

NOURISH TO FLOURISH

EMPOWERING VULNERABLE STUDENTS THROUGH HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD



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We extend our sincere gratitude to the cities who contributed their valuable insights and experiences. This magazine highlights the dedicated efforts of individuals, schools, communities, and organisations working with and for vulnerable groups, demonstrating how the Whole School Food Approach can be a powerful tool for systemic change. Their stories exemplify the spirit of collaboration and resilience, and serve as an inspiration for anyone committed to making sustainable food systems truly equitable.



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NOURISH TO FLOURISH: EMPOWERING VULNERABLE STUDENTS THROUGH HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD

Schools are powerful places. They are one of the most important environments where children learn, grow, and develop lifelong habits, including how they eat and care for their health. As teachers, you are not just guiding students through academics, you are helping them shape their futures. Yet, not all students start from the same place.

Children and adolescents are among the most vulnerable groups in our society, as they are in a crucial stage of development. They rely on their surroundings - at home, at school, and in their communities - to learn what it means to live a healthy life. Yet, when unhealthy food is more accessible, available, or visible than nutritious options, many develop poor eating habits that can lead to long-term health issues. (Sciensano, 2021)

For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the challenges are even greater. Low-income families often struggle to afford fresh, healthy food. A recent WHO/Europe report (2024) found that adolescents from lower-income families eat fewer fruits and vegetables, drink more sugary beverages, and are less physically active than their wealthier peers. All these factors put them at greater risk of obesity and other non-communicable diseases. However, this isn't just a health issue, it's a learning issue. When children don't have access to nutritious food, their energy, focus, and well-being suffer.

The good news? Schools have the power to change this. They are one of the few places where all children, regardless of their background, come together. That's why SchoolFood4Change champions the Whole School Food Approach.

It's not just about healthier school meals. It's about embedding healthy, sustainable food into every corner of school life: from shaping clear policies that prioritize nutritious school food, and integrating food education into the curriculum, to building strong community partnerships.

By transforming how food is seen, talked about, and shared in schools, we can turn the school environment into a driver of health, inclusion, and opportunity – for both people and planet.

This mission aligns with the **2021 EU Child Guarantee**, a commitment to ensure that every child in Europe, especially those at risk of poverty or social exclusion, has access to essential services, including nutritious school meals. It's a call to action for policymakers to invest where it matters: in food, in education, and in equity. Their decisions are key to shaping a fairer, healthier, and more sustainable future for all children.

In this publication, you'll discover a variety of inspiring best practices from schools across Europe that are putting healthy, nutritious food at the heart of everyday school life. Their stories show that change is possible, and powerful. With creativity, commitment, and collaboration, even small actions can spark a ripple effect that transforms how students eat, learn, and grow.

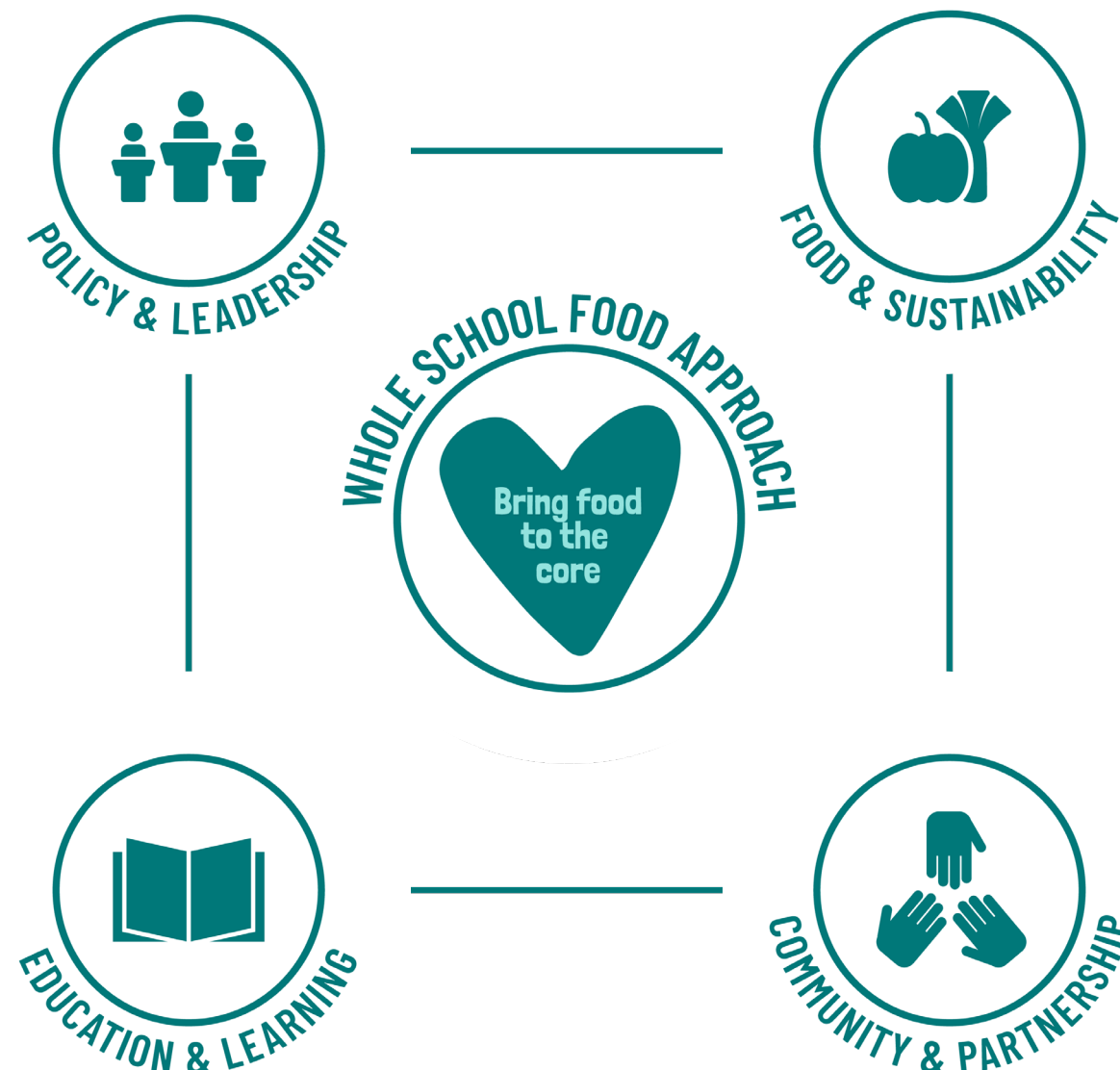
Resources

Sciensano. (2021), *Naar gezonde voedselomgevingen rond scholen in Vlaanderen*. Retrieved from [Naar gezonde voedselomgevingen rond scholen in Vlaanderen | sciensano.be](https://www.sciensano.be)
WHO European Regional Obesity Report 2022. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2022. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

