

A WHOLE SCHOOL FOOD APPROACH

GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOLS, CITIES & REGIONS

Rikolto Belgium

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CONTEXT

What school-age children and adolescents eat has an impact on both their health and the environment. Unhealthy diets negatively affect pupils' wellbeing and concentration. According to the World Health Organization, about 20% of school-age children in Europe are overweight or obese, with rates rising in many countries. Vulnerable children from low-income or disadvantaged households are more likely to eat unhealthy diet that lacks nutrition, which exacerbates inequalities. In the EU, 33 million people can only buy a proper meal once every two days, a number that risks increasing if food prices continue to rise. Investing in healthy and sustainable diets for young people will allow for significant savings to future public health spending and will contribute to personal and social wellbeing. It would also reflect the goals of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. In that strategy, the European Commission committed to reviewing both the EU school scheme legal framework (placing a greater focus on healthy and sustainable food) and the European Child Guarantee, under which EU Member States set up national implementation plans to guarantee children in need have access to healthy food and at least one healthy meal per school day.

Sustainable food production and consumption are important prerequisites for achieving the environmental and climate objectives that are put forward in the European Green Deal, Farm to Fork Strategy and the EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. According to the European Commission's Group of Chief Scientific Advisors, food production has a profound impact on the environment. It consumes large amounts of natural resources like water and energy and contributes to climate change: 21-37% of greenhouse gas emissions are caused by food production. Producing food also results in the loss of biodiversity – a worrying trend, because biodiversity underpins healthy and nutritious diets, improves rural livelihoods and agricultural productivity, and is a key aspect of our food system and food security.

As part of its Farm to Fork Strategy, the European Commission is promoting sustainable food consumption and the shift to healthy, sustainable diets. The Strategy is central to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. It puts a particular emphasis on the role of cities, regions and public authorities to source sustainable food for schools. The SchoolFood4Change project, which is supported by the Horizon 2020 programme, aims to facilitate a broad shift to sustainable, healthy diets by directly impacting more than 3,000 schools and 600,000 pupils in 12 EU countries.

The Whole School Food Approach (WSFA) framed in this document contributes to this shift. It builds upon the work of existing initiatives, such as the UK Food for Life initiative, Fair Trade school and university Campaigns, Slow Food movements, WWF, the Rikolto Good Food @ School campaign and the WSFA educational programme in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The WSFA is a method to achieve a healthy and sustainable food culture in and around schools. It contributes to community-wide systemic change and positively affects education, school democracy, sustainability, inequalities, communities and health. The WSFA makes societies more resilient – territorially, socially and environmentally.



INFORMATION IN THIS DOCUMENT

This document provides guidelines that schools and local and regional authorities can use to explain the different components of the WSFA in a coherent way. Because it is only a framework, it should be used in combination with tools on how to implement it.

- **PART 1 - Whole School Food Approach framework:** The WSFA is an intervention in schools to promote health and wellbeing, education for sustainable development, sustainability and equality.
- **PART 2 - Implementing a Whole School Food Approach:** To implement the WSFA in a school, all actors in and around the school need to be involved and take on responsibility. This part of the document illustrates how to achieve that, explains how to develop a Whole School Food Policy and provides a step-by-step guide.
- **PART 3 - Role of local and regional authorities:** Local, regional and national authorities can support the implementation of a WSFA in schools through tailored guidance and coaching, and by facilitating joint projects and partnerships with other local actors.
- **PART 4 – The three levels of the WSFA:** Schools that are doing excellent work in terms of school food and food education can go for the next level. Schools that take on the task to work in a structured way on a WSFA, also decide what level they want to reach: bronze, silver, or gold. This way they can showcase their efforts to the wider school community.



