



• Samson Primary canteen supervisor Jess Tercier's healthy meals get a grin of approval from Jamie Gabriel, Charlie Tercier and Caitlin Preedy. *Photos by Steve Grant*

Canteen queen

by STEVE GRANT

WHEN a visiting nutritionist recently asked students at Samson Primary to describe an everyday lunch, their reply of hamburgers, chips, pizza and icy poles had her fumbling for the nearest red light food card.

But it was the kids who had the biggest lesson to give that day: "Dude, you've got to check out our canteen."

The Little Lunchbox, as the tuck shop is now known, has been turned upside down by new supervisor Jess Tercier, who's also a mum at the school.

Ms Tercier's tossed out the choc milks and plastic cheeses and replaced them with healthy food that's almost entirely hand-made on site.

Despite a heavy emphasis on veggies, the kids are lapping up the new menu and Ms Tercier and her team of volunteers are struggling to keep up with demand.

When chicken nuggets, chips (hand-cut and roasted, of course) cucumber slices and carrot sticks appeared as a special last month, 181 of the school's 380 students put in an order.

Pasta cups with a napolitana sauce created by spritzing up eight veggies are also pretty popular, and costing just \$2.50 are a favourite with parents, while the kids adore the pureed watermelon popsicles



• Gardener Chris Dwyer and her aspiring chook carers.

(50c) and vanilla frozen yoghurt which comes in at just \$1 a dollop. The most expensive items on the menu are \$4.50, which gets you a full spaghetti bolognese or butter chicken with rice.

Ms Tercier is hoping to inspire other schools to overhaul their canteens, as she says many still take the easier option of forking out warmed-up sausage rolls in a plastic wrapper. All her packaging is recyclable, except the straws.

She says one of the ingredients to her success has been tapping into volunteering networks.

"A lot of schools rely only on parents to volunteer, but that can be really hard to manage," Ms Tercier says.

Veggie gardens

Instead she registered on volunteering websites and found a reliable supply of up to eight volunteers a week who were thrilled to be helping improve kids' diets.

The canteen's success is also due in part to the school's inspirational gardener Chris Dwyer, who's been there so long she doesn't even want to count the years.

Ms Dwyer has created lush and extensive veggie gardens that the kids play a big hand in tending and harvesting. She also holds cooking classes so there's a direct correlation between the food the kids grow and eat.

She's also mother hen to the school's chickens, which play an important part in the kids' learning.

Pre-primary gets the responsibility of taking the eggs from their chickens to the canteen where they're whizzed into something nutritious. Slightly older kids learn about holding chickens gently, with Ms Dwyer conscious of the link between the mistreatment of animals and anti-social behaviour later in life.

The big kids aspire to be chicken carers and have to go through a rigorous process before being selected, helping to instil them with responsibility.