



New Zealand House of Representatives
Te Whare Māngai o Aotearoa

Education and Workforce Committee

Komiti Whiriwhiri Take Kuranga, Take Hunga Mahi

54th Parliament
November 2025

Petition of Matilda Otter-Lowe: Reinstate previous school lunches programme

Presented to the House of Representatives
by Carl Bates, Deputy Chairperson

Contents

Recommendation	3
Request to reverse changes to the provision model for school lunches	3
Change of school lunch model	3
Comments from the petitioner	3
Current school lunches are poor	3
Benefits of the previous model	4
Good school lunches are important	4
Comments from the Ministry of Education	4
Reasons for the change	5
School lunches have nutrition standards	5
Our response to the petition	5
New Zealand Labour Party and Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand differing view	6
Appendix	7

Petition of Matilda Otter-Lowe

Recommendation

The Education and Workforce Committee has considered the petition of Matilda Otter-Lowe—Reinstate previous school lunches programme—and recommends that the House take note of its report.

Request to reverse changes to the provision model for school lunches

This petition was signed by 1,687 people. It was presented to the House by Hon Phil Twyford on 24 June 2025 and transferred to us on 31 July 2025, and requests:

That the House of Representatives urge the Government to reinstate the previous school lunches programme.

Change of school lunch model

Ka Ora, Ka Ako | Healthy School Lunches Programme was introduced in 2019 and aims to provide nutritious lunches to students in the greatest need of support. It supports over 242,000 students each school day with free lunches. Schools are eligible depending on their rating on the equity index rather than students being assessed individually.

From the start of Term 1 in January 2025 all participating composite schools and full primary schools were moved onto a new provision model. This new model involves most schools and kura receiving lunches from a nationwide contractor called the School Lunch Collective. Under the previous provision model each school determined its own provider under certain Ministry of Education requirements.

Comments from the petitioner

Ms Otter-Lowe was invited to make written and oral submissions. We were impressed by the petitioner's work with other students on the petition and her considered responses to our questions.

Current school lunches are poor

Ms Otter-Lowe expressed serious concern about the current quality of free school lunches since the change of provider in January 2025. She acknowledged that the Government has announced savings of over \$130 million from providing lunches at the new cost of \$3 each. Previously, lunches had cost over \$8 each. Some schools using an internal and iwi/hapū model will receive a slight increase to \$4 of funding per student to support the employment of people preparing the meals. The petitioner has noticed negative effects on students' enjoyment, wellbeing, and academic performance.

The petitioner called for the School Lunch Collective to publish the nutritional values and ingredient quantities for its meals. She estimated that the current meals only provide 18 percent of the energy a high school student needs, while the international standard is 30

percent. Ms Otter-Lowe would like to be able to quantify statements from the Associate Minister of Education, Hon David Seymour, that the new meals are equally nutritious. The petitioner is also concerned that reports of “positive ratings” may not be accurate.

Ms Otter-Lowe conducted a survey of her fellow students. She recorded mainly negative comments and noted that many meals are thrown away uneaten. The petitioner explained that the food often tastes chalky and has little variety—frequently butter chicken or mince.

Benefits of the previous model

Ms Otter-Lowe believes the locally produced meals under the previous provision model were nutritious. She cited research conducted in 2022 in Wellington which found that lunches improved the mental health of students experiencing food insecurity by 9 to 20 percent.

During the hearing, Ms Otter-Lowe explained that her school’s Deputy Principal alters the number of lunches to meet student demand. The uptake was around 80 percent of students under the previous provider, but recently it has been under 50 percent.

Good school lunches are important

Ms Otter-Lowe compared the amount spent on free school lunches in other countries. We were told that in Finland, which has a similar population size to New Zealand, NZ\$6.10 is spent per lunch. Finland’s programme provides lunches for over 700,000 students.

We heard that Waitakere College, the petitioner’s school in West Auckland, is in a lower socio-economic area and many students do not have access to high-nutrition food at home. Further, Ms Otter-Lowe noted that many of her schoolmates have no breakfast, so if they do not eat lunch they could be missing two meals a day. We asked what students do if they throw away their Ka Ora, Ka Ako lunch. The petitioner explained that students would generally go without food as her school’s tuck shop is expensive and many students do not bring their own food.

