School Meals Enhance Human Capital
What we’re learning from the Global Survey of School Meal Programs ©

Through school feeding programs, countries are making transformative human capital investments in children’s health and nutrition that multiply the return on investment in their education.

Governments across the world must invest in grey matter infrastructure; the infrastructure that helps brains grow from better nutrition; the infrastructure that builds the healthy and productive workforce of the future.

— Dr. Akinwumi Adesina, President of the African Development Bank, 2017 Gene White Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient

GCNF conducted the 2019 Global Survey of School Meal Programs © to establish a comprehensive database of school meal programs. Responses were received from 103 countries. Of the 85 countries that had large-scale programs, these were the most common program objectives:

HEALTHY AND NOURISHED CHILDREN LEARN BETTER

Investing beyond the first 1,000 days to every child’s first 8,000 days of life is critical for establishing lifelong health and future potential.

Of the school feeding programs surveyed:

91% provided nutrition education.
88% cited improved nutrition as an objective.
68% served fortified foods.
47% had nutritional requirements intended to address obesity.

School meals incentivize school attendance, improve nutrition, and boost learning outcomes, yet the coverage of school meal programs is lowest in countries where the need is greatest.

In Côte d’Ivoire, the Integrated Program for Sustainable School Canteens links canteens with micro-agricultural projects led by women’s groups that benefit from 70% production sold.

By purchasing food locally, Home Grown School Feeding (HGSF) programs support local agricultural development, build resilience in supply chains, and encourage government investment. Most (76%) school feeding programs reported investing in local agriculture by purchasing at least some of the school food locally.

- Advocate with GCNF for the global development community to recognize school feeding as a high-return investment and as a strategy for human capital development.
- Advocate with GCNF to scale up school feeding programs as a human capital investment that improves child education and health outcomes, builds sustainable food systems, and empowers women and youth.
- Advocate with GCNF to improve both the recognition and accounting of the multiple avenues for strengthening human capital through school meal programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on school systems and deprived vulnerable children of a daily school meal. At the peak of school closures in April 2020, 1.5 billion children were out of school,1 and 370 million were not receiving the school meals they depend on.2 The upcoming 2021 Global Survey of School Meal Programs© aims to capture the impact of the pandemic for at least one full school year.

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1. https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse