of their school and their government for taking practical action that will protect the environment. By committing to working with students to adopt environmentally sustainable practices within school canteens, schools will be playing a vital role in addressing young people's concerns relating to climate change.

### About the SA SRC

The SA SRC is an initiative of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, supported by the Foundation for Young Australians. The 2024 SA SRC cohort comprises 150 students from 80 schools representing 44 South Australian electorates.

The Year 10, 11, and 12 students, drawn from across the state, work together to create genuine, student-led change within their communities. The SA SRC brings together passionate young people who want to create a better future for themselves and for future generations of South Australians.

### About the Commissioner for Children and Young People

Established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*, the Commissioner for Children and Young People promotes and advocates at a systemic level for the rights, interests, and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. The work of the Commissioner is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and informed by the experiences and issues of South Australian children and young people themselves.

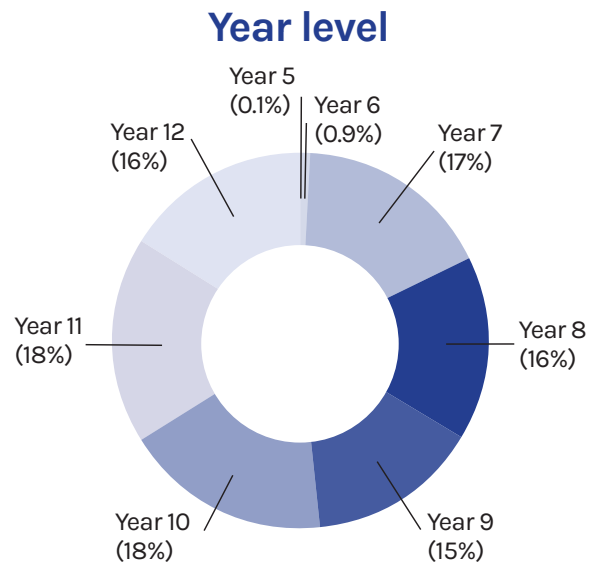
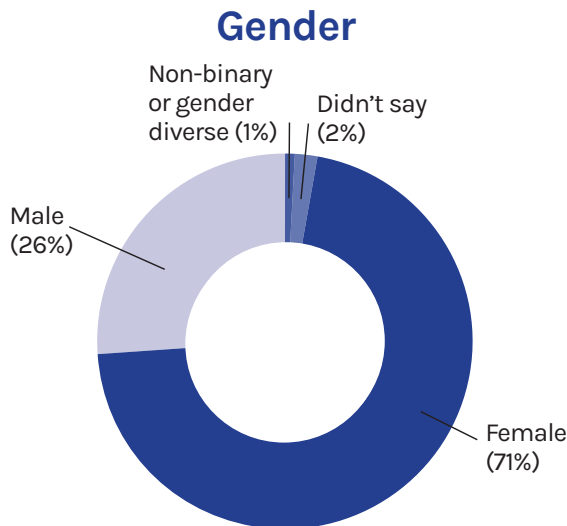
## What we did

To ensure the Greening Our Canteens campaign is representative of young people across the state, SA SRC members distributed a poll at schools throughout South Australia between March and May 2024.

Students in Years 7–12 were asked about their thoughts on the sustainable practices they would like to see more of in their school, how environmentally friendly they think their school canteen is, and what changes would make their canteen more environmentally friendly.

## Who responded?

A total of 1,398 students from 28 secondary schools across South Australia responded to the poll, representing all three school sectors (Government, Independent and Catholic). The 28 secondary schools represent 15 local government areas with responses coming from a range of students in different year levels and from different genders.



