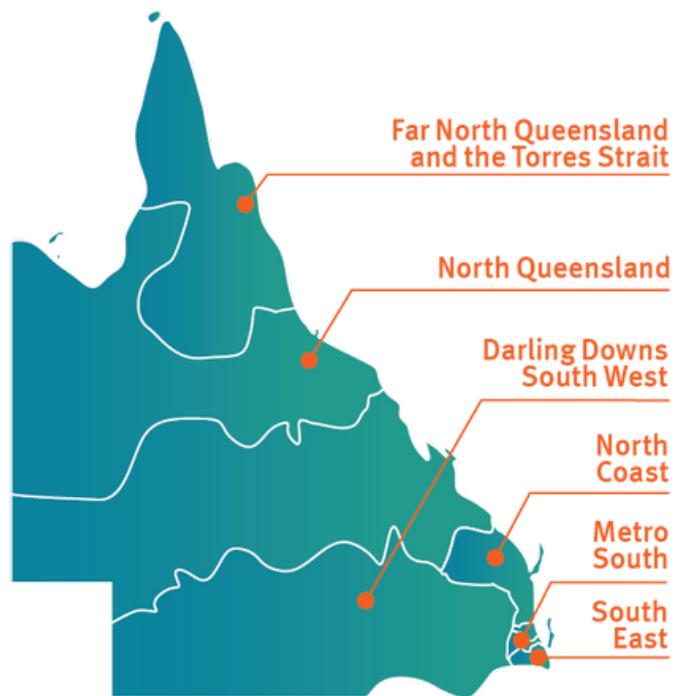


Achievements, impacts and outcomes in 2024

Pick of the Crop is a whole school healthy eating initiative developed by Health and Wellbeing Queensland (HWQld) which aims to increase opportunities for primary school students in Queensland to learn about and eat more vegetables and fruit.



Pick of the Crop was piloted in 2021 with 35 schools and 178 schools participated in the initiative in 2024, reaching over 40,500 students. Since 2021, over 200 schools have been involved in Pick of the Crop.

Schools in North Queensland, North Coast, South East, Darling Downs South West and Far North Queensland Department of Education Regions participated in Pick of the Crop in 2024.

In 2024, a pilot program commenced in Far North Queensland education region, with Pick of the Crop expanding to 9 rural and remote schools (Torres Strait and Cape York). Through the pilot, schools receive a grant of up to \$6,000 to implement actions compared to \$5,000 for other regions.

Evaluation in 2024

The 2024 evaluation aimed to capture achievements, impacts, and outcomes resulting from the implementation of Pick of the Crop.

Sources of information included:

1. Community connections and events
2. Schools' experiences and perceptions of Pick of the Crop
3. School action plan analysis, conducted by HWQld
4. Analysis of data from schools through a Term 4 review process, conducted by HWQld
5. Key impacts and recommendations from Pick of the Crop implementation partners hosting Regional Coordinators
6. Far North Queensland pilot program evaluation

Community connections

Pick of the Crop schools connect with local producers, growers, and industry members to improve students' food, nutrition, and agricultural knowledge and skills.

In 2024, connections and events included:

- Showcases at local shows, including the RNA Rural Discovery Day and a Pick of the Crop Kitchen session at the Royal Toowoomba Show
- Release of the 'Eat the Alphabet' video and resource, designed by a Regional Coordinator, Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers Ltd (BFVG)
- Publication of three videos from North Queensland, showcasing schools and excursions, designed by a Regional Coordinator, Bowen Gumlu Growers Association
- Statewide Q&A Gardening webinar, led by a Regional Coordinator, BFVG and Annette McFarlane, ABC radio gardening talkback presenter.
- Statewide Q&A Cooking webinar, led by the Regional Coordinator, Darling Downs Hospital and Health Service and QCWA Health Promotion Team Leader
- Mini-farmers day held by the Regional Coordinator, Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service for Metropolitan South and South East schools
- Mango mania event held in Term 4 across regions, led by Regional Coordinators in Bowen and Bundaberg



Rural Discovery Day 2024

Pick of the Crop sessions at the RNA Rural Discovery Day brought country to the city, teaching primary school students that food and fibre comes from farms. Held over a week in May, 21 schools participated, reaching 1521 students. HWQld provided a bursary to three schools to support attendance.