A WHOLE SCHOOL FOOD APPROACH

The Whole School Food Approach (WSFA) offers a comprehensive strategy to transform school food systems, ensuring that every child has access to nutritious, sustainable, and culturally appropriate school food. By focusing on four key pillars - policy & leadership, food & sustainability, education & learning, community & partnership - the WSFA fosters a healthier, more inclusive school culture where food plays a central role in children's well-being and development. It is a powerful framework that addresses the diverse needs of vulnerable groups by embedding food into the fabric of school life. Through collaboration, inclusivity, and empowerment, the WSFA helps ensure that healthy, sustainable food is not a privilege but a right for every child. In doing so, it transforms schools into not only centres of learning but also hubs of well-being, where food becomes a driver of health, equity, and community strength.

Every story featured in this publication is a lived example of how communities, schools, and cities are putting the WSFA into practice, tailoring its pillars to fit the specific needs, cultures, and challenges of their local context.



PILLAR A POLICY & LEADERSHIP

This pillar focuses on embedding health, sustainability, and community into school policy and culture. Collaboration is key: schools are encouraged to engage everyone - students, teachers, parents, and staff - in making food a shared responsibility. This inclusive approach fosters ownership and accountability, empowering children to actively shape their food choices. By embedding these values into school food policy and daily life, the WSFA creates a nurturing ecosystem where all voices are heard, particularly those of vulnerable groups, making healthy choices more accessible and meaningful for every child.

PILLAR B FOOD & SUSTAINABILITY

Pillar B emphasizes the importance of providing nutritious, sustainable, and affordable food options. What children eat directly impacts their growth, learning, and overall health. For vulnerable families, cost is often a barrier to healthy eating. Schools are encouraged to offer affordable options - whether meals, snacks, soup, or breakfast - without compromising quality. By making nutritious food the easy choice, schools help reduce health disparities and support the long-term well-being of all students.

PILLAR C EDUCATION & LEARNING

Food education is at the heart of pillar C, focusing on equipping children with the knowledge and skills to make informed, conscious food choices. Combining classroom learning with practical experiences, this pillar encourages critical thinking about health, sustainability, and ethics. For students with limited access to or exposure to such knowledge, food education can be transformative, helping them build lifelong healthy habits. Teachers and school staff play a pivotal role in supporting this transformation and making good food the norm, regardless of a child's background.

PILLAR D COMMUNITY & PARTNERSHIP

Pillar D highlights the power of community collaboration in building a positive school food environment. This pillar connects schools with local authorities, food producers, community organisations, and families to create a strong support network. For vulnerable children, this ensures food options are both accessible and culturally inclusive. Celebrating diverse food traditions and partnering with communities fosters a sense of belonging and respect, making nutritious food a shared and empowering experience beyond the school walls for all students.



ACTIVE LEARNING

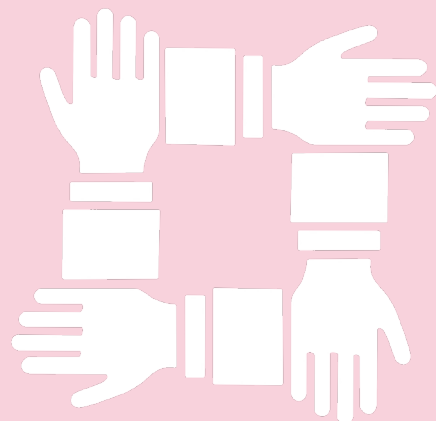
THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN

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In Ghent, four special needs schools - De Zonnepoort, Het Kompas, Balans, and Salvator - came together through the SchoolFood4Change project. As the initiative unfolded, it became clear that these schools faced many of the same challenges. For instance, because many students traveled by bus, their parents and caregivers had limited contact with the school. Cultural diversity among the students presented both opportunities and complexities, and food waste was a recurring issue - often due to a lack of awareness among families and students. Some students also experienced difficulties with eating.

Recognizing these shared challenges, the schools formed a collaborative group to work together more closely. This partnership proved to be a powerful step forward. Teachers exchanged insights, shared successful practices, and supported one another with practical tips. They inspired each other by exploring different approaches and engaged in meaningful discussions around food education, school meal offerings, waste reduction, inclusive participation, and effective communication.

The spirit of collaboration sparked fresh initiatives in each school. It also created a safe space for teachers to experiment with new ideas, backed by the encouragement and experience of their peers.



THE FOOD JOURNEY TO OUR TABLE

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Dr. Stefan Osuský Primary School, a proud holder of the SchoolFood4Change Bronze Certificate and a participant in the Really Healthy School programme, embraces an inclusive approach to learning. The school ensures that all children - including those with special educational needs, disabilities, socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and children from Ukraine - are actively involved in engaging activities centered on healthy and mindful eating.

This hands-on project blends experiential learning with the cultivation of healthy eating habits.

Pupils visited a bakery to witness the entire bread-making process firsthand, then had the chance to prepare their own nutritious snacks. They created playful food characters and baked brioche buns, turning learning into a joyful, sensory-rich experience. Ukrainian students contributed traditional recipes, encouraging cultural exchange and strengthening the spirit of inclusion.

Another highlight was the "milk journey" - a fun, educational exploration from cow to dairy snack. Students watched educational videos, created themed collages, experimented with milk, made their own butter, and even performed imaginative food science experiments - like erupting a volcano from sweet dough.

Through these activities, the school creates a vibrant environment where food becomes a gateway to learning, connection, creativity, and inclusion for every child.



