Why are Effective School Health and School Feeding Programs Important?

Healthy children are better able than sick or malnourished children to go to school and learn. Developed and developing countries are increasingly concerned about how children’s health impacts their school attendance, learning, and development. For this reason, school health and school feeding policies and programs are critical components of an effective education system. School health refers to school-based interventions that have health and education outcomes, while school feeding refers to interventions involving the supply of food to school-aged children. School feeding is a part of school health, but because of the importance of the resources in school feeding, it is often treated separately (See Figure 1). The interest in school health and school feeding has been sparked by a series of factors:

- **Better health improves school attendance.** Common health problems can reduce children’s participation in school. Each year, between 200 million and 500 million school days are lost due to poor child health in low-income countries around the world. In some African countries, malaria has been the source of more than 50 percent of preventable school absenteeism (Brooker, 2009). Treating children’s health problems can improve education outcomes, as seen in Kenya where children who received treatment for worm infections began attending school more frequently (Miguel and Kramer, 2004). In addition, health interventions such as treating malaria have been shown to reduce the gender gap in enrollment (Jukes et al., 2006). Various studies point to the fact that school feeding programs can also increase school attendance (Ahmed, 2004; Gelli, Meir, and Espejo, 2007; Jacoby, Cueto, and Pollitt, 1996; Powell et al., 1998; Kristjansson et al., 2007).

- **Better health improves cognitive development and educational achievement.** Children who suffer from poor health and nutrition often face learning difficulties. Across developing countries, there are 66 million children who go to school hungry, 169 million children who are infected with worms, and 300 million children with iron-deficiency anemia. All these health problems can reduce a child’s IQ by several points. School feeding has improved students’ cognition and educational attainment by attracting and retaining children, especially girls, as well as reducing hunger so children can concentrate (Whaley et al., 2003; Kristjansson et al., 2007; Jukes et al., 2008; Tan, Lane, and Lassibille, 1999; Ahmed, 2004; Adelman et al., 2008).

- **School health and school feeding benefit the most disadvantaged groups.** Studies have shown that the poorest and most vulnerable children can benefit significantly from school health and feeding interventions. Diseases that affect children and their education are most prevalent in poor countries, especially among the poorest communities within those countries. These conditions of poor health and nutrition have the biggest negative educational impact on the poor, so health interventions that are pro-poor can reduce educational inequalities. Thus, policies and programs targeting children who suffer from...
several conditions of ill health can help disadvantaged groups improve their educational achievement.

Although health interventions can improve cognitive development, increase school attendance, and minimize educational inequalities, the quality of education is crucial to reducing the learning and achievement gap among children. Thus, stakeholders from the health, education, agriculture, and other sectors should collaborate to design and deliver effective policies and programs.

**Key Policy Goals Related to School Health**

The World Bank’s Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) is an initiative to collect and analyze information on government policies in order to improve education systems. Based on a review of the available evidence, the SABER – School Health and School Feeding program identified four school health policy goals with corresponding policy levers to highlight best practices and key challenges to inform policy decisions (see Figure 2). These goals were selected based on the initiative known as the FRESH (Focusing Resources on Effective School Health) framework that was developed in partnership with the global community to provide a set of unifying principles to guide school health policies and programs globally. The four goals are:

1. **Health-related school policies** allow governments to demonstrate a commitment to school health programming and provide a basis for monitoring and evaluation, promoting accountability.

2. **Safe, supportive school environments** include adequate water and sanitation facilities and a healthy psychosocial environment to combat harmful behaviors, such as smoking and alcohol abuse.

3. **School-based health and nutrition services** include screening and referral for health problems, as well as treatments for parasitic infections and micronutrient supplementation.

4. **Skills-based health education** focuses on the development of knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills to positively impact individuals’ health behaviors.

**Limitations to Effective School Health and Feeding Policies**

Despite the growing demand for guidance, achieving effective school health and school feeding policies in a given education system is limited by several factors.

- Evidence of the impact of common ailments on education and cost-benefits analyses of school health and feeding programs are insufficient.
- Multi-sectoral cooperation on school health and school feeding policies and programs is unsatisfactory.
- Institutional capacity—resources, staff, infrastructure, and knowledge—is inadequate.
- National quality, safety, and nutrition standards are not included in official policies, which may reflect a lack of political will or commitment.
- Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are often not used.

