

# POLICY BRIEF

## #01



## Tackling inequality through healthy and sustainable school food

### Background

The EU is actively addressing child poverty, nutrition, and inequalities to promote social inclusion. Despite this, 25% of children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion and one in three school-aged children faces obesity or overweight issues. Schools are one of the few places where all children, regardless of their socio-economic, religious, cultural or geographical background, come together. Therefore, schools are a lever for fostering and encouraging healthy, sustainable food choices not only among students but also within their families and the broader school community. Since not every child is introduced to healthy eating habits at home, accessible, healthy school meals and food education at school also contributes

to more equal opportunities. Developing a healthy, sustainable food culture in and around schools is crucial to promote health and wellbeing, sustainable development, equality and climate resilience. Creating an environment that supports and enables healthy eating habits will have life-lasting positive effects on children's health, academic performance, and overall development.

Currently, several EU policies concerning the school food system from a social justice, health, education and agricultural perspective are not well integrated. Therefore, stronger and well-integrated policies are needed to unleash the true potential of healthy, sustainable school food.

**It's time for  
a new menu** →

## Policy recommendations

### #1 Support EU member states in the provision of at least one healthy and sustainable school meal daily, accessible to all children (0 - 18 years), aligning with the EU San Sebastian Declaration on School Meals and drawing from the principles of the EU Child Guarantee

One of the objectives of the [European Child Guarantee](#)<sup>1</sup> is that children should get at least one healthy meal per school day. However, access to healthy and sustainable school food is not evident in many countries, despite the EU Child Guarantee. For example, in Spain, around one million children living in poverty cannot access school meal aids<sup>2</sup>. Also, countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands are not meeting the target of one school meal per day due to insufficient ambition, and often lack the right infrastructure and facilities in schools to provide meals. School meals should be seen as an investment in the wellbeing of our children and in the future.

**The EU should monitor and support member states in the implementation of the [San Sebastian Declaration](#)<sup>3</sup> with clear guidelines. A helpdesk to oversee and provide support in the implementation of the provision of one healthy and sustainable meal per day would be a welcome addition.**

According to 2022 Eurostat data, 25% of EU children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Romania tops the list with 42% of children at risk, followed by Bulgaria (34%) and Spain (32%). In 2021, child poverty increased in eight countries, notably in Slovakia and France, while 19 countries saw decreases, with significant drops in Luxembourg, Hungary, and Greece. Studies suggest that increased resources for school meals may have contributed to these decreases<sup>4</sup>.

Like adults, children not only consume insufficiently nutritious food but also indulge in unhealthy, processed, high-sugar and high-fat food. According to the WHO, every third child in the European region suffers from being overweight or from obesity, increasing their risk of contracting non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and negatively impacting lifelong well-being<sup>5</sup>. Poor diets are major contributors to disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) in many European countries. Moreover, inadequate nutrition negatively affects children in their ability to focus, concentrate and in their overall academic performance<sup>6</sup>. Hence, prioritising preventive

measures and fostering sustainable eating habits during childhood is crucial, as early interventions are likely to yield long-term benefits and prevent problems in the future.

Recognising the importance of guaranteeing healthy school meals to every child, **SchoolFood4Change** cities and regions aim to address nutritional inequalities, acknowledging that, for some children, the meal provided at school may be their primary or sole source of daily nutrition. The cities of Viimsi and Tallinn (Estonia) and cities of Umeå and Malmö (Sweden) provide universal free school meals to all children. In the city of Lyon (France), extensively subsidized school meals are provided, underscoring the significance of financial support. In addition to providing meals, all SchoolFood4Change cities prioritise the integration of a [Whole School Food Approach](#)<sup>7</sup> (WSFA) in schools - a method to achieve a healthy and sustainable food culture in and around schools. The WSFA integrates educational initiatives on food and eating alongside school meals. The educational components reflect a commitment to not only nourish children physically but also empower them with nutritional knowledge, acknowledging the integral role of education in fostering healthier eating habits in children, their families and in wider communities.