CHRISTMAS GINGERBREAD

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At Kukučínová Primary School, where more than 400 students - including many from the Roma community - learn and grow together, we are dedicated to inclusive, experience-based education. Our "Christmas Gingerbread" project was designed as a multi-stage learning experience for primary students and their parents and caregivers. By exploring Christmas traditions, baking together, and collaborating with teachers and kitchen staff, the project fostered health awareness, food literacy, and social inclusion.

The first stage took place in the classroom, where students learned about traditional Slovak Christmas customs, the symbolism of food, and the importance of healthy ingredients. In the second stage, students participated in an after-school cooking session, where they practiced reading recipes, measuring ingredients, and preparing gingerbread dough - applying academic skills in a practical and engaging way. The third stage opened the school doors to families. Parents and caregivers joined their children for a joyful gingerbread decorating session, which also featured a visit from a local beekeeper - who is also the school principal. He introduced students and families to various types of honey and spoke about their nutritional value.

The project culminated in a festive sharing of the gingerbread with the entire school community. It proved to be more than a holiday activity - it bridged the gap between school and home, encouraged cultural understanding, and nurtured mutual respect. **For many families from vulnerable backgrounds, it was their first experience of a joyful, collaborative, and educational event centered around food – one that left lasting memories and strengthened the school community.**



SNOW, FOOD, AND FUN: AN INCLUSIVE OUTDOOR DAY IN UMEÅ

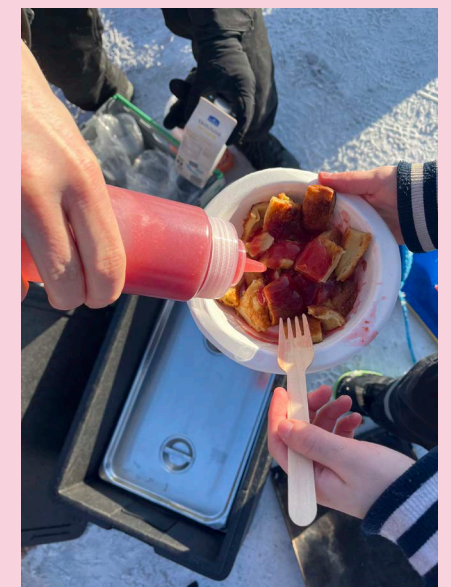
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The SchoolFood4Change (SF4C) project group had the pleasure of joining the 4th grade class from Hedlundaskolan on a memorable excursion to Bräntberget, a small mountain in central Umeå, for the event All on Snow. Events like this are designed to be inclusive - schools and organizers provide equipment such as skis, snowboards, and helmets so that every student can participate, regardless of socio-economic background. It's an opportunity for all children to discover the joy of snow and embrace an active lifestyle in a safe, playful environment.

Activities are tailored to each child's interests and supported by trained leaders who specialize in coaching children on snow. In partnership with the municipality, local schools, and the ski resort, the Swedish Ski Association invited all fourth-grade students in the area to experience the fun, energy, and beauty of snow-based activities.

For the SF4C team, this event also offered a perfect opportunity to combine outdoor play with outdoor eating. The school kitchen had prepared a smart, well-planned meal in advance - pancakes with jam, fresh carrots, milk, and water - using existing ingredients. The food was easy to transport, nutritious, and clearly a hit with the students.

In addition, we made bread over an open fire together with the pupils, who even got to ignite the fire themselves using fire steel and wood. **It was an enriching experience that blended physical activity, food education, and outdoor learning into one joyful day.** The pupils had a fantastic time, and it was a shining example of how inclusive, healthy, and fun school activities can be.



WEEK FOR GOOD FOOD: STIRRING UP COMMUNITIES

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During Rikolto's "Week for Good Food" in January, the City of Leuven and Leuven 2030 hosted a vibrant series of cooking workshops - bringing together citizens of all ages and backgrounds around the shared themes of healthy, sustainable, and affordable food ... and the joy of sharing it.

Various locations and resources were activated, weaving together the efforts of SchoolFood4Change and the FEAST project. These workshops are a concrete step toward making good food accessible for everyone. At the Rotonda, a centre for vulnerable young girls, we hosted a vegan cooking session.

At the Drukkerij, children and their parents or caregivers prepared delicious vegetarian spreads. Meanwhile, at Foodatelier César, children from after-school care at the Kettekeet got hands-on with lentils and chickpeas - discovering not only how to eat them, but how to craft with them too. And in a culinary highlight, a top chef teamed up with the HONK-crew - young people with disabilities - who served up a spectacular dish at the Maakleerplek. What a sight. What a feast!

These kinds of partnerships and cross-connections truly bring our project to life. Through the combined support of the School 2030 network and Rikolto, schools across Leuven are implementing a whole-school approach to food. At the same time, they're joining forces with KU Leuven and SAAMO to strengthen a city-wide food strategy that leaves no one behind.

This year, the FEAST project is also embarking on a new journey with Leuven's community restaurants - another powerful example of how food initiatives can foster connection, creativity, and inclusion.

These crossover collaborations are more than just meals - they're moments that nourish community and spark change. And this is just the beginning. To be continued!



CI.BUO: INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD EDUCATION

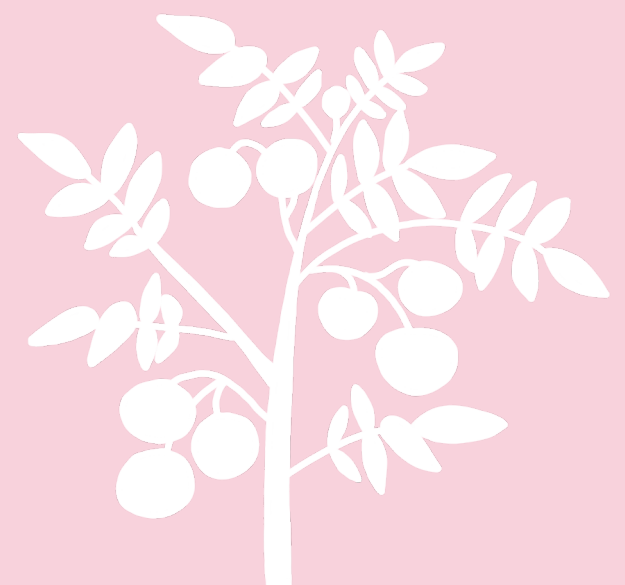
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The City of Nuoro has been running an educational program for two years as part of the SF4C project, aimed at promoting healthy and sustainable eating among children aged 5-14. The program, called Ci.Buo, focuses on encouraging good food practices through practical activities designed for pupils. Both editions of Ci.Buo offered a variety of interactive and non-formal educational modules, engaging all students in hands-on learning experiences. These modules, aligned with the implementation of WSFA in schools, also integrated Farm-to-School Twinings and included training for schools to further support the program.

What sets Ci.Buo apart is its inclusivity.

Every activity and collaboration with local farms involved all children, including those with severe cognitive or motor disabilities.

Each module was carefully adapted to ensure that it met the specific needs of every individual participant.



HEALTHY TASTES BETTER TOGETHER

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The Adam-Kraft-Realschule in Nuremberg is located in a district facing social challenges, with many students coming from low-income families, often with a migration background, and limited access to healthy nutrition and health education. As an all-day school, students spend most of their day at school, making it essential to integrate nutrition, physical activity, and well-being into daily life.

As part of SchoolFood4Change, an interdisciplinary nutrition week was organized, addressing health and nutrition across various subjects. The school partnered with the local community association and NEST - Nuremberg's Parent Office for School Success and Participation - which helped translate materials into over 31 languages, ensuring accessibility for all families.

During the week, topics like healthy lifestyles, nutrition psychology, and food diversity were explored in subjects such as biology, ethics, physical education, and art. Students reflected on their eating habits, discovered new foods, and developed strategies for healthy living.

The week culminated in a communal cooking event where students, families, and staff prepared meals together, fostering education, enjoyment, and community.

The program also emphasized the importance of practical, hands-on learning, enabling students to take responsibility for their own health and well-being. Through cooking and meal preparation, students not only learned about nutrition but also gained valuable life skills such as teamwork, time management, and the value of fresh, locally-sourced ingredients. By engaging in these activities, they developed a stronger connection to their food, the environment, and each other.

This initiative is particularly beneficial for vulnerable groups, providing children from disadvantaged families with health education they may not receive at home. The school becomes a place of participation, trust, and connection for students and families. By involving parents in an inclusive way, regardless of language or educational background, the project promotes social inclusion, cultural sensitivity, and equitable educational opportunities.



PROMOTING CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT DURING SCHOOL MEAL TIME

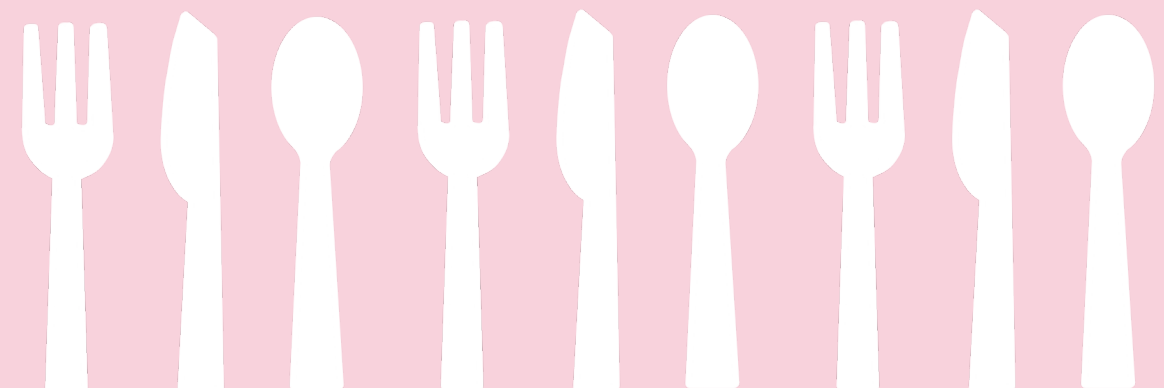
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The City of Milan has introduced a valuable initiative for all children at the 17 nursery schools involved in the SF4C project for the 2024/2025 year. This activity has proven highly effective as it engages children in the process of setting the table before lunch, teaching them the importance of cooperation and teamwork to prepare the tables for their peers.

Each class participating in the activity has been provided with a chef's apron, and through collaboration with Milano Ristorazione, the schools have been able to integrate educational opportunities that help children develop skills such as counting, dividing, and other foundational tasks.

Teachers have expressed great enthusiasm, noting that the activity has sparked increased interest among the children. Families have also reported positive changes, with children adopting better food-related habits at home - particularly in cultures that may not traditionally emphasize eating together at the table.

The City of Milan hopes to expand this program and use it as a foundation to develop a comprehensive internal policy on school food for all kindergartens.



SCHOOL FARM TWINNING IN SUBURBS AREAS

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Thanks to the fruitful collaboration with Milano Ristorazione in promoting innovative criteria for school meal product tenders (WP 5), several farm visits have been organized in the city of Milan.

A total of 21 visits to Cascina Battivacco, a farm located in the peri-urban area of Milan, were arranged for kindergartens that typically cannot afford such outdoor excursions.

These visits provided a wonderful opportunity for children to explore the agricultural side of Milan and learn about the traditional “Cascine” and farms that offer educational activities.

Cascina Battivacco, a rice producer, won the tender and generously offered free visits for primary and kindergarten schools in Milan.

The schools participating in these visits were selected by the Educational Department of the City of Milan, with a special focus on promoting food education in schools that face challenges, such as distance from the farms or social and economic barriers. In Milan, some educational visits are funded by parents and caregivers, so, thanks to the SF4C project, the Education Department made a concerted effort to expand opportunities for schools that are less able to support external visits within the city.



GROWING WITH ALL SENSES

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For visually impaired and blind children, experiencing the world through tactile and sensory experiences is essential - this includes the joy of gardening and cooking.



At the Primary School for the Blind, which serves children from across the country, a specialized program has been developed to facilitate these experiences.

The school features 18 raised garden beds, where students engage with nature throughout the year. These hands-on activities offer children a deeper, more lasting connection with the world around them. They grow a variety of vegetables, herbs, and berries, take part in watering and harvesting, and then contribute the fresh produce to the school kitchen, where it's transformed into delicious meals and beverages. To maintain sustainability, garden waste and green waste from the kitchen are composted, closing the loop between the garden and kitchen.



