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Queensland Association of School Tuckshops Inc.

HEALTHIER TUCKSHOPS CASE STUDY

CAIRNS WEST STATE SCHOOL

THE HEARTBEAT OF THE SCHOOL:

How the tuckshop at Cairns West State School nourishes a diverse community

AT A GLANCE

Tuckshop Manager
Mark Turner

Principal
Jason Evert

School
Cairns West State School

Region
Far North Queensland

Days open/week
5 days

Number of students
450

Tuckshop operated by
Education Queensland

At Cairns West State School, the tuckshop is far more than a place to buy lunch; it is the heart of the school community.

Serving more than 450 students from one of Queensland's most culturally diverse and socio-economically complex communities, "Westy's Tuckshop" plays a vital role in ensuring children are nourished, supported and ready to learn.

In a school where many families face financial hardship and food insecurity, the simple act of providing a healthy, homemade meal can make all the difference.

A TUCKSHOP BUILT ON CARE AND CONNECTION

When Principal, Jason Evert arrived in 2021, he recognised what a valuable and unique resource the Cairns West tuckshop was for the school and community.

"Food is crucial to the success of the children. It's the first thing we check in about if a child is dysregulated when they arrive at school," Mr Evert said.

Currently in his fifth year at the school, Jason is clear about the tuckshop's purpose:

"The tuckshop is an important part of our school culture. We run it as a school service, because it is so essential to the community needs."

To combat the growing level of food insecurity, the school also runs a Hungry Lunch Program for students without food.

At the end of each term, pantry staples and surplus supplies are turned into care packages for members of the school community doing it tough. No food goes to waste… and no child is left without support.

This case study was developed as part of the Healthier Tuckshops program funded by the Queensland Government through Health and Wellbeing Queensland.

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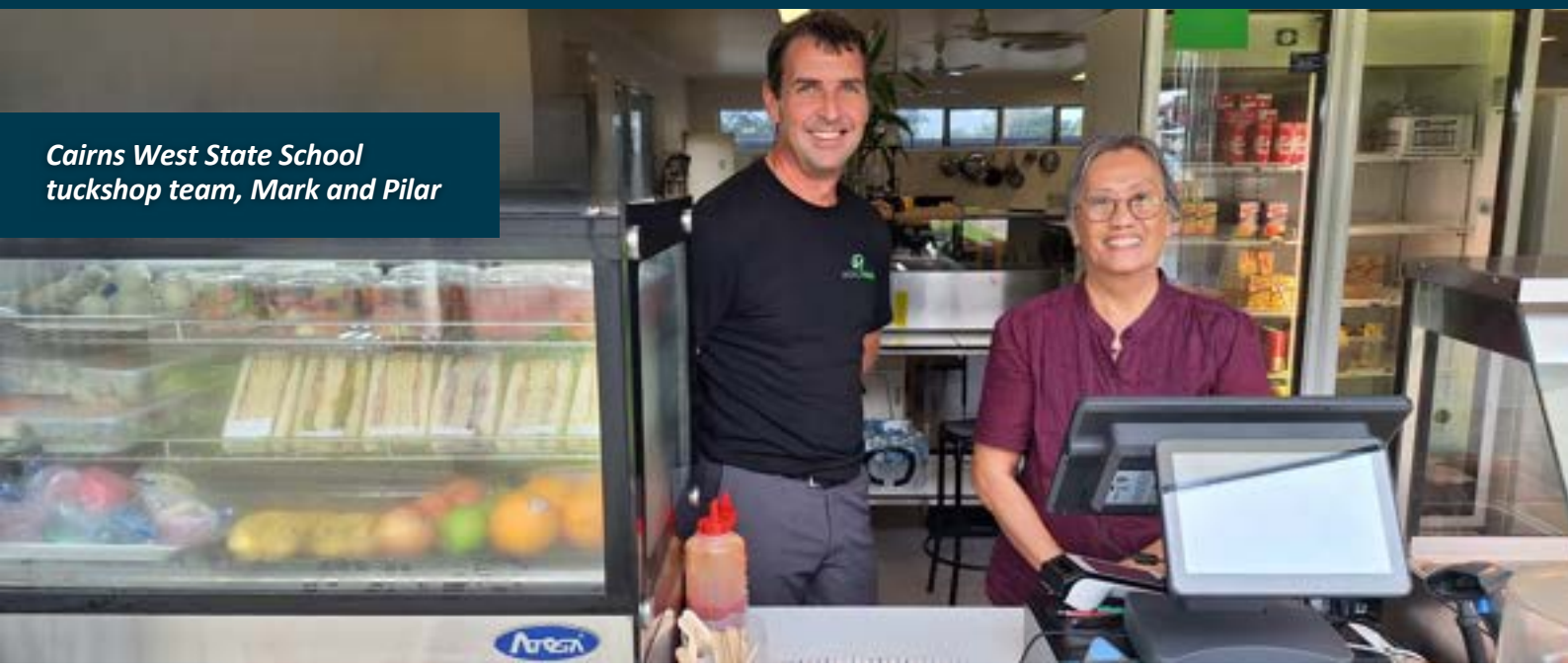