Pick of the Crop presented the Farming and Horticulture activation session, exploring the properties of fruit and vegetables. This included growers from the South East sharing insights into cultivating and harvesting produce. Students also engaged in a hands-on activities on seed germination.

312 teachers and 71 students provided feedback on the session.

- 97% teachers found the activity very impactful or impactful
- 94% teachers strongly agreed or agreed with the level of activity presented
- 87% teachers felt the activity met the V9 curriculum criteria
- 97% of students reported they enjoyed the activity, finding it very easy or easy



WHAT SCHOOLS SAID

First hand knowledge from growers is a valuable resource and presenters were passionate

RNA Rural Discovery Day event held in May

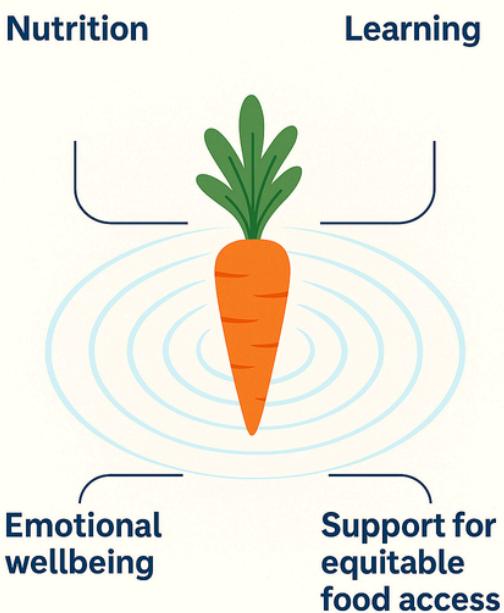
Understanding school experiences and perspectives of Pick of the Crop

School experiences and perspectives provide insights into the impact of the initiative on student learning whilst highlighting secondary effects, such as its impact on student emotional wellbeing.

These quotes were captured by Regional Coordinators in their reporting or through the Term 4 Review Surveys completed in December 2024.

Feedback also highlights the impact upon strengthened community and school connections, whilst supporting equitable food access

The Ripple Effects of a School Garden



What schools said

Pick of the Crop has truly enriched our students' learning journey by providing them with incredible hands-on experiences. Watching their garden flourish from seed to harvest has been both educational and inspiring for them. We're grateful for these opportunities that bring learning to life!

– Collinsville State School

Teachers are starting to see that kids learn the curriculum out in the garden and in the kitchen, and often [learn] better. You don't always have to teach blocks of 30-minute lessons in the classroom to cover each area of the curriculum

– School champion, Darling Downs region

As a fourth year school I cannot imagine our school without the sensory garden and students being able to play, pick, interact with plants, nature and tasting veggies freshly picked. In particular our students that need breaks from classroom learning – they are able to explore the garden – relax – and then return to learning in a calm manner.

– Participating school, North Coast Region

Thank you for your continued support, it makes such a difference for our low socioeconomic community where fresh fruit and vegetable is not readily provided to students outside of school.

– Participating school

School action plan analysis

In 2024, Pick of the Crop schools submitted a School Action Plan, identifying actions and use of grant funding, if applicable, for the school year.

Schools have access of up to \$7,000 (or \$8,000 for Far North Queensland (FNQ) schools) over two years, to support implementation of their School Action Plan.

The development of the plan is completed in consultation with their local Regional Coordinator and the whole school community.

Analysis of 135 plans provides a snapshot of how schools planned to implement Pick of the Crop in their schools in 2024.

- The majority of plans were submitted to HWQld for approval in Term 1 and Term 2 (over 80%)
- Average ICSEA (The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) for schools was 959
- 24,825 students were enrolled at the schools where the plans were analysed.
- School Champions involved different disciplines, with principals or teachers being the majority (76% of 106 plans)

Analysis identified that 94% of schools consulted with teaching staff during development of plans. Others consulted included school administration, parent organisations, students and ground staff.

Perceived enablers and barriers

The top four **enablers** identified at the beginning of a schools journey in Pick of the Crop included:

- Keen, dedicated and supportive staff and/or students (79%)
- Supportive parent organisations, parents and community (56%)
- Established garden to build on (51%)
- Building on previous year involvement (21%)

Barriers identified included:

- Time (50%)
- Weather (24%)
- Capacity (24%)
- Funding (21%)

These were consistent across schools in each region, apart from South West and FNQ where distance was also seen as the main barrier.

