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Editorial

Should governments feed all school children?



Children and young people today face significant challenges including poverty, declining mental health, disruption to education, economic uncertainty and increasing health inequities. All of these issues require action – one thing we can get right is school food.

In many countries there is significant focus on the health of aging populations and what that means for health services [1,2]. Whilst this is an important demographic shift which requires healthcare planning, it also highlights the importance of investing in the health and capability of children and adolescents to ensure societies thrive, with healthy and prosperous young people who can support older generations. Coherent policies that combat all these challenges are essential.

Nutrition is a key ingredient for healthy lives from conception onwards. From the benefits of breastfeeding to nutritious food during critical periods of development, food enables children to thrive and contributes to educational attainment and economic prospects at individual and population levels [3,4]. Additionally, food has a social and cultural significance that brings people together, fostering inclusion and social connections.

There are significant inequities in access to healthy food within and across countries. This results in both malnutrition and an increasing global burden of obesity and long-term health conditions. Efforts to address these issues most commonly focus on childhood. This is the most impactful and cost-effective period to concentrate population health interventions [5,6] and ensuring children are nourished and well-fed is widely supported – politically and culturally – in many nations.

The amount of time children spend in education settings provides an opportunity to influence health, health behaviours and health literacy. This includes health education, delivery of healthcare and provision and promotion of healthy food. Nutritious school meals enable learning and present an opportunity to reduce socioeconomic inequities in diet – one of the primary drivers of inequities in health [7]. Countries provide school meals in different ways [8]. In some nations, such as Finland, Sweden and Estonia, providing food at school is the norm and considered no differently than supplying books or pens. In other countries, such as Japan, school meals are mandatory and subsidised for some families. Studies examining the impact of free school meals have found benefits for children's dietary quality, food security and academic performance [9,10]. As a result of the growing evidence for the positive health and educational implications of universal school meals, there are calls to action to increase access to school meals and improve their nutritional quality and sustainability [11–14].

For example, in the United Kingdom (UK), a group of health and public health organisations have collaborated to review the evidence for free school meals, a national school breakfast programme, and a voucher scheme for food in early childhood [15]. Their report makes a range of

recommendations for improvement and expansion of these initiatives, including extending the provision of free school meals to all school-age children in the UK.

Many of the public health challenges we face require complex interventions in response, but sometimes it is about trying to get the basics right. Access to healthy food is a human right [16] and provides the foundations for a healthy and prosperous life. Countries can improve the health and life chances of children and adolescents by introducing policy on universal school meals which meet nutritional requirements so that all children can make the most of educational opportunities at a key point in their life course. This is an investment in future economic prosperity and an investment in cultural identity: “here we value all children”. Whilst this type of slogan may garner support in society, less clear is the most effective way to persuade decision makers. What combination of evidence synthesis, economic evaluation, and call for action is most likely to resonate across all political ideologies? Regardless, the academic, public health and advocacy worlds seem aligned on this – feeding children in schools benefits population health, education and wellbeing throughout life and is a key investment for future economic prosperity.

Declaration of competing interest

MB, JW and AW are co-authors of the report *Health of the Next Generation: Good Food for Children*.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2024.100465>

Available online 18 January 2024

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