Cairns West State School tuckshop team, Mark and Pilar

A CHEF WHO CHOSE COMMUNITY

In April 2025, qualified chef Mark Turner stepped into the role of Tuckshop Convenor.

With 20 years of hospitality experience – including as a teppanyaki chef – Mark made a deliberate and considered choice to leave the restaurant and retail food industry for school food service so he could be present for his own children.

He describes the role as “a better version of hospitality – better hours and smaller customers.”

Mark’s presence is significant. In a sector traditionally led by women, having a male convenor brings fresh perspective and challenges stereotypes about who works in school food service.

For the students, many of whom benefit from strong, positive male role models, his leadership in the tuckshop adds another layer of impact.

Supported by his assistant Pilar, the former convenor and self-described “work mum”, Mark leads a tuckshop culture grounded in experience, warmth and high standards.

Pilar, now 70, has been part of the school community since 2006 and is seeing the next generation of students come through. She remains the quiet pillar ensuring everything runs smoothly behind the scenes.

HOMEMADE, HEALTHY AND AFFORDABLE

The tuckshop operates five days per week, offering a regular menu alongside a daily special, with around 40 serves sold each day.

Every special is:

- Made fresh on the day
- Homemade
- Packed with vegetables and flavour
- Priced consistently at $6 to remain affordable.

Weekly specials include:

- Monday – Beef and Gravy Rolls
- Tuesday – Homemade Lasagne and Salad
- Wednesday – Chicken Fried Rice
- Thursday – Homemade Beef Burgers
- Friday – Homemade Pizzas

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Mark's Chicken Fried Rice, which is prepared teppanyaki-style on a hot plate, is his best seller. Loaded with zucchini, carrot, corn and capsicum, it proves that colourful, vegetable-rich meals can be incredibly popular when cooked well.

Soups, curries and teriyaki chicken also feature regularly, reflecting both Mark's culinary background and the school's diverse cultural makeup.

Importantly, menu decisions are informed by student and parent feedback. Mark actively asks what families would like to see and tracks what sells well. This responsiveness ensures the menu reflects the tastes and traditions of a community where:

- 55% of students are Indigenous
- 25% are refugees
- Many speak more than one language
- Students come from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Congolese, Ugandan, Sudanese, Rwandan, Kenyan, Zimbabwean, Zambian, Indian, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Filipino, Sri Lankin, Papua New Guinean, Vietnamese backgrounds, and many more.

The tuckshop also plays a role in whole-school cultural events. During Harmony Day celebrations, it was at the heart of the "Taste of Harmony" event where families prepared traditional dishes, strengthening community ties through food.

Mark's Chicken Fried Rice

The tuckshop offers over-the-counter service at second break.