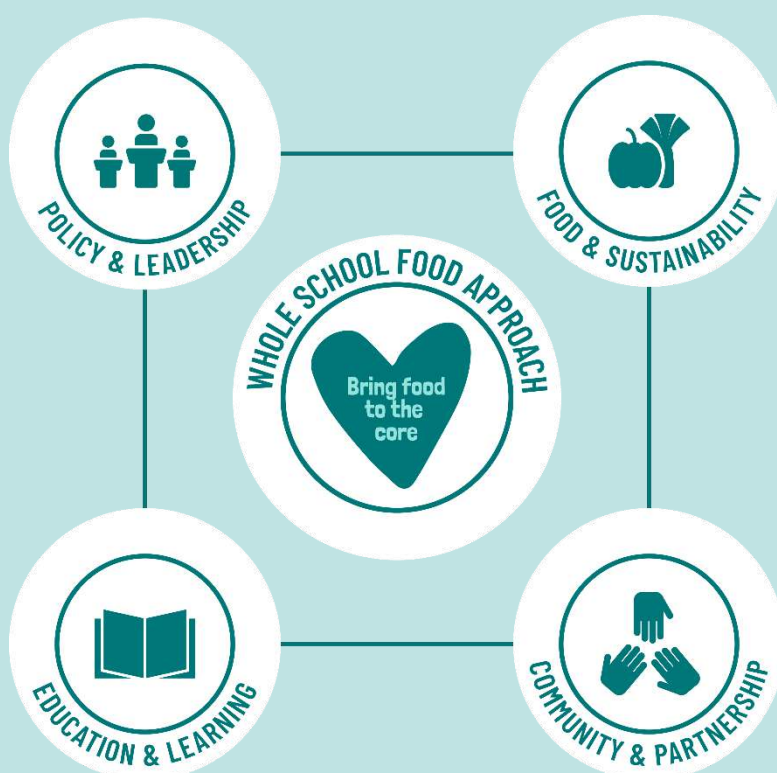
1. WHOLE SCHOOL FOOD APPROACH FRAMEWORK

ABOUT THE WSFA

The “Whole School Food Approach” (WSFA) is a method for developing a healthy and sustainable food culture in and around schools. It is an evidence-based intervention that contributes to community-wide systemic change and positively affects education, sustainability, inequalities, communities and health. The WSFA sees schools – from preschools to secondary schools – as catalysts for sustainable food system change. The method integrates food and education: it addresses the composition of school meals and the functioning of school canteens, includes practical teaching, learning activities and the active participation of pupils and teachers, and involves the wider school community (including caregivers, farmers, businesses and civil society).

FOUR PILLARS

The WSFA consists of four mutually reinforcing pillars: (A) Policy & Leadership, (B) Food & Sustainability, (C) Education & Learning, and (D) Community & Partnership. To successfully implement a WSFA, a school should work on all four pillars, as they are all essential elements of the approach. The pillars contain different building blocks to help a school implement a WSFA. Below, we present an ideal scenario.



1.1 PILLAR A: POLICY & LEADERSHIP

This pillar is about convincing all stakeholders – school staff, pupils, caregivers and the wider school community – to participate and make food an intrinsic part of life at school. It addresses a school’s approach to healthy and sustainable food through plans, policies, activities, values and education. With a broad vision and strategy, schools can maximise their impact.



Empowering pupils to take the lead and inviting them to participate in food decisions and food-related teaching content is not only educational, but also helps make healthy and sustainable food the easy and most natural choice for everyone.

This pillar ensures the WSFA is endorsed by the school’s leadership and enshrined in the school’s vision, mission, values, policies, development plan and curriculum, so it permeates the entire school experience.

1.1.1 WORKING GROUP

Setting up a School Food Working Group is one of the first steps schools should take. The working group will be a driving force that gets the WSFA up and running and sustains the momentum. The group unites teachers, canteen staff, pupils and school leaders. Caregivers, neighbours or others who want to interact with the school on food issues can also participate.

