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WORKING PAPER

# School Meals Case Study: Japan

Prepared by the Research Consortium for School Health and  
Nutrition, an initiative of the School Meals Coalition

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# An historical background

School lunch program in Japan started in 1889 at a private elementary school “Chuai Elementary School” in Tsuruoka Town (currently Tsuruoka City) in Yamagata Prefecture, in which free lunches were provided for children from poor families. After that, school lunch program have been spread mainly to city areas and then to the entire nation, including a time of the severe food situations in the aftermath of World War II. As of May 2021, school lunches are provided to 99.7% of all public elementary schools and 98.2% of all public lower secondary schools in Japan. <sup>1</sup>

## Country profile

### Population and economics

Table 1: Key data on population and economic indicators

Total population (2022)	Total number of population aged 5 to 19	Total number of population employed in agriculture sector	Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (2021)
124,490,000 <sup>2</sup>	15,680,000 <sup>3</sup>	1,810,000 <sup>4</sup>	39,803 USD <sup>5</sup>

### Education

The Japanese education system<sup>6</sup> is generally called the “6-3-3-4-year system” and consists of six years of elementary education, three years of lower secondary education, three years of upper secondary education and four years of college education. The 9 years of elementary and lower secondary education cover compulsory education, during which school meals are provided.

Table 2: Number of children involved in school in Japan in 2022

Total number of students	Total number of schools	Average class size	Number of children involved in school meal	Percentage of children eligible for free school meals
18,127,861 <sup>7</sup>	56,441 <sup>8</sup>	-	9,315,871 <sup>9</sup>	-

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20230125-mxt-kenshoku-100012603-1.pdf> (in Japanese), <https://www.maff.go.jp/j/pr/aff/2006/food01.html> (in Japanese)

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Bureau of Japan (as of March 2023)

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Bureau of Japan (as of March 2023)

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Bureau of Japan (as of February 2023)

<sup>5</sup> Department of National Accounts Economic and Social Research Institute, Cabinet Office, Japan (2021)

<sup>6</sup> See annex 1 and table 3

<sup>7</sup> See table 3: Number of schools and students enrolled below.

<sup>8</sup> See table 3: Number of schools and students enrolled below.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20230125-mxt-kenshoku-100012603-1.pdf> (in Japanese)

Table 3: Number of schools and enrolled students by grades<sup>10</sup>

	No. of schools	No. of students enrolled		
		Male	Female	Total
Kindergarden	9,111	466,450	456,845	923,295
Integrated center for early childhood education and care	6,657	420,327	401,084	821,411
Elementary school	19,161	3,145,159	3,006,146	6,151,305
Lower secondary school	10,012	1,639,489	1,565,731	3,205,220
Compulsory education school	178	34,831	32,968	67,799
Upper secondary school	4,824	1,499,033	1,457,867	2,956,900
Secondary school	57	16,246	17,121	33,367
Schools for special needs education	1,171	98,397	50,238	148,635
Specialized training college	3,051	277,005	358,569	635,574
Miscellaneous school	1,046	54,854	47,254	102,108
College of technology	57	44,486	12,268	56,754
Junior college	309	11,946	82,767	94,713
University	807	1,626,805	1,303,975	2,930,780
Total	56,441	9,335,028	8,792,833	18,127,861

## Food security, nutrition and health

- **Food insecurity:** People in severe and moderate food insecurity are 0.9% and 3.8% respectively in 2020 <sup>11</sup>.
- **Stunting:** 5.5 % of children under 5 years of age are stunting in 2020 <sup>10</sup>.
- **Micronutrient deficiency:** N/A
- **Thinness:** N/A
- **Overweight:** 2.4 % of children under 5 years of age were overweight in 2020 <sup>10</sup>
- **Obesity:** 4.3% of adult population (18 years and older) were obese in 2016 <sup>10</sup>

## Design and Implementation of the school lunch programmes

### Description

The Japanese Government enacted the “School Lunch Program Act,” which requires all public elementary schools and lower secondary schools establishers to provide safe and well-balanced school lunches to students. In Japan, education on food and nutrition (Shokuiku) is carried out through school educational activities. School lunches are served as a “living textbook” that allows children to learn about various food cultures and local traditional foods, eating manners, gratitude to those preparing meals, food production, distribution and consumption, and so on. Various efforts are made to enable children to acquire accurate knowledge about food and nutrition, good judgment on food choices, and a healthy and wholesome diet.