The program is designed to enrich the sensory experience in the garden, adding more scents and textures for the children to explore. **For blind children, the garden serves an essential role in visual education. It allows them to experience the full cycle of nature - from the emergence of life from a seed, to the development of plants, and the harvesting of vegetables, fruits, and flowers.** Braille signs on the raised beds help the children identify which plants are growing, making the learning process more inclusive.

Additionally, the students are involved in the student kitchen, where they learn about healthy eating and zero waste practices. A memorable project involved sowing wheat in a small plot of land, harvesting the grain, and then milling it to bake their own bread - symbolically, of course, representing the full process of food production.

LOCAL EDUCATIONAL COUNCILS

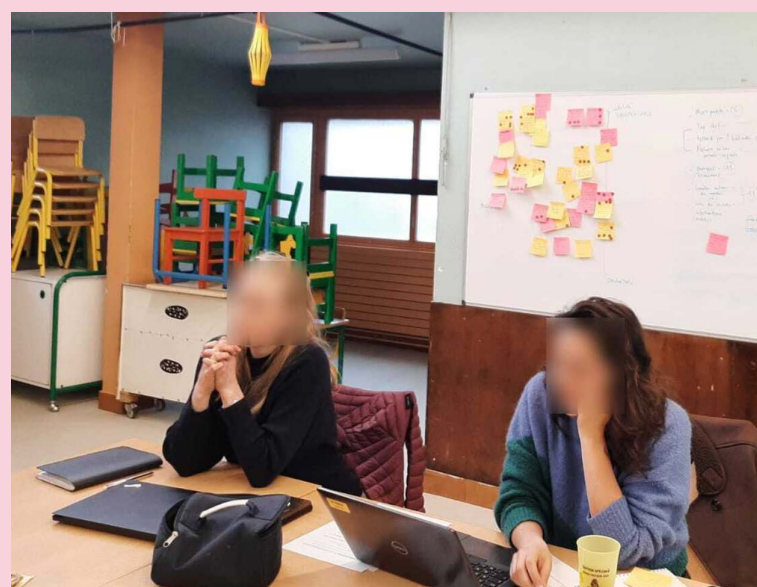
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Lyon's educational project is brought to life through a highly local dynamic, facilitated by the local educational councils. These councils provide a platform to unite the neighborhood educational community, including local professionals such as school restaurant staff, teachers, extracurricular teams, healthcare providers, local associations, partner institutions, as well as caregivers, parents, and children. Working together, these groups address local educational needs through collaborative action.

In Mermoz-Laënnec, a vulnerable neighborhood in the 8th district of Lyon, the local educational council was established two years ago. The group quickly identified food as a key priority for supporting healthy and sustainable eating habits within the community. The meetings have provided an opportunity to connect with a wide range of local partners, share knowledge of existing initiatives, and pinpoint common needs.

In Mermoz-Laënnec, a vulnerable neighborhood in the 8th district of Lyon, the local educational council was established two years ago. The group quickly identified food as a key priority for supporting healthy and sustainable eating habits within the community. The meetings have provided an opportunity to connect with a wide range of local partners, share knowledge of existing initiatives, and pinpoint common needs.

As a result of these discussions, the group decided to organize training sessions for school staff across the neighborhood. **The goal of these sessions is to better equip teachers and staff to address parents' questions about food and nutrition.** Moving forward, the Mermoz-Laënnec council plans to strengthen its connection with parents and actively include them in the decision-making process, reinforcing the co-construction of actions aimed at supporting healthier and more sustainable diets in the community.



FROM MATH SUPPORT TO CULINARY SKILLS

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Because sporting success requires not only brains, but also hands... Rot-Weiß-Essen is a well-known and respected third-division team in the Bundesliga, with a strong presence in the north of Essen, a region often marked by social challenges, tight budgets, and numerous everyday struggles. While the club brings people together and fosters a sense of unity through sport, it recognizes that it can offer much more than just a sense of belonging. Understanding its role as a community role model, Rot-Weiß-Essen is committed to supporting not only athletic success but also educational growth.

Through a partnership with the Evonik Foundation and Essener Chancen, the BesserMacher educational project was launched. This initiative provides targeted support to young people, helping them achieve the best possible qualifications - ideally the Abitur (high school diploma).

In addition to extracurricular tutoring programs, the club has also teamed up with SchoolFood4Change.

Through hands-on cooking workshops, young participants not only learn about what makes a balanced meal, especially before and after training sessions, but also gain the practical skills to prepare these meals themselves.

As SchoolFood4Change runs for only four years, but the need for long-term support in the northern neighborhoods remains, the educational staff also receive further training through multiplier courses to continue this important work beyond the project's duration.

During the workshops, the group began with a short theoretical lesson on how the body needs balanced nutrition to perform well in school and sports. Then, using a modular system, they explored different foods and put together balanced meals, which they prepared in small groups. The session was a memorable experience for all participants, especially as some who are typically quiet or reserved revealed hidden cooking talents. At the end of the day, the teaching staff were unanimous in their decision: cooking practice will become an integral part of their tutoring program moving forward.



REACHING VULNERABLE GROUPS THROUGH SCHOOL FOOD:

INSIGHTS FROM PROFESSOR MANUEL FRANCO

To understand the impact of SchoolFood4Change on vulnerable groups, we spoke with Professor Manuel Franco, a social and urban epidemiologist at the Basque Centre for Climate Change. His research on urban health, food insecurity, and chronic diseases offers valuable insights into how school food programs can support vulnerable groups, improve public health, and strengthen local efforts through initiatives like the European Child Guarantee.

How do you define vulnerable groups within the SchoolFood4Change project, and why is this an important aspect of the project?