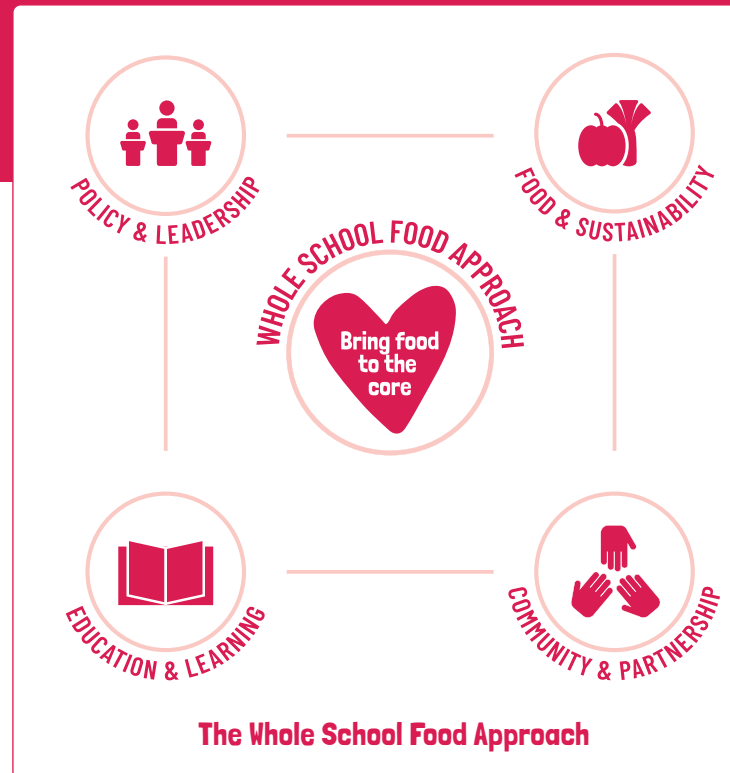


## Policy recommendations

### #2 Provide an enabling framework for the implementation of a Whole School Food Approach (WSFA) in all schools across Europe

A WSFA stems from the Whole School Approach<sup>8</sup> - a comprehensive and coordinated approach to education that involves all aspects of a school's operation, culture, policies, and practices. It recognises that the school environment plays a crucial role in shaping the overall development and well-being of students. This approach could be applied to the theme of healthy and sustainable nutrition, bringing the issue of food in schools to the forefront through a WSFA. The WSFA builds on initiatives such as the Czech [Truly Healthy Schools model](#)<sup>9</sup>, the UK's [Food for Life](#)<sup>10</sup> and the Belgian [GoodFood@School](#) programme.<sup>11</sup> The WSFA is a comprehensive strategy to foster a culture of healthy and sustainable food practices within and beyond schools by considering all levels, stakeholders and factors related to food and its consumption in schools, reflected in **four pillars**:

- 1. Policy and Leadership** is about ensuring the participation of all relevant stakeholders and making healthy and sustainable food an intrinsic part of life at school, teaching, values and strategies.
- 2. Food and Sustainability** focuses on creating safe, appropriate spaces in schools where all children can enjoy a healthy lunch in peace, either offered by the school or brought from home. The food and drinks offered in schools should be tasty, healthy, balanced and (where possible) based on sustainability criteria.
- 3. Education and Learning** about food spans environmental, social and economic aspects. Teaching children theory alongside practical skills empowers them to make informed choices for the wider food and health debate. Providing children with practical real-life activities, such as farm visits, cooking, growing vegetables in school gardens, taste sessions, and food waste audits, instills healthier and more sustainable food habits during crucial learning stages for developing lifelong preferences and social attitudes.



- 4. Community and Partnership** emphasises collaboration with a wider range of actors in the environment surrounding the school, e.g. families, food stores, neighborhood committees, to promote healthy and sustainable food practices.