# What would students like to see more of at school?

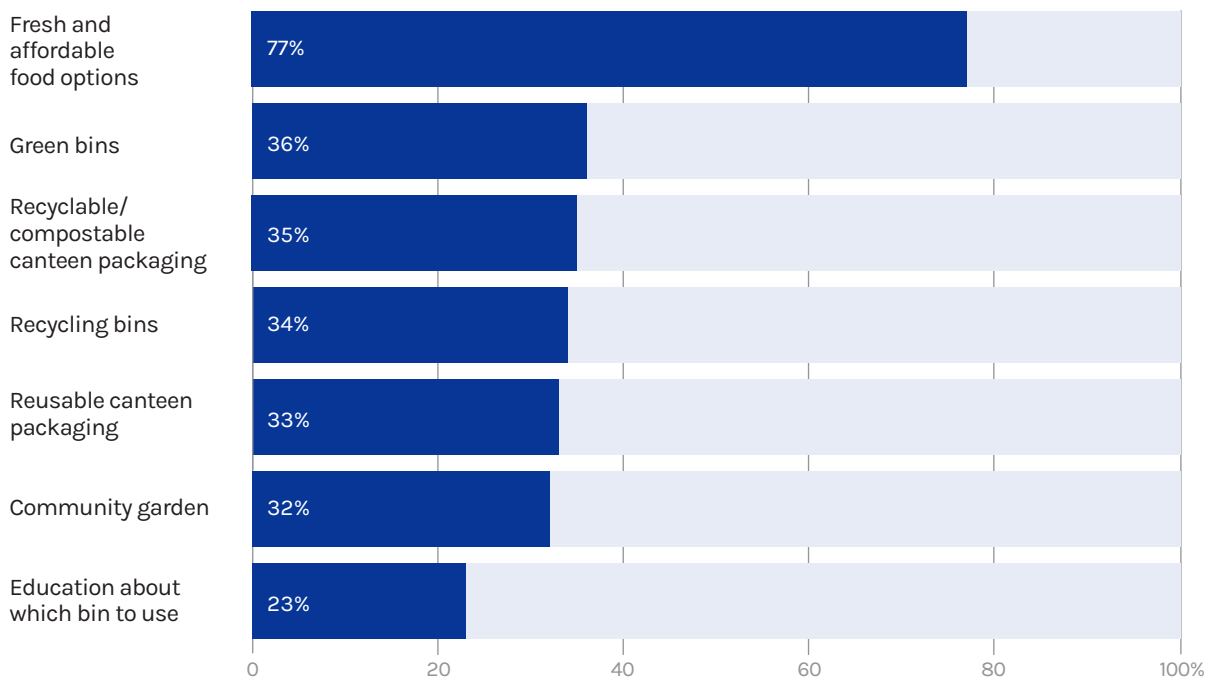
More than three quarters (77%) of students who participated in the poll reported wanting their school to have more fresh and affordable food options. The poll did not ask students about how many of these things are already available in their schools. Although students were only asked what they would like to see more of at school, this high proportion indicates that fresh and affordable food options are lacking in school canteens across the state.

More than one third of students wanted there to be more green bins (36%) and more recycling bins (34%) at school.

A similar proportion wanted there to be more recyclable or compostable canteen packaging (35%) and reusable packaging for canteen products, including mugs and cutlery (33%). Almost one third of students polled (32%) wanted their school to have a community garden.

A smaller but still significant proportion of students (23%) reported wanting more education about which bin to use. In light of the above proportions, this may suggest that the limits of existing waste management practices and infrastructure at a school and system level are of greater concern to students than awareness at an individual level.

