



Statement to the Ministerial Meeting of the School Meals Coalition

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

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The Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition was launched in 2021 as a global initiative to provide independent, evidence-based guidance to the 103 member states of the School Meals Coalition as they recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and rebuild the health, education and future of their schoolchildren and adolescents.

Guided by a 10-year independent research strategy, the Research Consortium operates through a global Academy of more than 850 scholars, policymakers and practitioners from over 85 countries to consolidate and distil research findings to guide actionable approaches that policy makers can apply in their own national contexts. Broad support from donors enables the Research Consortium Secretariat and its six mature Communities of Practice to create a global voice and perspective, and to collaborate with national and regional hubs in the translation of research findings for regional, national, and sub-national decisionmakers. In addition to expanding the independent global network of academics, scholars and practitioners, the Research Consortium is increasingly partnering with other established global and regional networks, including the FAO School Food Global Hub and the Inter-Parliamentary Network for Education (IPNEd) to share useful research and guidance with parliamentarians.

As in previous years, this Annual Research Statement reports new (2024) programmatic and policy insights, as well as adding to the evolving evidence since the Global School Meals Coalition Summit in Paris 2023.¹ The Statement builds on this evidence base by exploring the implications for policy, with the aim of contributing to the reach, quality, and comprehensiveness of national school meals programmes towards 2030.

The Statement was prepared by the Research Consortium as an input to the School Meals Coalition for the parliamentarians and policymakers of the member countries of the Coalition. The insights consolidated within this Statement draw from analyses led by the Research Consortium's global Academy, as indicated under each statement below.²

¹ The 2023 Statement to the Global School Meals Coalition Summit can be accessed here:
<https://doi.org/10.17037/PUBS.04671285>

² Disclaimer: Please note that the views presented in this paper are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the School Meals Coalition and its members.

New Evidence on the Design and Benefits of School Meals Programmes

1. School meals are effective at improving growth, enrolment and learning, and in the case of educational outcomes rank favorably relative to other popular education interventions.

There is growing evidence that school meals positively impact education outcomes. Recent findings reviewing both experimental and quasi-experimental studies show that school meals can yield up to half of a high-quality year of school per \$100 spent. These programs rank favourably relative to popular education programmes. These gains are mostly driven by studies with sizable effects on learning outcomes, although effects have high heterogeneity across settings. Effects appear to persist even in larger scale studies. These results appear to be supported by the very rigorous assessment procedures in both the gold-standard Cochrane Systematic Reviews that have been undertaken. The first Cochrane Systematic Review on this topic was conducted in 2007 and analysed 18 studies that met the strict Cochrane criteria and found increased weight and height-for-age z-scores and modest benefits for math scores and intelligence test scores. These results were influential in catalysing the increasing global roll out of school meals programmes over the first decade of the second millennium. The 2024 Cochrane Systematic Review has added to the depth and breadth of this analysis by increasing the number of admissible studies to 38 and the results to date provide further support for the 2007 observations.

The Impact & Evidence Community of Practice of the Research Consortium; additional sources: [1-3]

2. Recent reviews show the impact of cash transfers and school food as social safety net programmes, and suggest that both are effective and that neither is universally superior to meet the needs of vulnerable school-age children.

School meals and cash transfers have long been the foundations of social protection programmes aimed at schoolchildren and adolescents. Both cash transfers and school meals aim to promote school participation while providing a safety net, but they do so in different ways. Cash transfers offer families direct financial support, while school meals provide in-kind assistance, ensuring that children receive at least one nutritious meal per day at school. In the last decade, both cash transfers and school meals have grown in global importance: cash transfers have become the default social assistance instrument for low-income countries, while school meals programmes have emerged as the world's most extensive safety net and now serve about 41% of the world's primary school children. The two programmes are often implemented together: for example, Brazil's social reforms in the 2000s simultaneously introduced both the celebrated *Bolsa Familia* cash transfer programme and what is still the world's second-largest universal, free school meals programme. Recent reviews of these two approaches show that neither is universally superior, as the relative effectiveness of cash transfers and food-based interventions like school meals is highly context-specific. In some cases, cash may offer greater flexibility and empowerment for families, while in others, food provision may be more effective in directly addressing hunger and nutritional deficiencies. Considering the complementary programmatic and policy strengths of each approach will be necessary when determining how best to achieve the goal of reaching the most vulnerable learners in primary and secondary schools in low- and lower-middle-income countries.

