

WOOLWORTHS EDITORIAL COVERAGE

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Woolies vouchers plug science funding gaps

EXCLUSIVE

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Cash-strapped schools are using supermarket vouchers to buy science equipment, with the teachers' union warning that many public schools rely on fundraising to pay for basic maintenance and textbooks, too.

Requests for science equipment redeemed through the Woolworths Earn & Learn scheme have doubled in the past two years. Woolworths spokes-

woman Karen Madden said science equipment was now more sought after than sports gear in the 15,000 schools and childcare centres using the program. Digital and video cameras, digital microscopes, thermometers, robotics starter kits and toys that teach toddlers how to code are among the most common requests.

Australian Science Teachers Association president Anne Disney said schools needed more public funding for equipment to properly teach science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) skills. "Schools are crying out for materials," she said. "The

Australian government has a big

focus on STEM and coding but most schools wouldn't have the facilities available to teach that to the level they'd like.

"The best way to teach students STEM skills is through practical applications, not theoretical ones, but a lot of schools aren't equipped to do that."

Kingsgrove Public School in Sydney's south has used the Woolworths scheme to buy robotic car construction kits for its new STEM centre.

The primary school already has a 3D printer, Lego robots and a computer coding club for children

aged five to 12. "The kids love it," principal Beverley d'Astoli said. "They learn construction skills, movie-making and are learning about coding."

Yaya Lu, a 19-year-old software engineering student at the Australian National University, showed off some of her inventions at the school last week.

Ms Lu, a Young Australian of the Year finalist in 2014, has invented glasses that allow wearers to control a wheelchair by raising an eyebrow or wrinkling the nose. She said girls must "not be scared" of maths and science.

"Women bring a lot to the field," she said. "I know a lot of girl

coders and I think they bring a more nurturing side to technology. They focus on the connection between machines and humans, rather than just the machine itself."

Australian Education Union president Correna Haythorpe said many schools relied on public fundraising for basic maintenance, as well as textbooks and literacy programs.

"If we are to be an innovative nation we need to make sure that every school has the resources it needs to provide STEM and other programs," she said.



Yaya Lu demonstrates some of her inventions for Isiah Ao, George Braithwaite, Olivia Pereira and Justin Wu at Kingsgrove Public School in Sydney