1.1.2 PLANNING, MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

The School Food Working Group reviews what the school is currently doing in terms of food and food education and kick-starts the WSFA process, involving all relevant stakeholders. The resulting action plan guides the implementation of the WSFA. All plans should be followed up and evaluated every year. Recommendations and lessons learnt can then form the basis for next year’s plans.

1.1.3 COMMUNICATION

The success of a WSFA largely depends on the visibility of the actions that are taken. Communication has to spark enthusiasm, generate support and bring additional people

on board who want to help develop the WSFA. Schools can rely on their existing communication channels and cooperate with local media.

1.1.4 PUPILS' PARTICIPATION

A WSFA is most impactful if the children and adolescents involved truly care about food. Appealing to pupils' creativity and positive energy will foster a sense of responsibility and ownership – and make the project much more effective than if only teachers or the school's leaders had taken action. Involving pupils in school food decisions paves the way for a sustainable shift in eating habits. It also boosts pupils' confidence and leadership skills, turning them into change makers and conscious consumers. Pupils should be empowered, with efforts also involving the wider community beyond the school gates.

1.2 PILLAR B: FOOD & SUSTAINABILITY

School food is not just a commercial activity, a break from classes or a way to fill hungry stomachs: it is part of a school's educational mission. Serving healthy and sustainable school food is an excellent foundation to work towards the project's broader goals (like fostering a positive food culture in school).

It is also a good opportunity to introduce pupils to different kinds of food and spark their enthusiasm.



This second pillar is about turning a school's dining area into a learning environment (regardless of whether or not the school serves hot meals). By meeting high food standards, a school can reassure pupils, caregivers and the wider community that it serves sustainably sourced, traceable and nutritious food. Schools should make healthy and sustainable eating the norm, with staff setting a good example.

1.2.1 ATTRACTIVE DINING AREA

An attractive school dining area piques pupils' interest and makes them eager to learn. The way a school canteen looks, whether it is a pleasant environment, how food is positioned and what information it comes with all influence the choices pupils make. Empowering pupils and involving them in the design of their school's canteen contributes to healthy and sustainable food choices.

1.2.2 SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC FOOD PROCUREMENT

Public food procurement is the process of public authorities purchasing food and catering services. It has a major impact on what and how pupils eat and drink. When tender contracts include sustainability criteria (like organic, Fairtrade or seasonal), more nutritious, balanced and sustainable food and drinks are consumed in schools.

1.2.3 HEALTHY LUNCH BOXES AND SNACKS

During the school day, there are many occasions for eating and snacking. During breaks, pupils can turn to vending machines or kiosks; they eat lunch in the school canteen; and they might take food from home on special occasions, like birthdays or excursions. It is up to the school and pupils' caregivers to encourage healthy breakfasts, snacks and lunches, making the school as healthy an environment as possible. Schools should also always ensure free drinking water is available.

1.2.4 FOOD SECURITY

A healthy meal is crucial for children to get through the day. Learning, playing and concentrating are impossible on an empty stomach. Guaranteeing access to food for all children, especially socially vulnerable children, is very important. Any meals provided should nurture culinary diversity and respect a wide range of dietary needs.

1.2.5 FOOD WASTE

Reducing food waste through meal planning saves food for human consumption, saves money and lowers the environmental impact of food production and consumption. Schools should work with suppliers, dining teams, caregivers and pupils to prevent, reduce and manage food waste.

1.3 PILLAR C: EDUCATION & LEARNING

Teaching children to cook, grow and understand where their food comes from and what effect it has on the environment equips them with the skills and knowledge to make sensible decisions, both now and in the future, about their own health and that of the planet. Learning about healthy eating, animal welfare and sustainable and ethical food not only helps children make informed food



choices, but also helps them understand the wider food and health debate. Food and food system education touches on all three dimensions of sustainable development: ecological, social and economic.