The Research Consortium Secretariat; additional sources: [4-5]

3. School meals represent good value-for-money and, in our studies in Africa, are cost-beneficial in every region and sub-region where national analyses have been conducted.

School meals deliver a wide array of multisectoral benefits, across at least the four sectors of: (1) education, via increasing enrolment, attendance and retention of learners in schools; (2) health and nutrition, via improving the nutritional status of learners and preventing certain diseases (e.g. anemia) ; (3) social protection, via providing a significant value transfer to households of the beneficiaries, through free or subsidized meals; and (4) local agricultural economy, via initiating and establishing stable markets for local smallholder farmers. They provide an integrated approach to improving outcomes in all of these areas, even if they are not necessarily the most efficient tool for any single domain on its own. By serving multiple purposes, school meals become an attractive policy choice, especially in resource-constrained environments where governments seek to maximize the impact of public programmes. Preliminary findings from eight countries in sub-Saharan Africa show that school meals programmes are cost-beneficial in every subregion of all eight countries, with respect to the gains obtained in the education and health and nutrition sectors. For every \$1 invested in school feeding, benefits between \$1 and \$20 can be expected depending on the specific features of the national school meals programmes and on the local socioeconomic, educational and epidemiologic characteristics of each country. In some locations, these gains are higher for young girls than for young boys. School meals can bring large equity and redistribution benefits within countries to those most in need. Indeed, the value transfer (per school meal beneficiary) to households can be up to 10-20% of annual household food expenditures among the poorest.

The Analytics & Metrics Community of Practice of the Research Consortium; additional sources: [6]

4. Analysis of public policies in fifteen countries across income thresholds identifies common approaches that have helped ensure equitable coverage.

The "Good Examples" Community of Practice aims to support national teams to draft case studies on national school meal programmes in all School Meals Coalition member states. Ultimately, a comparative analysis of all national programmes will help identify common challenges and their solutions. Case studies are currently underway in 48 countries. Analysis of the 15 studies published to date spanning four continents has highlighted common good practices, including: (i) Utilizing nutritional standards to improve the quality of and diversity of school meals to support wellbeing; (ii) Incorporating cultural practices within school menus as a mechanism to promote local purchase and national food sovereignty; (iii) Involving students, parents, the community, and local authorities in the design and implementation of school meals programmes to foster ownership of the national programme; (iv) Adopting a whole-school approach that goes beyond the provision of quality meals to also integrate complementary nutrition and health education to foster health promoting behaviours over the long-term; (v) In settings where school meals are not yet universally offered, some countries implement targeted budgeting for vulnerable children, with the objective of reducing poverty (for example, in Ethiopia and Benin); (vi) When numerous stakeholders (including international bodies) are involved in programme implementation, the creation of a national agency is key to coordinate efforts and ensure they adhere to public policies on nutritional standards and local sourcing by giving them agreements; and (vii) having emergency measures in place helps to ensure the continuity and resilience of school meals programmes, as has been done in the Ukraine.

The Good Examples Community of Practice of the Research Consortium; additional sources: [7-19]
This result was the "3rd Priority" for research identified in the Consortium's 2023 Research Statement.

5. Nutrition is important for the wellbeing of children and adolescents across the 'first 8,000 days'.

Recent research on the "first 8,000 days" of life, which spans the development period from conception to the beginning of adulthood, underscores the critical importance of nutrition in shaping lifelong health outcomes. During this period, optimal nutrition plays a pivotal role in physical growth, behavioral and cognitive development, and the prevention of chronic and infectious diseases. Research has emphasized the importance of maternal nutrition during pregnancy in influencing growth and long-term health, with poor maternal nutrition linked to adverse outcomes such as low birth weight and stunted growth, which can persist into adulthood. Additionally, early childhood nutrition, particularly during the first 1,000 days of life (from conception to two years of age), has been highlighted as crucial for brain development and immune system function. Studies have demonstrated that adequate intake of key nutrients during this period is essential for neurodevelopment and reducing the risk of cognitive impairments later in life. Nutrition during middle childhood and adolescence, the "next 7,000 days", is increasingly recognized for its potential role in supporting catch-up growth during periods of rapid growth that occur between ages 5-9 years and at puberty, the brain rewiring that occurs throughout this period and is most intense in later adolescence and, when combined with appropriate education, can help the establishment of lifelong healthy behaviours including dietary preferences. Good nutrition during these critical periods of development covering the next 7,000 days will help set the stage for long-term health including reduced risk for both non-communicable and infectious diseases, improved cognitive and work performance, improved reproductive health, and life expectancy. Altogether, recent research continues to highlight the foundational role that nutrition plays throughout the 'first 8,000 days' in promoting long-term health, emphasizing the need for comprehensive strategies to ensure adequate nutrition throughout this development phase. The world currently invests 2.8 trillion USD annually in education during the next 7,000 days, yet estimates suggest that current investment in well-being during this phase represent less than 2% of the amount invested in education.