The petitioner cited a 2022 study by the Public Health Communication Centre which found that achievement was up to four years behind for students in food poverty compared to their food-secure peers. Ms Otter-Lowe argues that providing good lunches will improve attendance rates and academic performance, which she understands are areas the Government is targeting. Her request is not to return to funding of \$8 per lunch, but to raise it from \$3 to \$6.

Comments from the Ministry of Education

We invited the Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga to make a written submission commenting on the petition request. It noted that the ministry is supportive of students exercising their public voice and it recognised the importance of student feedback on the matter of school lunches.

The ministry did not comment on the petition request for the budget of school lunches to be increased, saying that is a Ministerial decision to consider alongside other budget priorities. It provided some background to the change and how it monitors school lunch standards.

Reasons for the change

The ministry explained that the change of provision model was to support other Government programmes on decreasing child poverty and waste, and reflected the coalition agreement to improve the cost-effectiveness of the school lunch programme. Composite schools and full primary schools moved to the alternative provision model from Term 1, 2025, while contributing primary schools are due to move to the new model in Term 1, 2026. The forecast savings were \$107 million a year, but more recent assessments have suggested savings of around \$130 million a year. As of September 2025, 242,000 students were receiving free school lunches, up from 230,000 in August 2023.

The ministry informed us that the Associate Minister of Education had been invited to report back to Cabinet in September 2025 on the future of the provision model and wider school lunch programme. No details of Cabinet's consideration appeared to have been published by the time we considered this petition.

School lunches have nutrition standards

The Ministry of Education explained its processes to ensure school lunches are nutritious and of high quality. The ministry actively monitors nutrition standards, which have not changed from previous years. The standards are informed by Ministry of Health guidelines and set appropriate quantities of grains, proteins, and vegetables.

We were told that the ministry displays the minimum weight per meal and the nutrition standards on the Ka Ora, Ka Ako website. All food providers must meet these standards. The ministry also monitors suppliers' food control plans to ensure high levels of food safety.

The ministry said that suppliers, including the School Lunch Collective, seek menu feedback. It also said that the School Lunch Collective's menu development involves student taste-testing to check that students enjoy its food. The Ministry of Education is confident that the processes will support the continuous improvement of school lunches.

Our response to the petition

We thank Ms Otter-Lowe for making this petition. We were impressed by the work she has undertaken to survey and represent her classmates. We like to see young people getting involved in Parliament and speaking to us about issues that directly affect them.

We agree that meals play an important role in supporting students' attendance and academic achievement. We also acknowledge school lunches can play a role in providing meals for students, particularly those who may not have access to nutritious food elsewhere. A majority of us consider that decisions about the scope and emphasis of these programmes should be made based on practical considerations that provide value to taxpayers.

We consider it important that the school lunch programme reach as many children as possible. We understand that the savings made by the Associate Minister of Education have enabled the expansion of the Ka Ora, Ka Ako programme. We encourage the Minister to consider our report on this petition, and to continue to engage directly with students on how effectively the school lunches programme is being delivered.

New Zealand Labour Party and Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand differing view

Labour and Green members on the committee agree with Ms Otter-Lowe's view that the reduction of the unit cost of school lunches to \$3 has reduced the value of the school lunch programme. As the petitioner told the committee the meals are now less nutritious and less appealing to the students. This undermines the objectives of allowing more students to learn on a full stomach, and counteracting the economic inequality that means too many students turn up at school hungry. Labour and the Greens agree with Ms Otter-Lowe that the original programme should be reinstated.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The petition was signed by 1,687 people. It was presented to the House by Hon Phil Twyford on 24 June 2025 and transferred to us on 31 July 2025. We met between 6 August and 5 November 2025 to consider it. We received written submissions from the petitioner and the Ministry of Education and heard oral evidence from the petitioner.

Committee members

Katie Nimon (Chairperson)
Carl Bates (Deputy Chairperson)
Shanan Halbert
Francisco Hernandez
Grant McCallum
Dr Parmjeet Parmar
Hon Willow-Jean Prime
Hon Phil Twyford
Dr Vanessa Weenink

Mike Butterick participated in the consideration of this petition.

Related resources

The documents we received as evidence in relation to this petition are available on the [Parliament website](#), along with a [recording of our hearing on 8 October 2025](#).