1.3.1 FOOD IN THE CURRICULUM

As a topic, food should be part of the school's curriculum, adapted to pupils' different ages and stages of development. It can be integrated into numerous subjects and the food issues should preferably be addressed in a multidisciplinary way, with several teachers collaborating. The topic could even be addressed during extracurricular events, for example, during a canteen party.

1.3.2 STAFF TRAINING

To integrate food in as many subjects as possible and to apply a WSFA in school, staff – both teachers and canteen staff – should get the right training and information. Theme-specific workshops and targeted educational resources can support teachers, staff and even educators or caregivers who are not necessarily part of the school staff. School dining areas and classrooms can become learning environments, where teachers, canteen staff and other school staff collaborate.

1.3.3 AUTHENTIC LEARNING

Theoretical learning through books and courses should be complemented by practical learning: farm visits, collaboration with local food businesses, growing crops in school, cooking together, etcetera. Hands-on learning increases pupils' understanding of the food system, teaches them new skills and makes them more likely to make healthy and sustainable food a prominent part of their lives. Practical projects can be cross-curricular or cross-class and can even involve actors in the school's environment.

1.4 PILLAR D: COMMUNITY & PARTNERSHIP

The final pillar focuses on cooperation with a wide range of actors in the environment surrounding the school. A WSFA is more impactful when many actors work together, including caregivers, food shops, farms, local associations and neighbourhood committees. Because the principle at the heart of the WSFA is that healthy and sustainable food should be the easiest choice for everyone, no matter who or where they are. The approach is not only about making the right food choices: it is about celebrating good food and food's role in important occasions in many different cultures.



1.4.1 CAREGIVER INVOLVEMENT

Engaging pupils' caregivers and families in the WSFA ensures food becomes a topic at home as well. An open, welcoming food culture can acquaint caregivers with the topic and encourage them to actively promote sustainable and healthy food at home, for example when preparing lunch boxes. Some caregivers might even offer to help out at school.

1.4.2 COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL ACTORS AND COMMUNITIES

Schools don't operate in a vacuum. Sustainable and healthy food is the shared responsibility of many partners, including local associations, communities and businesses:

- A local shop can promote healthy and sustainable food rather than unhealthy snacks.
- The school can buy products from a local farm, with the pupils learning about / participating in the farm's activities.
- The school can take on a local food business' surpluses, which teaches pupils how a food business operates.
- The school can organise exchange events with a local refugee centre, introducing pupils to different culinary traditions.
- The school can work with a local association that is committed to the principles of fair trade, to teach pupils about healthy and sustainable food in relation to the global south.

2 IMPLEMENTING A WHOLE SCHOOL FOOD APPROACH

To implement a WSFA, different actors in and around the school all need to participate, from the school's management and school councils to teachers and pupils, as well as school food services and canteen cooks, pupils' families and the community the school is based in.

2.1 STAKEHOLDER ROLES

Below, we have listed what different stakeholders can do to support a WSFA.

2.1.1 SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AND SCHOOLS COUNCILS

- provide leadership and support to implement a healthy and sustainable food policy in all areas of school operations (e.g. policies, food services, classroom activities, fundraising, projects, special events and sports days).
- integrate related strategies into school plans to improve health and wellbeing
- provide the necessary physical environment, including facilities and equipment that support healthy eating
- inform and encourage the whole school community to be involved in developing, implementing and evaluating school plans, policies, activities and events that promote healthy eating
- encourage healthy eating as the norm and serve as a role model
- encourage all families' equal access to and participation in the school's food culture, regardless of social or cultural background
- ensure teachers are able to plan and work interdisciplinary and collaborate with the local community (scheduling, time for joint meetings, etc.)
- ensure teachers and canteen staff get training and have opportunities to work together