<sup>10</sup> FY2022 Basic School Survey statistics (as of May 1, 2022)

<sup>11</sup>The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022 : <https://www.fao.org/3/cc0639en/cc0639en.pdf>

## Objectives

Objectives of the School Lunch Program (Article 1 of the School Lunch Program Act) are to promote dissemination and enhancement of school lunch and Shokuiku through specifying requirements on implementation of the Program and its instruction methods. The program has been contributing to sound development of school children/students physically and mentally as well as playing an important role of fostering correct understanding and judgment on food and nutrition among them at school.

Targets of School Lunch Program (Article 2 of the School Lunch Program Act) are :

- Maintaining and promoting good health through proper nutrition intake
- Acquiring accurate knowledge on daily meals, developing an ability to judge and choose a healthy diet, developing good eating habits
- Enriching school life, developing good-fellowship and cooperative spirit.
- Understanding that a good diet comes from the blessings of nature, and encouraging them to have a spirit of respect for life and nature, and an attitude contributing to the environmental preservation
- Understanding that daily meals are supported by many people of various activities involved in food production, and encouraging them to take an attitude of respect for hard work
- Encouraging them to deeply understand the traditional food culture of our country as well as local foods.
- Guiding them to understand food production, distribution, and consumption

### **Through hygiene management**

The Government established the hygiene management standards for school lunch<sup>12</sup>, which stipulate that all school establishers shall carry out thorough hygiene management, from the selection of food ingredients to the actual serving of school lunches to children.

### **Good nutritional balance**

The Government has established school lunch nutritional standards<sup>13</sup>, which require all school establishers to plan daily menus that enable children to receive a balanced meal suitable for their developmental stage.

### **Promoting the use of local products and organic agricultural products**

The central government is taking various initiatives for improving school lunches by promoting the use of local products and organic agricultural products. Local governments are using original and unique ways to enhance school lunches according to the situations in their localities.

## Targeting and coverage

Under the School Lunch Program Act, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has responsibility for:

- Establishing standards that are desirable to be maintained regarding nutrient intakes necessary for children and students, other contents of school lunches and requirements for the proper implementation of school lunch program.

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/hakusho/nc/1283821.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/hakusho/nc/1283821.htm) (in Japanese)

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20210212-mxt\\_kenshoku-100003357\\_1.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20210212-mxt_kenshoku-100003357_1.pdf) (in Japanese)

- Establishing standards that are desirable to be maintained regarding the maintenance and management of facilities and equipment necessary for the implementation of school lunch program, hygiene management in the cooking process and others.

The Government of Japan is also promoting Shokuiku with the following role and responsibility of each ministry and agency under the Basic Act on Shokuiku (Food and Nutrition Education)<sup>14</sup>.

*Table 4: Engaged ministries and their areas of action in promoting Shokuiku*

No.	Responsible ministry and agency	Role and responsibility
1	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF)	Improve the food self-sufficiency ratio and increase the consumption of domestic agricultural products
2	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)	Foster desirable eating habits through school education activities
3	Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW)	Prevent lifestyle related diseases through community health activities
4	Children and Families Agency	Promotion of Shokuiku for school children
5	Food Safety Commission of Japan (FSCJ)	Food safety, etc
6	Consumer Affairs Agency (CAA)	Food loss, etc

Japan is promoting the use of local foods and products and domestic foodstuffs in school lunches based on the Shokuiku act and the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Shokuiku<sup>15</sup>. The use of local foods is particularly important for facilitating children’s understanding of local nature, culture, industry, and so on, and school lunches in Japan also include this educational element. Moreover, the use of local products contributes to reducing the burden on the environment from the transport of food products, and thus is very effective from the perspective of the SDGs.

## Meal type

The provision of school lunches is implemented by each school establisher. The types of school lunches are divided into different categories :

- Full Meal Lunch: School lunch consisting of bread or rice, milk, and one or two dishes
- Half Meal Lunch: School lunch consisting of milk and one or two dishes
- Milk Lunch: Consisting of only milk

The meals are prepared at a kitchen in the school or at a school lunch center and then delivered to the school. At many schools, the children themselves serve the food, eat in their own classrooms, and clean up after eating. At some schools, students eat in lunchrooms rather than in the classrooms.

