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# What Works: School Meals Programs

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There is a significant—and growing—body of evidence that well-designed and effectively delivered school meal programs are a cost-effective and scalable means to build human capital, improve learning outcomes, and improve health and nutrition.<sup>1</sup> Despite setbacks during the pandemic, school meals programs have remained one of the largest social safety nets in the world, with 418 million children now benefiting from programs, an increase of 30 million from the level prior to 2020.<sup>2</sup> Policymakers are eager to utilize this lever for change, as evidenced by 76 national governments who have joined the **School Meals Coalition** since its creation in 2021.

### Evidence of the impact of school meals on education outcomes

Long-term learning outcomes from school feeding interventions vary by objective, national context (particularly by income level), such as those of gender parity or social protection. The evidence body behind learning outcomes from school meals programs is still developing, as many learning gains need time to accumulate, and most evaluations do not cover a period long enough to truly gauge specific learning outcomes.<sup>3</sup> However, evidence shows that the benefits of school meals are strongest for **nutrition and enrollment**.<sup>4</sup> The impacts of school meals are likely to be greatest where the needs are most extreme, such as in low-income countries, where coverage is limited and security indicators are weaker.<sup>5</sup> A synthesis of evaluations from 20 low-income countries concluded that school feeding programs have strong positive effects on primary school enrollments, particularly in areas of high food insecurity.<sup>6</sup> Another synthesis documents statistically significant impacts on school attendance among school meals recipients relative to control groups.<sup>7</sup> One meta-analysis of school meals programs across 32 sub-Saharan African countries found that school meals, combined with take-home rations (THRs), increased the enrollment of girls by 12 percent.<sup>8</sup> The direct impacts—improved enrollment, participation and attendance, nutrition and cognition, hunger reduction, gender parity, and security for vulnerable populations—are supported by decades of research<sup>9</sup> showing that the condition of children is one of the most powerful determinants of learning outcomes. Healthy and well-nourished schoolchildren learn better, have a greater opportunity to thrive and fulfill their potential as adults, and increase their earning potential.<sup>10</sup>

According to a 2018 review of the available evidence comparing the relative impacts of 15 types of interventions, school feeding interventions overall have a moderate effect on learning outcomes in low- and middle-income countries, but feeding interventions have a significant effect in sub-Saharan African countries. Only one intervention (structured pedagogy) generated higher returns for learning in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>11</sup> An evaluation of India's Midday Meals scheme found a positive effect on learning achievement: children with up to five years of primary school exposure improved their test scores by approximately 10-20<sup>12</sup> percent, and children of mothers who participated in the scheme were less likely to drop out of school, marry early, and have children with stunted growth rates.<sup>13</sup> In Ghana, a large-scale school feeding program was evaluated with a randomized controlled trial. After two years, both math and literacy scores rose for all children on average, but the largest impacts were for girls and children living in poverty.<sup>14</sup> Randomized trials covering the impact of school feeding programs on math scores among girls in camps for displaced populations in Uganda and in Jamaican primary schools found positive results.<sup>15</sup> Considered from a gender parity lens, girls can benefit substantially from these

programs.<sup>16</sup> Considered from a social protection intervention lens, school feeding improves learning outcomes over cash transfers.<sup>17</sup>

### **Evidence of a broader return on investment across multiple sectors**

Overall, school meals programs are cost-effective and cost-beneficial because of the returns from substantial benefits across at least four different sectors: agriculture, education, health and nutrition, and social protection. Through homegrown school feeding programs, there are opportunities to create markets for farmers, with potential benefits for employment, income, and the development of sustainable food systems. Initial cost–benefit analyses carried out across 18 countries by WFP, which assessed both WFP and national school feeding programs, found that every US dollar invested in school meals programs would yield an economic return of \$US3–10 in improved health, education, and productivity.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, preliminary results of a cost–benefit desk analysis in 14 low- and middle-income countries pointed to an economic return of up to \$9 for every \$1 invested.<sup>19</sup> This represents a substantial return on investment, comparable in magnitude to several of the best-buy intersectoral interventions highlighted by seminal cost–benefit analyses. Lastly, perhaps most importantly, the distributional and equity impacts of those school feeding programs are likely to be very progressive, disproportionately benefiting those most in need.<sup>20</sup> To the extent that school-based food transfers are predictable, they offer “potential insurance and resilience in the face of external shocks, such as food price inflation, crop losses, or health episodes.”<sup>21</sup>

### **What is needed to scale school meals.**

The lack of **financing** remains a key issue for policymakers looking to scale school meals programs. Worsening fiscal constraints are limiting governments’ capacity to increase investments, and aid donors and multilateral development banks (MDBs) have underinvested in school meals programs. Apart from the United States, which provides 90 percent of international aid for school meals, no major donor has prioritized investment in school meals.<sup>22</sup> International flows to cross-sectoral programs are often poorly coordinated, reported, and monitored in the current aid system.<sup>23</sup>

Countries like Bolivia, Guatemala, and Senegal have shown the way forward in terms of options to strengthen and scale financing. These options include using natural resource and tax revenue, SDG bonds, debt swaps, and earmarked taxes, as well as innovative financing mechanisms, such as guarantee-based instruments. Greater impact can also be achieved through greater efficiency and equity in school meals spending. Cross-sectoral planning and credible budgeting for school feeding are key to facilitating a sustainable partnership between governments and external funders and helping countries transition toward self-reliance.

*This note has been prepared by the **Sustainable Finance Initiative (SFI)** of the **School Meals Coalition**, a partnership between governments, UN agencies, nongovernment organizations, and research institutions aimed at expanding the reach and strengthening the quality of school feeding programs.*

*For more information on the SFI, please contact Katherine Kullman, Manager of School Health and Nutrition, Education Commission at [kkullman@educationcommission.org](mailto:kkullman@educationcommission.org).*

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