2.1.2 TEACHERS AND STAFF

- include healthy eating and food education in the curriculum, across learning areas and levels
- provide opportunities for pupils to develop and apply knowledge and skills that promote healthy eating (e.g. growing food, budgeting, shopping, cooking and trying out different foods)
- take the lead in promoting health and healthy eating activities in school
- encourage healthy and sustainable eating as the norm and serve as a role model
- develop positive visions for the future and support pupils' active involvement in problem-solving
- cooperate with canteen staff or those present at lunch
- involve pupils in lesson-planning
- open up the classroom and prioritise mutual exchange with the surrounding community

2.1.3 SCHOOL FOOD SERVICES AND CANTEEN COOKS

- provide food and drinks that meet the SchoolFood4Change criteria
- ensure healthy and sustainable food and drinks are always available as the easy/default choice
- trial-serve new and culturally diverse food and drinks, then gather feedback from the school community
- present nutritious food and drinks in attractive and appetising ways (e.g. names of dishes)
- promote menu items via posters, noticeboards, announcements, newsletter articles and the school's website
- work with the teachers and caregivers who help out during lunch

2.1.4 PUPILS

- actively participate in the school's food activities, inside and outside of the classroom
- be a role model for healthy and sustainable eating behaviours and attitudes
- get involved in healthy and sustainable eating at home (e.g. helping with grocery shopping and cooking)

2.1.5 CAREGIVERS AND FAMILIES

- be a role model for healthy and sustainable eating behaviours and attitudes
- involve children in healthy and sustainable eating at home (e.g. budgeting, shopping, cooking, lunchbox preparation)
- provide healthy and sustainable food and drinks at home and in lunchboxes
- assist the school with planning, implementing and evaluating healthy and sustainable food initiatives

2.1.6 (LOCAL) COMMUNITY

- businesses support the school's healthy and sustainable eating activities, like fundraisers, by providing equipment, human resources and prizes (e.g. non-food items, discount vouchers and services)
- businesses collaborate with pupils around food, asking them to voice their opinion and welcoming support
- health professionals, services and organisations strengthen the school's capacity to promote healthy and sustainable eating (e.g. by providing health-related information, advice and support)
- local farmers, food manufacturers and retailers support the school's healthy and sustainable eating messages (e.g. through a school visit or an excursion to a local market or farm)
- local/ (inter)national fair-trade associations help raise pupils' awareness of the food-chain interdependence of the global north and global south, providing information and setting up e.g. webinars with cocoa, coffee or banana farmers
- local and regional authorities can support a WSFA on numerous levels - see part 3 of this document.

2.2 DEVELOPING A WHOLE SCHOOL FOOD POLICY

A Whole School Food Policy is a shared, evolving document for all stakeholders that interact with the school. It expresses a common vision on the ethos, status and role of all aspects of food within the school (including food provision and food education). It publicly demonstrates that the school cares about and contributes to sustainability and the health and wellbeing of pupils, staff and other stakeholders.



A WHOLE SCHOOL FOOD POLICY

- sets out a coordinated approach to the provision of food and drinks, to reflect the WSFA's goal of making good food the easy choice for everyone
- communicates this approach to pupils, staff, caregivers and the wider school community
- improves wellbeing
- ensures equal access and participation for everyone
- ensures the curriculum and the provision of food and drinks in school are in line with each other
- establishes effective partnerships to work towards a common goal
- ensures greater sustainability through planned action by providing resources and staff training to meet its aims
- The Policy brings all aspects of food and drinks and education together in a clear, coherent and consistent way. Those aspects include:
 - the formal curriculum, e.g. subjects, equipment and resources, ingredient provision and staff development
 - education for sustainable development as an approach to food education. This means the school has a holistic approach to food, based on the ecological, social and economic aspects of sustainable development
 - practical intra- and extracurricular activities, e.g. cooking and gardening
 - provision of food and drinks in school, e.g. breakfast clubs, tuck shop, school hydration

- consumption of food and drinks in school, e.g. dining area environment, way of serving, time, pupils bringing food to school from home (including information to caregivers) and commercial food providers
- promotion of food and drink, including advertising and sponsorship
- outings and events, e.g. school festivals
- pastoral care and welfare, e.g. behaviour, free school lunches



2.3 STEP-BY-STEP PLAN FOR A WHOLE SCHOOL FOOD POLICY

A WSF Policy is established through discussion with all stakeholders: pupils, teachers, cooks, school leaders, caregivers, governors and community partners. Together, they review the role and profile of food and drinks in the school – usually through a School Council or School Food Working Group.