## Nutritional norms

School lunches have played an important role in improving children’s nutrition intake. The “Survey on the Dietary Situation of Elementary and Lower Secondary School Students in Japan”, conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, shows a comparison between children’s food intake on days with/without school lunches. It indicates that

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.maff.go.jp/e/policies/tech\\_res/attach/pdf/shokuiku-19.pdf](https://www.maff.go.jp/e/policies/tech_res/attach/pdf/shokuiku-19.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.maff.go.jp/e/policies/tech\\_res/attach/pdf/shokuiku-18.pdf](https://www.maff.go.jp/e/policies/tech_res/attach/pdf/shokuiku-18.pdf)

children tend to eat larger amount of staple food (rice/bread) but smaller amount of main dishes (fish/meat) and side dishes (vegetables) when school lunches are not available while they tend to eat more nutritionally balanced meals when school lunches are provided. The health of children is being improved by the provision of nutritionally balanced school lunches. The School Lunch Program Act sets school lunch nutritional standards, stipulating the standards for the necessary nutritional intake that students are expected to take for a meal. Based on these standards, each school's diet and nutrition teachers, who are registered nutritionists, prepare menus that appropriately combine various foods and allow students to experience different foods while receiving a nutritionally well-balanced meal.

## **Food procurement**

The selection and procurement of food for school lunch are implemented by school establishments, who are the providers of school lunch, based on the views of diet and nutrition teachers, parents, and other relevant parties and the situations in each region. Since the use of local food products for school lunch has an educational significance in that it enables students to deepen their understanding of the local nature, environment, food culture, and industry in a more familiar and realistic way and facilitating their understanding of agricultural producers and production processes, the Government proactively promotes the use of local products for school lunch.

## **Legal framework and public policy evolution**

In 1954, the School Lunch Program Act, which stipulates the requirements for the implementation of school lunches, was enacted, and up to the present, the provision of school lunches has been spread and enhanced as part of school educational activities.

The nutritional and dietary standards for school lunch have been regularly revised in consideration of children's health, nutritional, and dietary problems. For maintaining and promoting children's health through proper a nutrition, efforts have also been made to enhance and diversify school lunch menus by combining various foods, etc.

Brief history of legal framework on school lunch is as follows

- 1954: Enactment of School Lunch Program Act.
- 1968, 1969: The National Curriculum Standards for elementary and lower secondary schools were revised, and the school lunch program/guidance became one of "special activities at school."
- 2004: The School Lunch Program Act was partially revised, and in 2005 the "diet and nutrition teacher system" started, which designates these teachers as educators and managers for students' nutrition matters.
- 2005: Basic Act on Shokuiku (Food and Nutrition Education) was enacted. The Act clarified the basic principles and direction of food and nutrition education, for comprehensively and systematically promoting policy measures regarding food and nutrition.
- 2008: The School Lunch Program Act was partially revised, stipulating the "promotion of food and nutrition education in schools."

## Costs of implementation

The School Lunch Program Act stipulates that, in principle, the costs for facilities and personnel necessary for the provision of school lunches shall be borne by the school establishers and that the school lunch cost (cooking ingredients cost) by the parents. Some school establishers cover the school lunch costs as well by their own decision. The school lunch cost for children, whose families are in a severe financial situation, is supported by education allowance and school expense subsidies through social welfare services.

*Table 5: Number of distributed school lunches and their associated costs in public school in 2021*

School	No. of school lunches/year	Cost of school lunches/month
Public elementary schools	192	¥4,477
Public lower secondary schools	188	¥5,121

\*2021 MEXT survey

The table below shows the average number of school lunches provided in 2021 at public elementary schools and lower secondary schools and the average monthly cost for school lunch borne and paid by parents.

## Monitoring and evaluation

Regarding the promotion of Shokuiku (food and nutrition education), its progress including target achievement is appropriately monitored and evaluated every fiscal year based on the 4th Basic Plan for the Promotion of Shokuiku, which is announced to the public, reviewed, and improved based on its evaluation. Especially for school lunches, targets are set to increase the use of local products, setting the following three pillars with numerical targets and regular monitoring and evaluation.