Reasons why schools wanted to be part of Pick of the Crop in 2024

Four schools provided the following:

- *After implementing this program in 2023/24, we have noticed a change in our students' attitude to trying new fresh tastes and ingredients. This occurred through creating a wicking bed vegetable garden and cooking sessions focused on fresh produce. We would love to continue this development and encourage students to follow through with this learning into their home environments and daily lives.*
- *In creating a whole school garden space, this will enhance our curriculum teaching with more hands on experiences and activities. This is a project that the whole school will be a part of and will benefit from. It will support our student wellbeing program and be a calming space for the students who need it.*
- *To continue to improve our students' and local community's knowledge of the benefits of growing and eating fruit and vegetables. Ensuring our gardens are producing enough fruit and vegetables for continuation to provide food for our students' breakfast club and fruit breaks.*
- *Promoting Healthy Eating Habits – By growing their own produce, students will gain a better understanding of the nutritional benefits of fresh fruits and vegetables, which can lead to healthier lifestyle choices.*

Actions planned

Actions are highlighted in plans according to the five Pick of the Crop components.

The **top three components** considered by 135 schools were:

- 83% - **Food and Grower Connections** (including actions such as incursions, excursions)
- 70% - **Healthy School Environments** (including school gardens)
- 59% - **Teaching and Learning** (including links with the curriculum and cooking classes)



Other related activities completed in schools included:

- 67% schools ran a daily fruit/veggie break
- 56% schools had or ran breakfast clubs
- 56% schools had a school tuckshop
- 43% schools held cooking sessions for students

The **top 4 programs** identified to support Pick of the Crop implementation:

- OzHarvest FEAST (23%)
- QCWA Country Kitchens (16%)
- George the Farmer (14%)
- Mushrooms in schools (13%)

The data gained from this analysis provides a snapshot only and is subject to limitations, such as some sections not being completed by all schools; errors in data entry etc.



School reviews in 2024

To understand schools' experiences with Pick of the Crop in 2024, 138 schools completed a Term 4 survey. The survey also provided an insight into schools' progress in completing their approved action plans.

Number of schools who completed the survey, by years of participation

1 year of participation

65
schools

2 years of participation

37
schools

3 years of participation

18
schools

4 years of participation

18
schools

Based on your experience with Pick of the Crop, how likely are you to recommend it to other schools?



4.94
out of 5

WHAT SCHOOLS SAID

Pick of the Crop enables the programs that are close to our hearts. It is the values of our families and community

Students get excited to learn about growing and cultivating their own food.

Childrens engagement with the curriculum, community connections, the richness and authenticity in which we have been able to deliver the exciting projects and to witness the wonderful outcomes for the children.

Tuckshop involvement in providing healthy options- utilising garden produce.

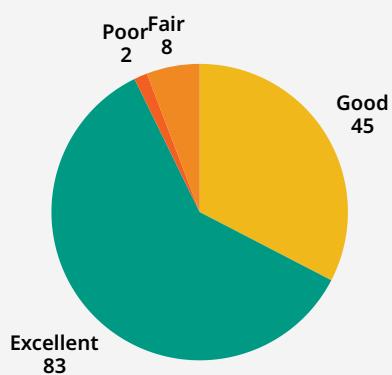
The most positive benefit was funding towards our school environment. This enabled us to better engage students in healthy eating habits: trying new foods, growing different vegetables, better understanding of sustainable food practices.

That ideas, attitudes and practices have become embedded

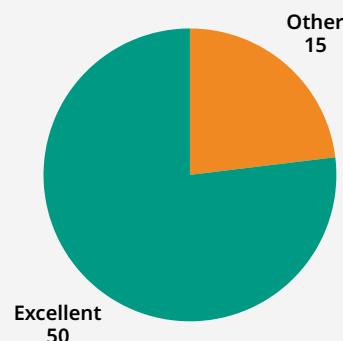
Improved uptake of confidence of students in being exposed to and trying new foods.