The Nutrition Community of Practice of the Research Consortium; additional sources: [20]

This result was the 2nd priority identified for further research in the Consortium's 2023 Research Statement.

New Evidence on Effective School Meals Policies

- 1. Prolonged school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic had strong negative social, educational and economic consequences, and has highlighted the value of school-based programmes for the well-being of children and young people.**

The consequences of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic were recently the subject of the World Bank Group's influential analyses to identify Disease Control Priorities. The decision to close schools at the onset of the pandemic reflected public health experience with managing influenza transmission. This precedent in turn led countries worldwide to close schools as a precautionary measure, even before direct evidence of the epidemiological role of children and adolescents in the transmission of COVID-19 was understood. The emerging evidence for public health impact of these decisions remains mixed, however, there is generally low confidence in the evidence that closing schools, or preventative actions in schools which were not closed, had meaningful consequences for the transmission of COVID-19 for either the primary school population or the general population. In contrast, global evidence shows considerable consequences for human capital formation and wellbeing of learners; school closures in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a 9% reduction in learning achievement in standardized tests, which, over time, are estimated to negatively affect lifetime earnings by 6%. The closures had additional unforeseen societal consequences, including increased rates of early marriage and early pregnancy for school-age girls, of inappropriate labour for all school-age children, and substantial and often irreversible drop-out from school. The counterfactual experience of closing

schools, and removing most forms of support to schoolchildren and adolescents, has spurred national governments to re-establish and strengthen investments in school-based services. National school meals programmes in particular have proven to be important in elevating school participation and attendance, especially important given that chronic absenteeism has gone up after the pandemic-driven closures. Lessons learned from this pandemic can shape government actions in schools in subsequent pandemics, which will again need to weigh the trade-offs between protecting public health and the integrity of the school system. The creation of the School Meals Coalition is highlighted as a particularly positive action.

Research Consortium Secretariat; additional sources: [21]

2. The World Bank Group's Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) has become an institutionalized policy instrument in low- and lower-middle-income countries.

Since its introduction in 2011, at least 59 countries have used these tools 81 times to self-evaluate their national policies for school meals and complementary programs against international benchmarks and to help identify actionable priorities to strengthen national programmes. Globally the SABER School Feeding tool has been adopted by 68% of the world's low-income countries and 54% of lower-middle-income countries. SABER is unique in that this is a government-led, government-completed process. An analysis of SABER surveys suggests that countries with longer established national school meals frameworks tend also to be more advanced in other policy areas, and that the weakest policy areas relate to programme design, implementation and fiscal space. Given the complementarities between school meals and other school-based health interventions, the World Bank and WFP have combined key elements of the SABER School Feeding and SABER School Health framework into a single, comprehensive policy tool. 'Healthy-SABER' is envisaged to further engage multisectoral actors in the design of effective and holistic school health policies and clarify key areas for further investment, and is currently being rolled out by governments across Africa, with support from the Human Development Sectors of the World Bank Group and WFP.

Research Consortium Secretariat; additional sources: [22]

This result was the 4th priority identified for further research in the Consortium's 2023 Research Statement.

3. National governments have demonstrated a commitment to adopting planet-friendly school meals policies, and modelling data estimates that implementing these commitments will have significant positive impacts on human and planetary health.

The white paper on *School Meals and Food Systems: Rethinking the consequences for climate, environment, biodiversity and food sovereignty*, was presented on the main stage at COP 28 in Dubai in December 2023. This paper was co-written in collaboration with more than 160 authors from 87 global organizations and explores how school meals programmes can help deliver improved health, environmental, climate and economic outcomes. Governments typically hold the policy levers for their national school meals programmes. These programmes represent the majority (around 70%) of all publicly managed food systems, and globally reach 418 million children daily. They therefore provide a unique opportunity for government policy to create significant change in food practices, at scale. The White Paper identified priority areas relating to food use that could be addressed by policy levers immediately available to national programmes: planet-friendly menu changes, clean and energy efficient cooking solutions, reduction of food waste, holistic food education, and procurement policies that create demand for ecological and fair agricultural production. Modelling data estimate that adopting