MORE THAN A MEAL

In low socio-economic and culturally diverse communities, school food services often carry a weight far beyond their operational budget.

At Cairns West State School, the tuckshop:

- Supports student regulation and behaviour, through healthy and accessible meal offerings
- Reduces stigma around food insecurity
- Provides culturally inclusive food experiences
- Offers affordable, healthy meals
- Acts as a community connector
- Supplies catering to school business units, increasing sustainability
- Serves as a welcoming space used by staff and families.

The school is also exploring revitalising its tuckshop garden to further embed fresh, local produce into the menu and connect students to food origins.

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THE HEART OF THE SCHOOL

When children arrive at school hungry food becomes foundational. It is not an "extra". It is essential infrastructure for learning.

At Cairns West State School, the tuckshop demonstrates what is possible when school leadership values food as central to wellbeing, when an experienced chef brings professional pride to school meals, and when a community rallies around nourishing its children.

This is not just a tuckshop; it is care in action.

SUPPORTING HEALTHY CHOICES THROUGH THE HEALTHIER TUCKSHOPS PROGRAM

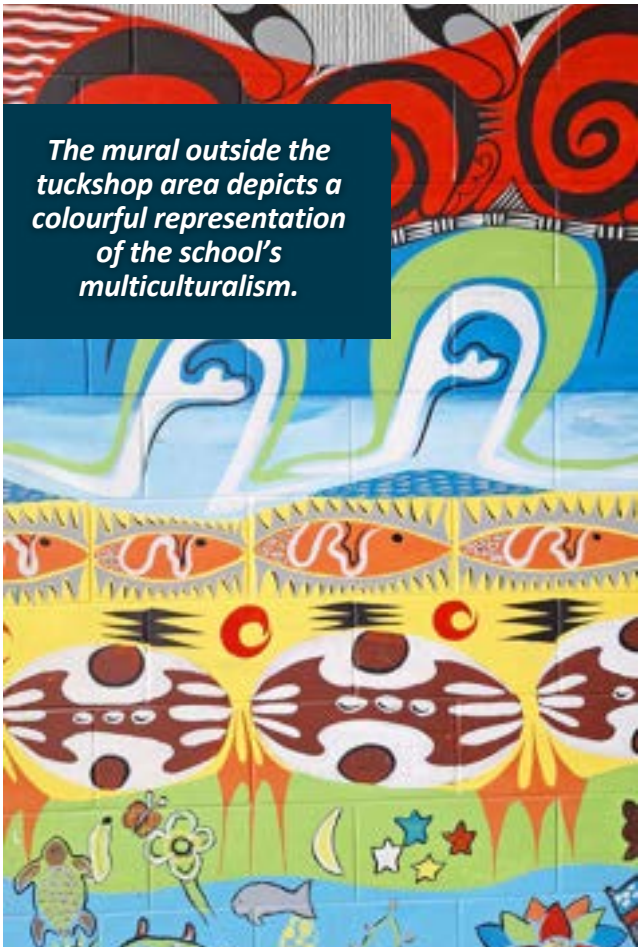
The tuckshop at Cairns West State School is also supported through the Queensland Association of School Tuckshops' Healthier Tuckshops Program, which helps school tuckshops across Queensland create menus that are both nutritious and appealing to students.

Through this program, schools receive practical guidance on menu planning, recipe ideas and strategies to promote healthier choices.

For Mark, the program reinforces what he already values as a chef – cooking meals from scratch, using fresh ingredients and making vegetables a natural part of everyday meals.

By combining Mark's culinary experience with the practical resources provided through the Healthier Tuckshops Program, the Cairns West State School tuckshop demonstrates that healthy food can be affordable, culturally inclusive and popular with students.

It's a powerful example of how school tuckshops can play a leading role in improving children's nutrition while strengthening the wider school community.



The mural outside the tuckshop area depicts a colourful representation of the school's multiculturalism.

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