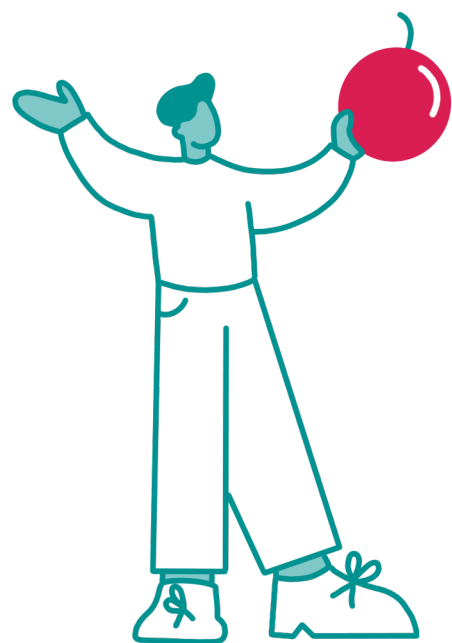
The SchoolFood4Change (SF4C) project includes, among its objectives and actions, a strong focus on engaging and reaching out to vulnerable groups. However, the way we define vulnerable groups varies across countries and cities. This is one of the first challenges we encounter in Europe. In addition, there is a lack of sufficient data on who these vulnerable groups really are.

So who do you typically include in that definition?

Most often, we refer to low-income families, household that fall below a certain threshold in terms of income and wealth. But we also include migrants, refugees, and single-parent households. Across Europe, these groups are generally at greater risk of food insecurity.

And how does the project work to reach those families?

Because SF4C works directly with schools, we focus on those located in low-income neighbourhoods, where vulnerable families often live. Within these schools, we try to identify and reach out to those families most in need of support.



For the European Child Guarantee to succeed, both national and local authorities need to commit not only funding but also genuine political will. This is where the true challenge lies: turning a promising framework into meaningful, everyday support for the children who need it most.



What role can Whole School Food Approaches play in addressing broader health and social inequalities among children in Europe?

While the projects are important, policies at the local, regional, and national levels are even more crucial. They play an important role for several reasons. First, malnutrition remains a significant problem among vulnerable groups. We know from studies across many cities that children from high-income families generally face fewer issues with malnutrition. It's important to note that malnutrition isn't just about poor diet quality, it also includes childhood obesity. Therefore, we need to focus on protecting and promoting the health of children who are most in need. That brings us to the second issue. Without free and universal school meals, low-income families often struggle to provide meals for their children. Even when they manage, it places additional financial strain on them. The real question becomes, who bears the cost of food when a family is already struggling to make ends meet?

So, would you say that free school lunches play a crucial role in supporting vulnerable groups?

Yes. When free school lunches, or even breakfasts, are available, children from the most vulnerable households are more likely to attend school and stay there longer. Staying in school as long as possible is crucial for these children, as school is not just a place for learning; it's a safe space where they can receive nourishment, engage with others, and access a higher level of education. Education, of course, is one of the most effective ways to break the cycle of poverty.



Staying in school as long as possible is crucial for these children, as school is not just a place for learning; it's a safe space where they can receive nourishment, engage with others, and access a higher level of education. Education, of course, is one of the most effective ways to break the cycle of poverty.

How can schools and municipalities better respond to the nutritional needs of vulnerable children?

Addressing nutritional needs start with having reliable data: not only on child poverty or which families are in need, but also on the actual nutrition and dietary habits of these children, including any obesity-related or nutrition-related issues. It's essential that we map food insecurity accurately at all levels, from cities and neighbourhoods to regions and entire countries. However, the data describing the reality of these vulnerable groups is often not readily available from governments or research institutions. Instead, third-sector organizations like UNICEF, Save the Children, EDUCO, and the Red Cross tend to have the most accurate and up-to-date insights. That's why it's essential to collaborate with them, involve them in policy discussions, and work together to effectively engage and support these vulnerable groups.

Why is it so important to gather accurate data on children's diets and health?

This is fundamentally a public health and epidemiological challenge. To address it, we need the best possible data on children's diets, food insecurity, diet quality, and overall dietary patterns across Europe. However, we must acknowledge that the most vulnerable children, the ones who are often at greatest risk, are typically underrepresented in health surveys. As a result, it's crucial that we make a joint effort to reach these children and ensure that their experiences and needs are accurately reflected in our data.



What are according to you the main challenges in implementing Whole School Food Approaches specifically for vulnerable groups?

One of the biggest challenges we face, is that we don't fully understand the reality of these vulnerable groups. In many cities and regions across Europe, we lack a clear picture of where these communities are or what their specific needs entail.

Our educational system and social services must be equipped to understand and respond to this reality, as vulnerable groups are an integral part of our society. It's essential that we acknowledge their presence and understand their struggles, because we can't afford to leave anyone behind due to a lack of awareness.

So, what's at stake if we don't address these issues?

A healthy diet is essential for overall well-being, and school meal programs play a key role: not only in improving children's health, particularly for those from vulnerable backgrounds, but also in supporting more sustainable food systems. It is a win-win. By acknowledging and addressing this issue, we have the opportunity to make a meaningful difference on two fronts: enhancing public health, and promoting sustainability. In that sense, it's a powerful two-for-one investment in both people and planet.

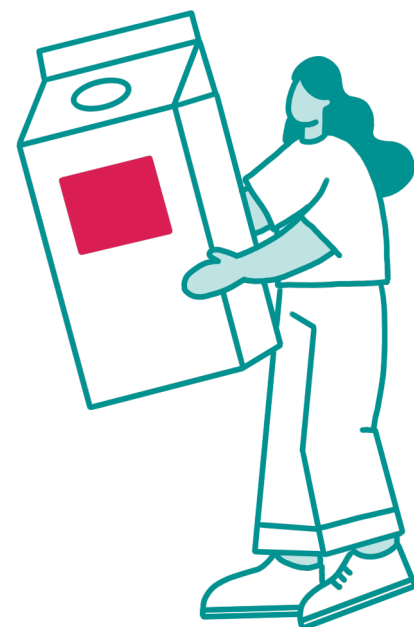


One of the biggest challenges we face, is that we don't fully understand the reality of these vulnerable groups. In many cities and regions across Europe, we lack a clear picture of where these communities are or what their specific needs entail.

How can European initiatives, such as the European Child Guarantee, help strengthen local efforts on the ground?

It is crucial that the European Child Guarantee translates into real action at the local level. The main challenge is ensuring that it doesn't remain just a policy on paper, but becomes a concrete reality implemented by local governments and municipalities.