*Table 6: Shokuiku Plan's targets to be achieved by 2025*

	Detailed target values	Values when the Fourth Plan was created (FY2020)	Current Values (FY2022)	Target Values (FY2025)
Indicator1	Average number of times diet and nutrition teachers provide guidance on local products	9.1 times/month (FY2019)	10.5 times/month	12 or more times/month
Indicator2	Percentage of prefectures maintaining or improving the percentage of local products used in school lunches (on a value basis) from the current value (FY2019)		76.6%	90% or more
Indicator3	Percentage of prefectures maintaining or improving the percentage of domestic foodstuffs used in school lunches (on a value basis) from the current value (FY2019)		78.7%	90% or more

\*The progress is monitored through "Survey on Efforts to Teach about Local Products in Schools (MEXT)" and "Survey on the Use of Local Products and Domestic Food Stuffs in School (MEXT)" every fiscal year.



## Lessons learned and best practices

- The month of June is designated as "Shokuiku Month," and the National Convention on Promotion of Shokuiku is held as a nationwide initiative at this period of the year. Awards for Shokuiku activities, booth displays for the promotion of Shokuiku, symposiums and stage events are held. In this context, organizations related to school lunches also hold booth displays, which are an opportunity to promote the public understanding and awareness of Shokuiku through school lunches and deepen cooperation among relevant stakeholders.
- The city of Sapporo in Hokkaido Prefecture, implements the "food recycling compost" program for school lunch. In this program, school lunches are prepared with the vegetables grown by local farmers using the compost made from leftover and other waste from the cooking process of school lunches. Of the city's 300 local schools, almost 100% of them collect food waste, and all of them use vegetables produced using this compost for school lunches. In addition, about 70% of the local schools conduct cultivation activities using this compost. Through these efforts, Shokuiku and environmental education are enhanced at school.
- In Usuki city of Oita Prefecture, "the Organic Agriculture Promotion Law" in 2006 and the "Basic Plan for Food and Agriculture in Usuki City" including the "Organic Agriculture Promotion Plan" in 2022 came into force respectively. The city has been making continuous efforts to promote organic agriculture based on mutual understanding between producers and consumers for building circular economy within the city. The city has two school lunch centres where they cook a total of 2,800 meals per day for serving lunches at thirteen elementary schools and five junior high schools. As of 2022, the use rate of organic products is about 24% of all fresh vegetables used for school lunches (based on weight) and the city has a target to raise the use rate to 25% by 2026. In addition to promoting organic agriculture, Usuki was recognized for its promotion of traditional food culture and was approved as a new applicant city for membership in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2021. There are 49 cities in the world (Of these, 25 are in OECD countries) that have applied and been approved by UNESCO in the sector of food culture, which is the second city in Japan after Tsuruoka in Yamagata Prefecture.

## Challenges

There are some problems in using local products for school lunch. Some local agricultural products are expensive and the stable supply of local products, which meet certain standards, is often difficult. In response to such problems, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries dispatches the coordinators of "local production for local consumption" to mediate between school lunch providers and agricultural production providers, supporting the development of menus that use local agricultural products.

In FY2021, the percentage of local products used in school lunch on a monetary basis was 56% on average.

## Related resources and data sources

- School Lunch Program Act(in Japanese) :  
<https://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/document?lawid=329AC0000000160>
- Survey on Provision of School Lunches, 2021, MEXT(in Japanese) :  
<https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20230125-mxt-kenshoku-100012603-1.pdf>
- Survey on the Dietary Situation of Elementary and Junior High School Students in Japan, 2016, MHLW(in Japanese) :  
<https://www.mhlw.go.jp/file/04-Houdouhappyou-10904750-Kenkoukyoku-Gantaisakukenkouzoushinka/05-1.pdf>
- A Guide to Shokuiku : [https://www.maff.go.jp/j/syokuiku/guide/pdf/00\\_en\\_guide.pdf](https://www.maff.go.jp/j/syokuiku/guide/pdf/00_en_guide.pdf)
- Policies for the Promotion of Shokuiku The Fiscal Year 2021 Edition :  
[https://www.maff.go.jp/j/syokuiku/wpaper/attach/pdf/r3\\_index-18.pdf](https://www.maff.go.jp/j/syokuiku/wpaper/attach/pdf/r3_index-18.pdf)