Healthier food choices - Lunches coming into school have more fresh fruits and vegetables

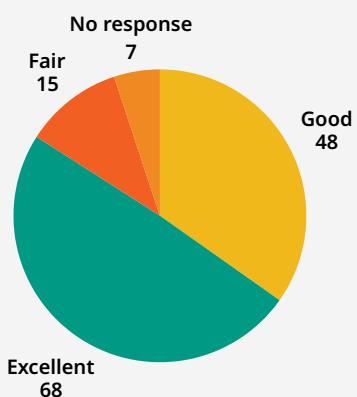
Experience with Pick of the Crop (data from 138 schools)



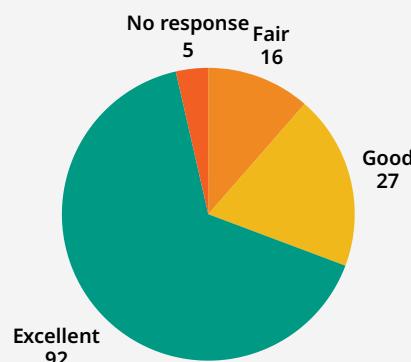
Experience with Pick of the Crop (data from 65 schools participating in their 1st year)



Opportunities for students to consume vegetables and fruit at school since implementing Pick of the Crop (data from 138 schools)



Students' knowledge and attitudes about vegetables and fruit since implementing Pick of the Crop (data from 138 schools)



Four most enabling factors for schools

- ✓ Funding
- ✓ School garden establishment or boost
- ✓ Support from Regional Coordinator
- ✓ Support from staff across the school

Three most challenging factors for schools

- ▶ Time
- ▶ Staff / people
- ▶ School operational challenges

There were no vast differences across school size, except for larger schools (501+ students) who highlighted the School Action Plan as a top enabler.

Achievements and impacts from implementation partners

In 2024, schools received support and assistance from locally-based Regional Coordinators who were hosted by local organisations (known as Implementation Partners). This is funded by HWQld.

Implementation partners in 2024 included:

- Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers Ltd
- Bowen Gumlu Growers Association
- Childrens Health Queensland
- Darling Downs Health

This model differed for Far North Queensland, with the Regional Coordinator based at HWQld and in the South West region, schools were supported by South West HHS Healthy Communities team.

Most significant impacts highlighted by implementation partners

Implementation partners highlighted the most significant impacts of Pick of the Crop for schools and the region in 2024. These include:

- Connecting schools with programs and organisations to promote a whole school approach, whilst facilitating connections across schools.
- Increased community support and sustained community relationships which boost spirit and morale in the local area.
- Enhanced student nutrition education and exposure to vegetables and fruit, particularly for students who may not have access to vegetables and fruit at home.
- Continuing the flexible approach of Pick of the Crop to ensure that it can be tailored to all schools.

Furthermore, secondary impacts include:

- Positive behaviour changes for students as an unintended impact, including students that are living with a disability.
- Opportunities for hands-on learning and student engagement, with students actively playing a role in their learning.
- Strengthening healthy school environments through competitions and online networking between Pick of the Crop schools.
- The critical role of growers remains essential in contributing to the success of and sustainability of Pick of the Crop.

Recommendations from implementation partners

These include:

- Establishing a working group, with dedicated guidelines to support Regional Coordinator capacity.
- Consideration of a mentoring system pairing experienced schools with new schools to support school staff and champion capacity.
- A review of the current communication resources and methods to support a user-friendly platform.
- Ongoing school support to link Pick of the Crop with the Curriculum.
- Creating local partnerships or community connections to support Pick of the Crop schools, particularly with activities which require fresh produce donations, such as Fresh Fruit Fridays.

Pick of the Crop pilot program in Far North Queensland

Food insecurity is prevalent in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Schools in remote Far North Queensland (FNQ) are important drivers to improve children's health and disseminate healthy messages throughout their communities.

Pick of the Crop pilot program in FNQ is an integral action under the Queensland's Remote Food Security Strategy, known as the Gather + Grow Strategy 2023-2032.

Reach and actions

In 2024, 11 FNQ schools, reaching over 2000 children, were engaged across the Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait Islands. A collaborative initiative was also formalised by a Memorandum of Understanding between HWQld and Cook Shire Council.

To ensure cultural relevance and safety, the pilot was adapted with guidance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait. Through school-led action plans, schools primarily focused on establishing or re-establishing school gardens to strengthen "paddock-to-plate" educational experiences. These efforts are complemented by:

- engagement with local rangers;
- building growing and nutrition into curriculum;
- emphasis on social, emotional, and cultural
- wellbeing through engaging in traditional practices.

A separate evaluation framework has been developed to assess the impact of the pilot program. Additionally, through partnership with Tagai College in the Torres Strait Islands, further evaluation of children's knowledge and participation in healthy food and nutrition activities will be undertaken.