Successfully implementing a WSFA requires resources and support at various levels. It is important that both a **policy and financial framework**, to support the creation and implementation of the WSFA in schools, is established. Inclusion of the WSFA at the EU policy level is key for ensuring implementation at the broadest scale in Europe, thereby producing a meaningful contribution to a systemic change in our food systems. It is recommended that any policy changes (mandatory or voluntary) from the EU - resulting from the revision of the EU School Scheme or the EU public procurement guidance, for instance - that include changes to the provision of school food, include and explicitly **support food education in schools through a WSFA**. Support for practitioners could be provided by the EU in addition by establishing a network on WSFA and/or a helpdesk. An **incentive system** could exist with start-up grants for local authorities to help schools implement a WSFA and peer-to-peer exchange for schools and local authorities.

## Policy recommendations

### #3 Enhance the integration and alignment of international conventions and EU policies affecting school food, the right to healthy sustainable food and food education, and thereby fostering collaboration and coherence for a common approach

**School food** and the **right to food** touch upon many (EU) policies that currently operate in an unintegrated manner. **Collaboration** across the various departments and directorate-generals of the EU institutions should be strengthened in order to bolster existing and future policies, conventions, frameworks and initiatives. A clear **reference point** overseeing and ensuring these synergies and nexus should be established by the EU institutions. We see synergies in the following policies and initiatives:

- The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#)<sup>12</sup>, particularly Principle 11 on childcare and support for children, along with the **EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child**, underscoring the EU's commitment to protecting and promoting children's rights across policies. The Council Recommendation on the **European Child Guarantee**, a key initiative, aims to break the cycle of disadvantage by ensuring six essential services, including at least one healthy meal daily. During the 2023 Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU, the **San Sebastian Declaration** affirmed a dedication to providing healthy school meals. Ongoing frameworks like the **European Semester** should continue prioritising investments in children within broader macroeconomic and social policies.
- Various EU initiatives, such as the **Farm to Fork Strategy** and a research and innovation policy framework (**Food 2030**), within the **European Green Deal**, aim to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally friendly, particularly by promoting healthy and sustainable diets, including organic products, in schools and public institutions. There is great potential to review the **EU School Scheme** and the **EU Public Procurement Law** towards healthy and sustainable food and to strengthen educational messages about the importance of healthy nutrition, sustainable food production and reducing food waste.

- Various international conventions and treaties, such as the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** and **UN treaty on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** ratified by all EU countries, recognise the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest standard of health, and that, in case of need, countries shall provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly regarding nutrition. Additionally, the UN Committee on the Rights of the child published its [General Comment No.26](#)<sup>13</sup> on 'Children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change', emphasising children's rights to education and healthy nutrition, while protecting the environment and combating climate change. Moreover, the EU and its member states are committed to the **UN Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs), including those on ending poverty, reducing inequalities and ensuring quality education.

Rather than perceiving school meals as mere administrative and financial obligations, we should view these as a chance to implement policies to fight **food insecurity**, **foster social resilience** and at the same time as a lever to improve our current **food system**. A key priority should be to **appoint a reference point** that oversees and connects all listed social, educational, health, environmental and agricultural policies, departments and initiatives, to move towards greater social justice, a smarter social investment model and a greener and healthier Europe.



**MORE VEGGIES,  
LESS CO<sub>2</sub>!**

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## About

**SchoolFood4Change aims to make school meals tasty, enjoyable, educational and healthy for both our children and the planet.**

SchoolFood4Change engages children, young people, parents, school staff and canteen managers - as well as city representatives, policy makers, researchers and experts - to transform schools and school canteens into learning spaces where nutritious, healthy and sustainable school meals are served. We want to set a new menu in schools!

Together, we focus on knowledge sharing, participatory action and educational activities in the participating SchoolFood4Change partner schools, to strengthen young people's understanding of healthy eating and to empower them to be change makers, advocating for sustainable food consumption in their environment.



Dreamstime / Pojoslaw

More information:

**[www.schoolfood4change.eu](http://www.schoolfood4change.eu)**  
**[#SchoolFood4Change](https://twitter.com/SchoolFood4Change)**



## Follow our work! It's time for a new menu!

### #SchoolFood4Change



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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101036763. The sole responsibility for the content lies with the SchoolFood4Change project partners. The content does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Commission. The European Commission is also not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.