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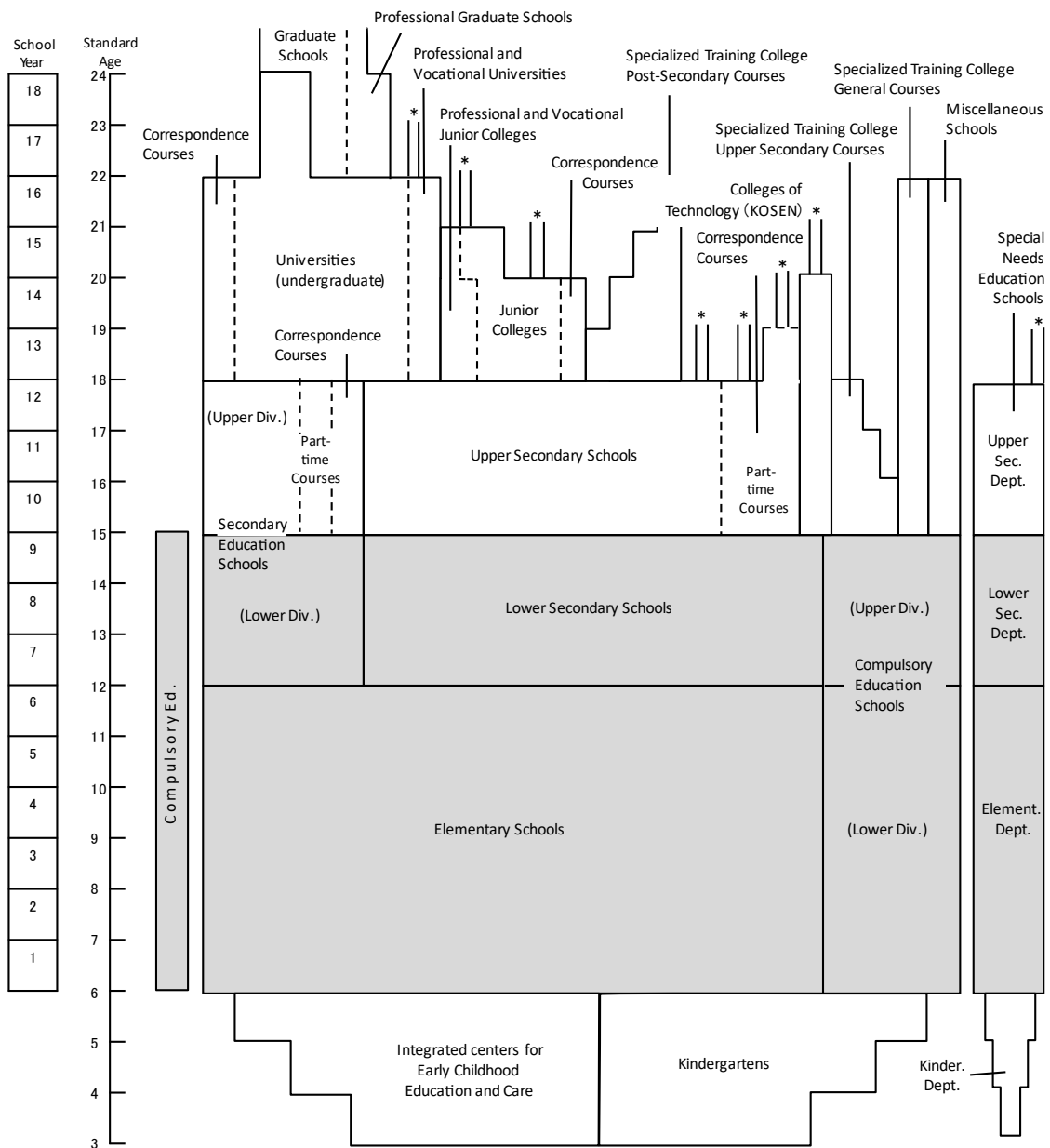


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# Annex

## Overview of the organization of the school system in Japan<sup>16</sup>

### Organization of the School System in Japan



(Notes)

(1) \* indicates advanced courses

(2) Upper secondary schools, upper division of Secondary Education Schools, universities, junior colleges, and upper secondary department of Schools for Special Needs Education can have separate courses with course terms of 1 year or more.

(3) A child aged from 0 to 2 years old can attend Centers for Early Childhood Education and Care because it functions as school as well as child welfare institution.

(4) Age and admission requirements for Specialized Training College General Courses and Miscellaneous Schools are not defined uniformly.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nicjp.niad.ac.jp/en/japanese-system/media/2023/06/fd0d4607627f42f4da0c9df855cecd28.pdf>