planet-friendly menus and reducing food waste, could reduce mortality from dietary risks by 10-20%, with a 50-60% reduction in environmental impacts (including GHG emissions, land use, freshwater use and eutrophication), and lift 120 million people out of undernourishment. In addition, it is estimated that these effects can be carried into adulthood, potentially resulting in a 12-20% reduction in deaths (or 3 million fewer deaths). The findings in this report have subsequently been widely endorsed in high impact scientific journals, and are being explored and tracked in practice by several countries, including Kenya, Norway, Rwanda and Uganda. A specific need has been identified to create a toolkit that can be used by governments to assess the benefits and costs of modifying their national programmes.

The Diet & Food Systems Community of Practice of the Research Consortium; additional sources: [23]
This result addresses the 1st priority identified for further research in the Consortium's 2023 Research Statement.

4. Procurement practices have the potential to influence farming practices, including driving a renewed focus on regenerative agriculture.

The planet-friendly White Paper identified the role of procurement in contributing to changes in farming practices over the long run. However, the follow-up research suggests that school meals can contribute to wider food system transformation through multiple pathways and processes, besides the more traditionally understood pathway of output support for food producers. Through its various operational components such as menu development and school gardens, it provides a unique platform for programme and policy engagement across public health, conservation and food production. Very importantly, given the localized nature of most school meals programmes food system transformation catalysed through school meal programmes is particularly context sensitive and community driven. There are now five country-specific studies across sub-Saharan Africa which are exploring these issues including developing appropriate interdisciplinary research methods to capture the diverse element of interactions between school meals programmes and menus and the broader-food system. Some key focus areas of the current research include the role of school meals in promoting climate smart foods, improving gender equity, access to financial resources and supporting agrobiodiversity. The research also explores how school meal programmes can help align policies around issues such as farmer sharing of planting material and adoption of biofortified foods, in the context of traditional farming practices and food sovereignty. A specific research strategy is also being developed to understand how this transformation can also influence agricultural methods, such as promoting regenerative agriculture, and what are the associated drivers, constraints and risks.

The Diet & Food Systems Community of Practice of the Research Consortium; additional sources: [23]
This result addresses the 1st priority identified for further research in the Consortium's 2023 Research Statement.

Priority Actions Going Forward to Support the School Meals Coalition Member States

Based on the evidence accumulated over three years of analysis with the 103 member states of the School Meals Coalition, and in addition to the ongoing research programmes of the Communities of Practice and insights from our global Academy, the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition has prioritized the following five research topics for the coming year:

- 1. Support government action to enhance the climate and environmental sustainability of national school meals programmes.** Work with governments to create an open access “sustainability toolkit” of policy and programmatic tools to assist countries with the design or adaptation of school meal programmes that optimize co-benefits for people and the planet. These tools would aim to strengthen the ability of governments to predict the health and

resilience outcome of different policy choices, and contribute to evidence-based decisions that are reflective of the local context.

2. **Support the roll-out of the School Meals Coalition's Data and Monitoring Initiative to improve the availability of data on school meals programmes.** Effort in this area will include the creation and data-population of a global database for school meals and school health, and analyses to better identify actionable responses to challenges to equity, coverage and programme quality.
3. **Support the roll-out of the pilot Healthy SABER tool as a joint action with WFP and the World Bank.** The Consortium will build on its role of analyzing the effectiveness of the various tools since their launch in 2011 to also include a focus on institutionalizing the role of Healthy-SABER as a policy monitoring tool and identifying a permanent, open-access policy archive.
4. **Explore the options for professionalizing training in school meals programming.** This will include scoping the current availability of formal and informal, on-site and distance training opportunities for school food professionals.
5. **Share policy information on the value-for-money of school meals programmes.** There is now a substantial and growing portfolio of evidence on the multisectoral returns from school meals programmes, and it is now possible to distill the implications of these findings for policy-makers, with a focus on the returns to nutrition/health, education, social protection and agriculture. There is also a need to undertake two types of systematic reviews: one of programme costs, to update the current most widely cited dataset which pre-dates the 2008 Financial Crisis; and the second of the reported costs, effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness of school meals and school health programmes. Finally, there is much to be learnt from the well documented performance of the largest and most mature school meals programmes across the globe, including the programmes in Brazil, Finland, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, South Africa and Sweden. The aim is to provide government decision makers with authoritative data on the scale of return from investing in school meals programmes, by providing quantitative estimates to support policy decisions.

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