Key insights and lessons learned in 2024

- Adaptations made for FNQ included increasing grants to \$8,000 over two years and offering greater flexibility in fund allocation to address the unique challenges and higher costs in remote settings (e.g. cost of produce, transport and setting up school gardens).
- Resources were adapted to reflect cultural differences. This included renaming the 'Food and Growers Connections' component to 'Connection to Country and Local Food Production.'
- Eligibility criteria were broadened to include non-state schools, ensuring more equitable access.
- The reality of high staff turnover, limited resources, and logistical challenges hindered implementation and reporting of Pick of the Crop.
- Conventional communication methods, such as phone and email, proved inadequate for building strong relationships, highlighting the importance of face-to-face engagement. This has led to a greater emphasis on in-person visits.
- Timelines, expectations, and realities of remote communities, where trust-building and resource limitations require a more adaptable approach, has led to increased flexibility in reporting.
- As with other regions, schools have expressed concerns about the sustainability of Pick of the Crop once funding expires.

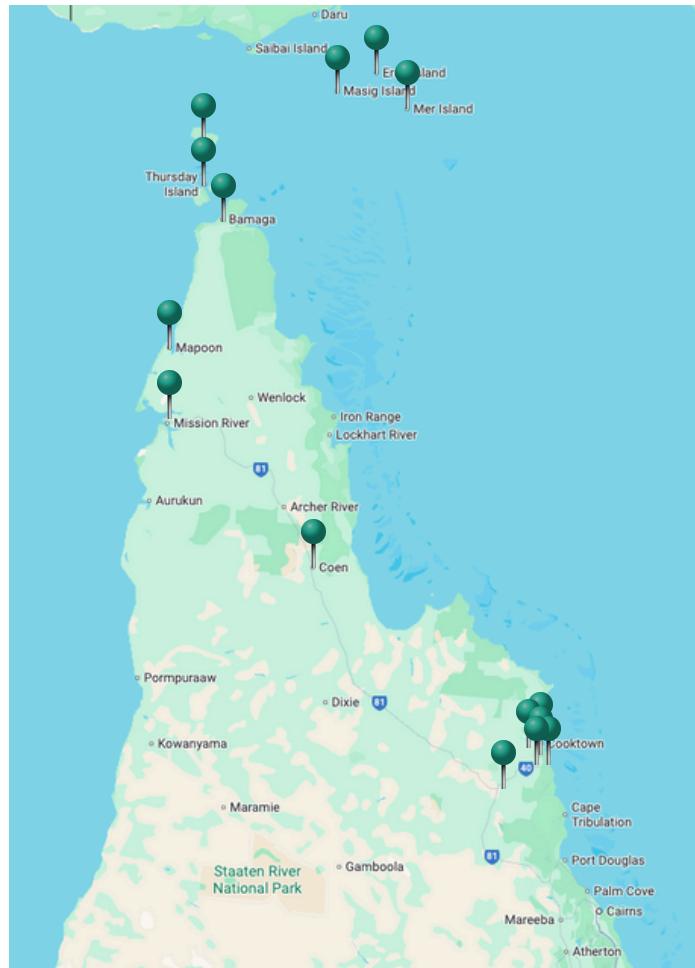
Recommendations

Adaptations made as part of the FNQ pilot program have been vital to the success of integrating Pick of the Crop into the schools. Ongoing evaluation and further refinements are critical for continued success and sustainability.

Recommendations from the initial stages of implementation include:

- Extend scoping periods and implement more flexible timelines.
- Appoint a dedicated FNQ coordinator, preferably a local community member, to support effective implementation.
- Prioritise in-person visits to build trust, as virtual communication alone often falls short.
- Consider expanding eligibility to include other educational settings, including secondary schools, kindies and community hubs.
- Continue refining reporting practices to reduce burdens, streamline processes, and enhance program efficiency.

Despite challenges, Pick of the Crop has demonstrated potential to support health and nutrition in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with more schools showing interest in participating.



Evaluation contributors and acknowledgements

Health and Wellbeing Queensland wish to thank the Pick of the Crop Implementation Partners and Regional Coordinators for their contribution to this evaluation. They include Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers Ltd; Bowen Gumlu Growers; Darling Downs HHS and Childrens Health Queensland HHS.

Previous evaluations (in 2021 and 2022) were conducted by the Institute of Social Science Research, The University of Queensland.

November 2025