



School Meals and Education

Tapping the Full Potential through Partnerships

Most governments around the world provide meals to their schoolchildren as part of a package of education investments. School meals help maximize the return on these investments and help all children realize their full personal and productive potential.

Partnerships for Education

Every day at least **368 million children** across low-, middle- and high-income countries are **fed at school by their governments**.¹ There are good reasons for this: school meals provide children with nutritious food that is essential for their development and learning and, where children or communities are in difficult or disrupted circumstances, can help children find regular support for their daily needs in the classroom.

In order to learn, children need good health, a conducive learning environment, trained teachers, safe classrooms and school books. In other words, only an **integrated package of investments**, made by an appropriate coalition of education partners, can deliver the inclusive and quality education children need. But some children need more to find their way to school. A school meal or take-home ration can be the decisive incentive for poor families to send their children to school.

Investment in education has to increase significantly if governments wish to reach the Sustainable Development Goal on education by 2030.² A school meals programme can help **maximize the return on investment in education**, because it facilitates access to school and improves the nutritional status, health and cognitive development of children. When part of the education package, school meals enable children - especially the poorest and most disadvantaged - to achieve their full personal, social and productive potential.

Maximizing Investment in Education

Children require sufficient **nutrition** to think, learn and grow intellectually. So school meals are the bedrock of educational opportunity for the poorest children, ensuring they are healthy and able to learn.

Evidence from a number of studies clearly demonstrates that school meals help boost performance and **cognitive ability**. One global review found that children benefiting from school meals programmes and adequate education provision moved up respectively 7 and 12 percentiles in international intelligence and math tests.³

These improvements have a significant **lifelong impact**. More educated young people grow up to become more empowered adults. Higher levels of education are not only linked to higher earnings, but also to healthier, longer, more productive lives. And these benefits are passed on from mother to child.

Studies show that every US\$1 invested in school meals programmes brings a US\$3-10 **economic return** from improved health, education and productivity.⁴



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Examples of Effective Partnerships

Empowering Girls

Once girls are attracted to school, education and health professionals can offer specialist support, not just to address their undernourishment challenges, but also to help them understand their reproductive rights and their health choices.

For example, in Malawi, a joint programme of the government, WFP, UNICEF and UNFPA, built around the provision of school meals as an incentive, has been designed specifically to tackle the social and other barriers preventing girls from attending school.

Strengthening Social Integration

School meals programmes may partner not only with education professionals but also with civil society and social workers to increase the local ownership of the school meals programme and cultivate trust in the national education system.

For example, the national school meals programme set up by the Tunisian government, which reaches 240,000 children in 2,500 schools, is supported by local organizations that employ local youth as caterers, ensuring local ownership of the programme and fostering social inclusion.

Home Grown School Meals

In Home Grown School Meals initiatives, the food for the school meals is sourced locally from smallholder farmers, who at the same time receive agricultural development support.

This integrated approach not only strengthens local markets, benefitting local farmers and businesses, but also communities and national economies. And the children can eat culturally diverse, familiar, nutritious, locally grown foods. WFP supports Home Grown School Meals initiatives in 37 countries.

Promoting Education During Crises

An integrated education strategy that includes a school meals component can provide the bridge between a humanitarian intervention and an education development outcome. During crises, when inevitably the emphasis is on meeting basic life-saving needs, school meals successfully meet the basic nutritional needs of children, while getting them back into the classroom.

For example, in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, children from Syrian refugee families benefit from a package of complementary investments, including school meals, provided to them by partners working together through the Education Cluster.



¹ WFP (2013) *State of School Feeding Worldwide*

² UNESCO (2016) *Global Education Monitoring Report*

³ Kristjansson et al. (2016) *International Journal of Educational Development* 48:79-83. This global review of school meals programmes found that the WISC and WRAT-4 test results of children receiving school meals were respectively 0.17 and 0.31 standard deviations higher than those of children not receiving school meals.

⁴ WFP (2013) *The School Feeding Investment Case*