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**Figure 1: Relationship Between School Health and School Feeding**

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**Figure 2: School Health Policy Goals and Levers**
Key Policy Goals Related to School Feeding

School feeding is an important component of school-based health and nutrition services. Based on a review of the available evidence, the World Bank’s SABER – School Health and School Feeding program identified five school feeding policy goals with corresponding policy levers to highlight best practices and key challenges to inform policy decisions (see Figure 3). The five policy goals for school feeding are:

1. **A national policy framework** provides a strong foundation for program implementation. A policy basis for a school feeding program strengthens its potential for long-term sustainability and effective implementation. In a majority of countries that are implementing national school feeding programs, national policy frameworks include school feeding (Bundy et al., 2009; WFP, 2012). Developing countries often mention school feeding in their poverty reduction strategies or in sectoral policies.

2. **Financial capacity** and stable funding for school feeding is a prerequisite for the program’s sustainability. Cash contributions, food aid, and government in-kind contributions are used in many countries where external partners or donors support school feeding.

3. **Institutional capacity and coordination** through a government institution mandated and accountable for school feeding implementation ensures better execution. The institution needs adequate resources, managerial skills, staff, knowledge, and technology at the central and subnational levels. Multiple sectors should cooperate to implement a national school feeding program, which can include the education, health, and agriculture sectors.

4. **Design and implementation** of school feeding programs should be based on a country’s context. A situation assessment is a useful tool that can help countries identify the problems, objectives, and expected outcomes of a school feeding program that is context-specific. This ensures that the program targets the correct beneficiaries and chooses the right modalities of food delivery as well as an adequate food basket. Complementary actions such as food fortification and deworming can be important components of a school feeding program. It is also important to have a monitoring and evaluation plan for school feeding that is integrated into a national monitoring or information management system.

5. **Community roles** ensure school feeding programs address community needs, are locally owned, and incorporate parental or community contributions, which reach beyond schools. These programs are usually the strongest and more likely to transition from a donor-funded program to a government-funded one.

**Figure 3: School Feeding Policy Goals and Levers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLICY GOALS:</th>
<th>POLICY LEVERS:</th>
<th>OUTCOMES:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy Frameworks</td>
<td>Overarching policies for school feeding in alignment with national level policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Capacity</td>
<td>Governance of the national school feeding program through stable funding and budgeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Capacity and Coordination</td>
<td>School feeding inter-sectoral coordination and strong partnerships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design and Implementation</td>
<td>Quality assurance of programming, targeting, modalities, and a needs-based and cost-effective procurement design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Roles-Reaching Beyond Schools</td>
<td>Strong community participation, accountability, and ownership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Trade-offs in Developing School Health and School Feeding Programs**

Successful education systems achieve the school health and school feeding policy goals in different ways, as there is no single set of policy options that will be relevant to all countries. The potential trade-offs or caveats when developing a school health or school feeding policy and program are:

- **Best practices vs. context-specific policies**: While governments can use the school health and school feeding policy goals as best practices, governments should keep their policies and programs context-specific. The policy goals outlined by the SABER—School Health and School Feeding program are components that will provide a solid foundation for pro-poor interventions, but they are not the only important elements of an effective school health or school feeding program.

- **Public vs. private interventions**: Extensive coverage is critical to the effectiveness of school health and school feeding programs. Analysis suggests that public
sector interventions can most easily lead to universal coverage. However, private sector approaches can also be sustainable and effective.

- **School system vs. health care system:** Schools can be a cost-effective platform for the delivery of health interventions. However, the school system cannot replace the health system. Rather, the school system can be a complement to the traditional health care delivery system in order to increase coverage to reach disadvantaged children.

- **School health interventions vs. educational interventions:** Evidence shows that school health and school feeding interventions can contribute to children’s educational achievement and attainment levels. These health programs should be viewed alongside traditional interventions, such as the abolition of school fees, conditional cash transfers, and subsidies as options to increase participation in the education system.

- **Delivery of health services vs. delivery of education:** The use of schools as a health delivery platform should not detract from their primary role of teaching. For example, school gardens should be used to raise interest in local agriculture rather than for significant crop production. School health and school feeding programs should thus be mainstreamed within a systematic education sector plan so that both systems receive adequate resources.

References


Kristjansson et al. 2007. “School Feeding for Improving the Physical and Psychosocial Health of Disadvantaged Elementary School Children.” *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 1.