Because it helps establish ownership, the process itself is more important than the final policy document. Once a school has established a WSF Policy, it can start implementing targeted, coordinated measures.

1. *Get started*

- *Identify the need for and obstacles to a Policy and the perceived opportunities/benefits for the school*
- *Create a working group consisting of teachers, school management, canteen staff and pupils*
- *Discuss the concept of a WSF Policy with the School Food working Group, school leadership, teachers and municipality representatives*
- *Determine why the school wants a WSF Policy*
- *Establish clear short- and long-term goals, i.e. what the school would like to achieve*
- *Plan for how and when to implement actions, follow up, develop and evaluate these actions*

2. *Review the school's food culture*

- *Appoint someone to oversee this work*
- *Conduct a food culture review: Are there any food- and drinks-related issues in the school? Which food and drinks are provided? How are they consumed? How do the formal curriculum and extra-curricular events treat food and drink? How do the formal curriculum, and extra-curricular events treat food and drink from a holistic perspective. This review will serve as a baseline to monitor progress later on.*
- *Analyse the results of the review. What is going well, what could the school be better at?*
- *Share this information with all stakeholders*
- *Determine the school's needs and priorities*
- *Formulate the Policy's goals with these priorities in mind*
- *Establish criteria for success, a timeline and roles.*

3. Draft the policy

- *Write a preliminary draft, in line with the results of the food culture review and the school's vision*
- *Ask the school's leadership and the School Council / School Food Working Group to review the draft. Welcome constructive feedback*
- *Edit the draft*

4. Modify the draft Policy

- *Analyse any comments received*
- *Modify the draft Policy accordingly*
- *Get the school's governor and senior management to sign off on the Policy*
- *Ratify the final version at a meeting of the School Council / School Food Working Group*
- *Publish the Policy*

5. Implement the Policy

- *Put the Policy into action*
- *Delegate responsibility for each goal to a group member*
- *Let different stakeholders know what is expected from them and cooperate them*
- *Provide the training and resources the Policy mentions*
- *Show the school how the Policy is being implemented*

6. Monitor, evaluate and adapt the Policy

- *Make the Policy a set agenda item for governors and staff*
- *Document any actions taken*
- *Continue to engage all stakeholders*
- *Celebrate and communicate successes*
- *Review strength and weakness*
- *Adapt the Policy (if necessary) once a year has passed, share it with all stakeholders*

3 ROLE OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

WHY LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES SHOULD SUPPORT SCHOOLS

Local and regional authorities such as cities and regions can be catalysts of change and make a real difference for public health, society and the environment. They often play a significant role in education and in promoting sustainable public food procurement policies.

As local and regional authorities operate in close proximity to different stakeholders, they can help implement a WSFA in schools: providing coaching, tailored guidance and networking opportunities to facilitate partnerships with local actors of change.

HOW LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES CAN SUPPORT SCHOOLS

Local and regional authorities are complex institutions. It is not always clear which food initiatives already exist and who is responsible for them – not to city or regional staff, and definitely not to schools looking for support for their WSFA efforts.

To assist schools, local and regional authorities will need to rally political and public support, liaise with different departments, and consider which short-term actions they can initially focus on.

There is rarely a one-size-fits-all approach, but a good first step can be to set up a task force with enthusiastic colleagues from different departments (e.g. food, education, environment/ sustainability). Political leaders and enthusiastic teachers or school directors from the city/region can join the task force as well.

