School Meals Provide and Promote Nutrition

What we’re learning from the Global Survey of School Meal Programs

Investing in a child’s nutrition not only in the first 1,000 days, but in the first 8,000 days of life is critical for establishing lifelong health and full future potential. School feeding is a powerful tool to meet the nutritional needs of children and adolescents.

GCNF conducted the 2019 Global Survey of School Meal Programs to establish a comprehensive database of school meal programs. Eighty-five of the 103 countries that responded have large-scale programs, of which:

- 66% had nutrition laws, policies, and/or standards.
- 87% cited improvement of students’ nutrition as a goal.
- 91% provided nutrition education.

Improving Nutrition with School Menu Diversity

Programs that rely on domestic purchase help support local agricultural development and also more commonly report diverse and nutritious food items:

- Green vegetables: 39%
- Eggs: 48%
- Poultry: 39%

Delivering Fortified Foods through School Feeding Menus

Where access to nutritious food is limited, fortification strategies can address hidden hunger.

- 68% of programs served fortified foods.
- Bhutan provided fortified oil and rice.
- 12% of programs served biofortified foods.
- Gambia, Malawi, Mozambique, and Nigeria served vitamin A-rich sweet potatoes.

ADDRESSING OBESITY WITH SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

School meal programs provide a clear opportunity to tackle the global obesity epidemic.

25% less than 25% of school meal programs listed obesity reduction among their goals.

47% of programs had nutritional requirements intended to address obesity.

NUTRITION EDUCATION, HEALTH EDUCATION, FOOD EDUCATION, AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION WERE INCORPORATED IN 65%, 53%, 51% AND 49% OF PROGRAMS, RESPECTIVELY.¹

Mexico noted that the school environment tends to inhibit progress toward a healthy food culture, while Greece reported that overweight and obesity decreased in schools where the Food Aid and Promotion of Healthy Nutrition Program (DIATROFI) is implemented.

What’s Next?

- Work with GCNF to address the gap in nutrition data and interventions after the first 1,000 days of a child’s life, to cover the full 8,000-day continuum.
- Advocate for school meal programs to be included in nutrition commitments within global frameworks like the Global Nutrition Report and the UN Food Systems Summit.
- Work with GCNF to leverage school meal program investments in nutrition-sensitive agriculture to improve dietary diversity and micronutrient adequacy for children.
- Advocate with GCNF to use the power of the school food market and other public food procurement to increase production of sustainable, nutritious, and affordable foods.
- Work with GCNF to show how school feeding can reduce and help prevent child obesity.

Reach out to us at info@gcnf.org to discuss how we can advocate together!

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,² and 370 million were not receiving the school meals they depend on.³ 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. Food education is focused on facilitating the consumption of food that contributes to one’s health and well-being. Nutrition education is closely related but is focused on nutrition and nutrition-related behaviors.
2. https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse