

Game's AmaLunchbox promotes feeding with dignity at primary schools

One nutritious, well-prepared meal a day can make a vast difference in children's educational development, especially those from disadvantaged schools who often face a long school day on an empty stomach. South Africa's basic literacy and numeracy rates are arguably one of the most urgent long-term sustainability challenges facing our country's future.



Image: Mykel Nicolaou

What can be done to ensure that children are well-fed, alert and ready to learn?

Game has become increasingly aware of the impact poverty has on childhood and educational development in the work it has undertaken in communities around our stores. The chain recognised that many resource-poor schools have the best intentions in delivering on the national Department of Education's feeding scheme, but are hindered by a lack of facilities to provide regular, hygienically prepared meals for children in need. Already under-budgeted and cash strapped, fundraising within the school communities is unlikely to achieve the required amounts and an external helping-hand was clearly needed. With nutrition and education high on our list of social investment priorities we approached the Department of Education to find a sensible, sustainable and safe solution that would complement the National School Nutrition Programme. In 2008, the AmaLunchbox Campaign was born.

The AmaLunchbox campaign distributes mobile kitchens, built inside bright pink shipping containers, complete with a gas burner, plumbing facilities, a double bowl sink, cupboards, stainless steel preparation counters, shelving, cooking pots, preparation utensils and pink tumblers and bowls for every child.

This is an improvement on the one-ring gas burner or open fire previously used by most of the schools and has really enhanced the nutritional quality and safety standards of food provided to the learners.

The issue for Game is not just providing a hygienic food preparation area, but also ensuring that food safety and storage standards are met and sustained, that hot meals are provided regularly and that learners, and by extension their school administration, parents and community, are the recipients of a service that promotes nutrition, education and eating with dignity.

A shared vision

The Game AmaLunchbox container kitchens are located at schools within a 100km radius of a Game store, predominantly in urban areas, which meant that outlying disadvantaged schools still require assistance. Fortunately Masscash's footprint in these areas is significant and the development of their Econo Kitchen programme, based on a 'One Store - One Kitchen' outcome for schools in the immediate store surrounds, ensured that both urban and rural children benefitted from the projects.

Both projects have a shared goal, well-fed youngsters who are able to concentrate on their classroom activities and make the most of their education. By supporting the Department of Education's National School Nutrition Programme and involving store staff, communities and parents in the food preparation and delivery over 76 000 children have received at least one, well-balanced, safely prepared, nutritious meal daily in the past school year. To date AmaLunchbox, with an annual budget of R2.8-million, has delivered close to 8 million meals in the past year alone.

Selecting the schools

AmaLunchbox schools are selected against a set of criteria that ensure those most in need benefit from the programme. The school must be listed on the National School Nutrition Programme and graded in Quintile Levels 1,2 or 3 meaning they represent the poorest of the poor. They must have a minimum of 500 learners, although the kitchens tend to service an average of 1 000 learners per school, and be within 100km of a Game store.



Image: Mykel Nicolaou

AmaLunchbox kitchens have been set-up in 7 provinces across South Africa based on these criteria and have also been established in Zambia and Malawi illustrating just how flexible and impactful the programme can be.

Container Kitchens: robust and ready to roll

Container-based service delivery has been successful

in South Africa across a variety of services, from cell phone centres and tuck shops to primary healthcare, and allowed the rapid roll out AmaLunchbox in meaningful numbers, which could not have been achieved with a more permanent structure. The container kitchen, valued at between R60 000 and R90 000 each, has the added advantage of being mobile allowing us to deliver a fully functional facility that can 'get cooking' immediately, and should the school move the kitchen moves with it. But it is hygiene, safety and centralised quality control that have really benefitted; the containers are provided by two experienced suppliers who assisted with the design and fitting of the kitchens optimising working space, air flow, heat extraction, gas storage, security and the practical issues of moving hot pots from cooking to serving areas. We are certainly open to building more permanent structures in the future but currently the robust container provides the best, and fastest, solution to our needs.

Getting everyone involved

Employees across all levels have been involved in the programme from the start. At each kitchen handover local Game store employees are the first to serve meals and see firsthand the happy faces of children with full stomachs. By providing more than a financial hand-out, Game and Masscash have created relationships with the communities. AmaLunchbox and Econo Kitchens have allowed Massdiscounters and Masscash to support a major nation building priority while making a real and immediate impact as a large corporate citizen. Most importantly, it has improved the lives of thousands of children who are now able to learn on a full stomach in a school that has gained a resource that will continue to provide sustenance for years to come. ■