

UNESCO Report on School Nutrition

Posted at: 02/04/2025

UNESCO Report on School Nutrition: Key Insights and Challenges

Context

Education and nutrition are closely linked, with **school meals playing a crucial role in cognitive development, health, and social equity**. Recognizing this, UNESCO released its report "*Education and Nutrition: Learn to Eat Well*" in **March 2024** during the *Nutrition for Growth* summit hosted by France.

The report emphasizes the need to **integrate school nutrition programs with education policies** to combat malnutrition, improve learning outcomes, and enhance economic productivity. It also highlights key challenges and policy recommendations for governments worldwide.

Key Data and Insights from the Report

- **Global Reach:** School meals benefit **418 million children** across **161 countries**.
- **Nutritional Gaps:** More than **50 percent of school feeding programs** lack sufficient **fruits and vegetables**, while **one-third** include **sugary drinks**.
- **Rising Obesity:** Childhood overweight and obesity have **doubled** in over **100 countries** in the past **two decades**.
- **India's Efforts:** The **PM-POSHAN scheme** provides meals to **118 million children daily**, making it one of the **largest school feeding programs globally**.
- **Hidden Hunger:** Despite widespread coverage, **micronutrient deficiencies persist** due to poor dietary diversity.
- **Limited Nutrition Education:** Only **17 countries** integrate **nutrition education into school curricula**, linking it with **national food standards**.

Interlink Between Education and Nutrition

- **Improved Learning Outcomes:** Nutritious meals directly **enhance attention, memory, and classroom performance.**
- **Equity and Access:** School meals serve as an **incentive for enrollment**, especially for **girls and low-income families.**
- **Health Foundation:** Early childhood nutrition **shapes cognitive and physical development**, influencing **future productivity and earning potential.**
- **Support for Local Economy:** Linking school feeding programs with **local agriculture** fosters **sustainable farm-to-table systems.**
- **Social Justice Tool:** School meals act as a **safety net for vulnerable populations**, reducing **inequality in access to food and education.**

Countries such as **Brazil and Finland** with robust school meal programs report **higher retention rates and improved learning outcomes.**

Key Challenges Identified

- **Low Food Quality:** Many school meals contain **ultra-processed, sugary, and nutrient-poor foods.**
- **Lack of Nutrition Education:** Few countries integrate **nutrition literacy** into the school curriculum.
- **Overreliance on Staples:** Most programs depend heavily on **rice, wheat, and maize**, leading to **low dietary diversity.**
- **Urban-Rural Divide:** **Infrastructure, supply chains, and cold storage facilities** vary significantly, affecting food quality and distribution.
- **Weak Monitoring Systems:** Many nations **lack standardized indicators** to assess the **impact of school meals** on health and education.

Only **eight percent of countries** track the **nutritional quality of school meals** based on **WHO standards**.

Way Forward

- **Integrated Curriculum:** Embed **nutrition education** across subjects and grades.
- **Strengthening Standards:** Adopt **science-backed food standards** aligned with **WHO dietary guidelines**.
- **Localized Procurement:** Ensure school meals are **sourced from sustainable, seasonal, and diverse local agriculture**.
- **Teacher and Staff Training:** Upskill educators to **effectively teach food and nutrition** in classrooms.
- **Robust Monitoring:** Establish **national benchmarks** to assess the **nutritional and educational impact** of school feeding programs.

UNESCO urges **every country to develop a national school nutrition strategy** with **clear accountability measures**.

Conclusion

The report underscores that **quality education and proper nutrition must go hand in hand**. Investing in **nutritious school meals** is not just a **welfare measure** but a **strategic step toward human capital development**. A **well-nourished child learns better**, and an **educated child builds a stronger nation**.