## What would you like to see more of at school?

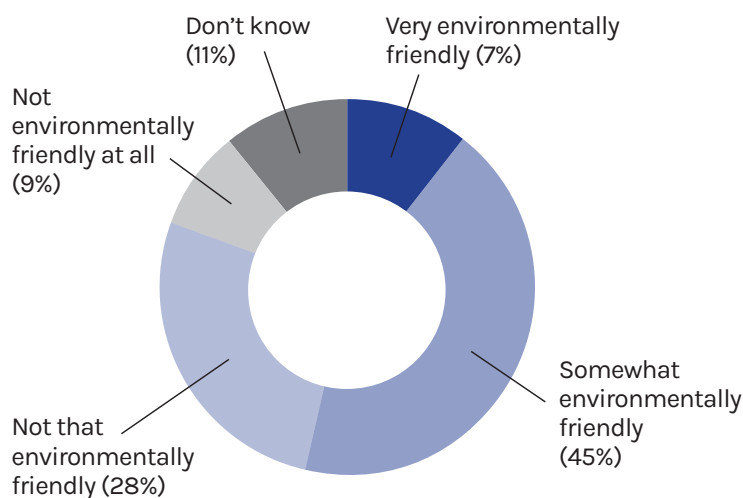


## How environmentally friendly do students think their canteen is?

Only 7% of students described their school canteen as 'very environmentally friendly'. While 45% thought their school is 'somewhat environmentally friendly', 37% reported that their school canteen is 'not that environmentally friendly' (28%) or

'not environmentally friendly at all' (9%). There were 11% of respondents who did not know how environmentally friendly their canteen is, and a smaller number of students who reported that their school does not have a canteen.

### How environmentally friendly is your school canteen?



## What would make school canteens more environmentally friendly?

**Students identified a range of changes to improve the environmental sustainability of school canteens. They want schools to:**

Improve the way they manage waste by implementing recycling and composting programs. This includes reducing the amount of food waste that ends up in landfill by ensuring all schools have green bins and other facilities to support this.

“ Most packaging is biodegradable or recyclable with the exception of some glad wrap, but there's no way to dispose of the biodegradable or recyclable containers properly. There's no point in switching from single-use to “environmentally friendly” if you treat the waste the exact same way. For environmental benefit, the school needs to drive proper waste disposal and actually have the facilities for it.” - Year 11

“ We need to change our bins first, they all go into the same big bin at the end of the week so there's no point of even investing. We need green bins but only after there's been a change in the final bin. The red and yellow bins at our school get dumped into.” - Year 9

Use sustainable packaging that is recyclable or compostable rather than plastic.

“ Reusable cutlery, getting rid of food items or drink items that contain plastic straws or plastic sleeves (likewise, instead of buying the products and getting rid of the plastic material, don't buy the products at all).” - Year 12

Provide or encourage the use of reusable kitchenware, containers and cutlery, and offer 'eat in' options to help reduce packaging waste.

“ Less of a focus on single use plastics and items. For example, instead of providing sauce sachets which increase waste, swap it out for a bottle of sauce that students can use if they need it. I also think it would be great to have a reusable cutlery/system set up, where you could return a container/cutlery after eating (maybe in return for a small discount).” – Year 11

“ Reusable forks, spoons, and cups, a place to sit near the canteen to eat and then return the reusable packaging, and using ingredients from the garden to make canteen food.” – Year 9

Have more fresh food options that are sourced locally to reduce the carbon footprint associated with transporting food and food packaging.

“ Source food locally where possible. This reduces the carbon footprint associated with transporting food.” – Year 11

“ Fresh food other than ordering processed foods.” – Year 10

Listen to students about the kind of food they want to eat in order to reduce food waste. This includes providing more affordable and fresh options, including more fruit and vegetables and more plant-based, halal and gluten-free options.

“ I think they should ask classes what type of foods they like so then there is no food wastage.” – Year 9

“ Consider offering more plant-based meals, which generally have a lower environmental impact than meat-based meals.” – Year 11

Improve education about the environment and food sustainability and have signage near the canteens and bins about which bin to use.

“ Education about the environment to change school culture of littering.” – Year 12

“ Make it obvious if packaging can be composted or recycled. And if there is food on the packaging – if it effects how it can be disposed of.” – Year 12

“ Compostable packaging and cutlery, a full set of green, red/blue and yellow bins near the canteen and signs which tell people what bin is correct for their rubbish.” – Year 7

Have school vegetable gardens so that canteens can use fresh garden produce and compost food scraps.

“ Food waste like fruit peels and vegetable scraps can be composted and used in the school garden. This reduces the amount of waste going to landfill and enriches the soil naturally.” – Year 11

## For more information

For more information about Greening Our Canteens and other SA SRC campaigns please contact Niav Andrews, Engagement and Participation Officer, at [Niav.Andrews@sa.gov.au](mailto:Niav.Andrews@sa.gov.au)