Next, it can be helpful to explore what is already being done in the local level, what expertise and resources the different departments have, and whether any quick wins can be achieved in certain areas to generate support for a WSFA. Initially, it is probably best to focus on a limited number of schools that are already eager and willing to adopt a WSFA.

CONCRETE EXAMPLES OF WAYS TO SUPPORT SCHOOLS

Below, we list examples of ways in which local and regional authorities could support schools, structured according to the four pillars of the WSFA.

3.1 PILLAR A: POLICY & LEADERSHIP

- Make budget available for schools working towards a WSFA
- Get School Food Working Groups up and running in different schools, e.g. by organising an info evening, helping them draw up an action plan (providing examples, templates and a facilitator)
- Help schools carry out a food culture review: offer methodological support, ask members from different School Food Working Groups to participate in reviews in other schools
- (Co-)organise a yearly evaluation and planning meeting with schools, focusing on results and lessons learnt
- Engage with partners, NGOs or associations that can coach schools
- Promote the WSFA in their own communication channels and in local/national media, highlighting the achievements of schools in the region/city
- Scale up the WSFA and get other schools on board
- Promote and coordinate the WSFA award scheme: explain the different levels of achievement, encourage schools to participate and provide incentives (such as subsidies but also services e.g. provision of material for the organisation of a canteen day).
- (Co-)organise a yearly WSFA event/ceremony: facilitate networking between schools, invite other stakeholders to a workshop/brainstorming session on collaboration, present the results of a pupil design competition for school canteens, present schools' plans
- Share their experience with other local and national authorities.



3.2 PILLAR B: FOOD & SUSTAINABILITY

- Integrate sustainability criteria in cities' and schools' public procurement
- Draw up a tendering template schools can use for new catering contract
- Strengthen cooperation with those responsible for public procurement in schools that are part of a centralised system
- Organise training for school staff (and caregivers) on healthy and sustainable food that reflects different cultural needs
- Have a city-wide guideline to, for example, make one day a week vegetarian
- Help schools make healthy and sustainable food available to socially vulnerable pupils
- Facilitate cooperation between different schools on food purchasing, catering contracts and healthy and sustainable food through vending machines/tuck shops
- Support schools as they renovate/remodel their dining areas and kitchens, to make these areas more educational and let pupils get involved
- Sponsor the installation of drinking fountains in schools
- Help schools prevent food waste, e.g. with tools to measure food waste and with tips and tricks



3.3 PILLAR C: EDUCATION & LEARNING

- Organise training for teachers and school staff on the WSFA and on sustainable food systems (including on setting up local projects)
- Support schools in integrating the topic of healthy and sustainable food into different school subjects for different ages (e.g. pedagogical guidance, courses and tools exchange between schools, inspiration from other schools)
- Provide gardening and composting materials to let pupils create a vegetable patch in school
- Lobby to give food a more prominent place in the national curriculum



3.4 PILLAR D: COMMUNITY & PARTNERSHIP



- List local actors who would be willing to interact with schools
- Provide inspiration and organise exchanges between different schools on how to work with different actors
- Schedule a reflection/brainstorming session at a local food council (meeting with all stakeholders and the local or regional authority) on possible partnerships between schools and other local stakeholders, like shops, caterers, farms, food companies, neighbourhood communities, elderly people's homes, refugee communities or other groups
- Directly contact local stakeholders and encourage them to cooperate with schools on a WSFA
- Suggest possible initiatives that these stakeholders can take to promote healthy and sustainable food to children/adolescents
- Facilitate concrete projects on location (such as farm visits), together with the wider community
- Cities can also intervene in the broader food environment, which influences children's diet. They can, for example, analyse whether healthy, sustainable food is available in school areas and then try to increase its availability while limiting access to unhealthy food (e.g. through restrictions on fast food outlets and marketing).



**THANKS FOR
THE FOOD!**



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a new menu**

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