For the European Child Guarantee to succeed, both national and local authorities need to commit not only funding but also genuine political will. This is where the true challenge lies: turning a promising framework into meaningful, everyday support for the children who need it most.





PROGRESSIVE EXPOSURE AND CIRCULAR COOKING

RESIDENTIAL CENTER FOR CHILDREN

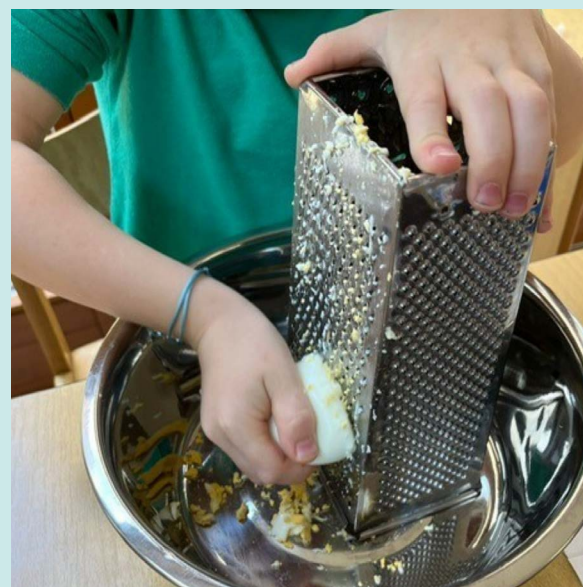
Zlin / Czech Republic
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Our residential care centre provides comprehensive healthcare and education for children up to the age of sixteen with a wide range of needs - including sensory, physical, intellectual, and multiple disabilities, as well as autism spectrum disorders. We offer expert nursing care, individualized educational programs from preschool through secondary levels, and specialized therapies, including physical and speech therapy.

Every activity is carefully tailored to each child's unique abilities, with three levels of engagement: active participation, assisted participation, and observational learning. Through the Skutečně zdravá škola (Truly Healthy School) program, we foster a nurturing environment focused on nutritious food, environmental awareness, and holistic wellbeing - for both children and staff.

Children are actively involved in the full journey of food - from growing and sourcing ingredients to preparing and cooking meals - helping them build valuable life skills in a meaningful, hands-on way. Our seasonal activities bring nature and nutrition together: foraging for wild garlic, preparing healthy snacks, learning basic baking, cultivating vegetable gardens, fermenting sauerkraut, sprouting seeds, harvesting herbs for teas and syrups, collecting berries for preserves, making natural confections, and preserving seasonal produce.

These experiences not only support health and independence, but also connect children to the rhythms of the natural world, enriching their lives with purpose, sensory discovery, and joy.



FOOD LANGUAGE IN A MULTICULTURAL SETTING

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Malmö is a vibrant, multicultural city, home to residents from 186 nationalities - but also a place marked by significant socio-economic challenges. At Mellanbäck Preschool, these realities are felt every day. Few children speak Swedish as their mother tongue, and many caregivers speak little or no Swedish at all. In this context, the preschool plays a vital role - not only in fostering language development but also in establishing healthy eating habits from an early age.



Mellanbäck places a strong emphasis on teaching children where food comes from. Together with the staff, the children grow a variety of fruits and vegetables, learning through hands-on experience. The preschool has even built its own small farm, turning everyday moments into opportunities for discovery. Visual aids are used to support communication, helping the children develop their Swedish while deepening their understanding of food and nature.

Many of the children had never seen a real food producer before, which made Mellanbäck the perfect first participant in the city's Farm-to-School Twinning initiative. The children visited urban farmer Göran - commissioned by the city of Malmö - and explored his farm. For many, it was their first time seeing vegetables grow in the ground. They were especially captivated to learn that broccoli is, in fact, a flower.

This direct engagement with food has had a lasting impact. More children now eat the food served at school, are willing to try new things, and express genuine appreciation for the meals. Food has become a universal language - a bridge that connects them to each other, to their educators, and to their own growing confidence in both Swedish and their home languages.



SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE IN SMALL STEPS

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At Kukučínová Primary School, where 99% of our pupils come from the Roma community, we are dedicated to educating both students and their families about sustainable agriculture and healthy food systems.

Our project, Sustainable Agriculture in Small Steps, is designed to build awareness of where food comes from and how the health of our soil and crops influences future food security.

The program began with a blend of classroom learning and hands-on garden activities, supported by cooking and tasting sessions that sparked students' curiosity and enthusiasm. As the project evolved, parents were invited to join their children for an interactive workshop led by an expert in sustainable farming. Together, they explored topics such as soil regeneration, companion planting, and how to make affordable organic fertilizers at home. Children took an active role by designing their own garden plans and planting herb seeds generously donated by the school's produce supplier. Parents engaged in meaningful dialogue and received practical advice they could implement in their daily lives.

This initiative is more than a gardening project - it's a powerful tool for strengthening community ties, promoting health equity, and empowering families with valuable skills for ecological living. Looking ahead, we aim to establish a dedicated school garden, co-managed by pupils and parents, where collaboration continues to thrive and harvests are shared by all.



SOCIAL FUNDING PROGRAM

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Copenhagen Municipality is committed to supporting vulnerable children through a range of social programs, including a subsidy scheme for school meals. This initiative ensures that every child can access a healthy, nutritious meal each day, regardless of their family's economic background.

Families with lower incomes can apply for fully or partially subsidized school meals, with the level of support adjusted according to household income. This targeted approach prioritizes children from the most resource-limited homes.

Beyond income-based subsidies, Copenhagen has also established a social funding program to assist children who may not meet the financial criteria but are experiencing urgent or critical family situations, or who come from homes lacking social stability and support. In these cases, free school meals are offered temporarily to safeguard the child's well-being and provide timely, preventative care.

By addressing both economic and social vulnerabilities, this initiative helps to ensure equal access to nutritious food, while promoting student health, inclusion, and academic readiness.



SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE FOOD IN THE NURSERY

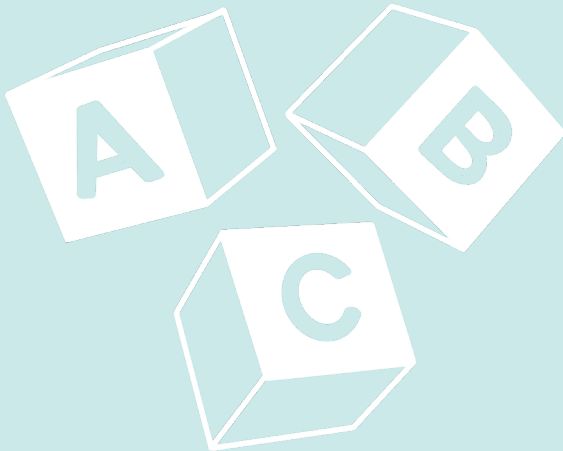
Bambilor / Senegal
thierno95@hotmail.com

The Bambilor Central Kitchen, which supplies elementary schools with hot, healthy meals, also plays a vital role in supporting the nursery “La Maison du Fils” in Bambilor. This partnership helps ensure that the children in the nursery receive nutritious and balanced breakfasts.

“La Maison du Fils” cares for infants and toddlers aged 0 to 27 months who have been found abandoned or are living in difficult circumstances. The center provides comprehensive emotional, nutritional, educational, and healthcare support to meet the children’s essential needs.

The nursery relies primarily on donations and community goodwill, with the Central Kitchen being one of its key supporters. Despite these efforts, the center continues to face several significant challenges, including limited financial resources, insufficient access to medical care, a lack of qualified permanent staff, and the integration of children into stable environments.

Through partnerships like the one with the Bambilor Central Kitchen, the center is able to offer critical early support to some of the most vulnerable members of the community.



TALLINN SERVES UP EQUITY: FREE MEALS FOR EVERY STUDENT

Tallinn / Estonia

In Tallinn, all students are entitled to a free hot lunch with multiple choices, funded by both the state and city. Starting in January 2025, free breakfast is also available to every student in Tallinn schools, thanks to the support of the Tallinn City Government. This initiative is part of a broader health promotion strategy, aimed at ensuring that all children have access to nutritious meals that support their well-being.

According to the 2022 Estonian School Student Health Behaviour Survey (HBSC) by the Estonian Institute for Health Development, one in five students aged 11-15 skips breakfast on school days. The survey also shows that older students are more likely to skip breakfast. This highlights the importance of making breakfast a key part of the morning routine, as it provides essential energy to start the day.

Regular breakfast consumption is linked to several health benefits, including lower risks of overweight, a more positive body image, and better mental health.

Breakfast offerings typically include a variety of porridges, served with a side of butter or jam. However, some schools also provide additional options like sandwiches, omelettes, and fresh fruits. With two free meals provided at school each day, this initiative ensures that all students, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds, have access to healthy, hot meals - often their only opportunity for a nutritious, full meal during the day.



EUROPEAN WEEK TO REDUCE FOOD WASTE

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The Sustainable Food School Program guarantees a hot, nutritious lunch every school day for all students whose parents or caregivers choose to participate. Meal costs are adjusted based on each family's social and economic situation, as determined by a national assessment system - ensuring fair access. Families may pay the full price, a reduced rate, or receive meals free of charge. Every child who participates receives a complete, balanced meal including soup, a main dish, bread, and fruit.

More than just a meal service, this program is a strategic territorial policy rooted in collaboration. It operates under a governance model that brings together essential partners: five municipal kitchens, public local authorities, and private social solidarity institutions. Together, they ensure both quality and equity.

The initiative is built on four foundational pillars:

1. **Production** - Students engage in school gardening activities, learning through hands-on experience.
2. **Acquisition** - Schools prioritize sourcing from local producers and suppliers, strengthening the local food economy.
3. **Cooking** - Menus are carefully designed with the support of a nutritionist to ensure they are balanced and appealing.
4. **Consumption & Healthy Eating Habits** - Food literacy and physical activity are promoted to support long-term health and well-being.



RISE & SHINE WITH A HEALTHY ROUTINE

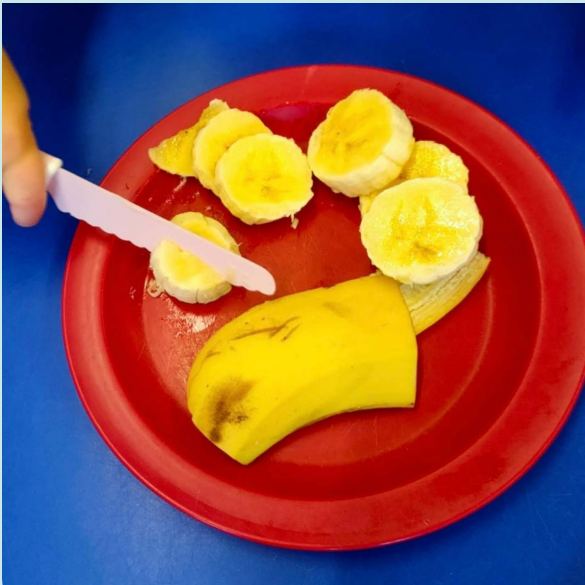
Zaragoza / Spain
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As part of their comprehensive approach to school food, the Municipal Nursery Schools of Zaragoza are committed to fostering healthy eating habits from the earliest years. One standout initiative is the introduction of a healthy breakfast routine across all 13 nursery schools. What began as a one-off activity to inspire families with nutritious breakfast alternatives has now become a regular practice throughout the school year. Twice a week, children enjoy options like bread with olive oil, bread with tomato, fresh cheese, and seasonal fruit.

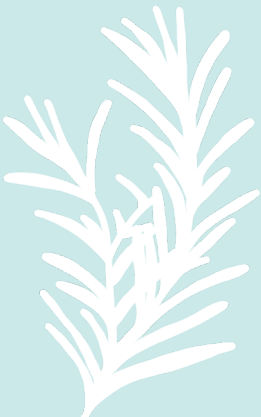


This initiative does more than energize children for the day ahead - it lays the foundation for lifelong healthy habits. By promoting the consumption of seasonal produce and offering balanced, accessible meals, the program helps reduce inequalities and ensures that every child receives the nutrition they need to grow and thrive.

Beyond breakfast, children also participate in sensory food workshops - vibrant, hands-on experiences that bring the garden into the classroom. They explore, touch, smell, and taste a variety of vegetables such as baby lettuce, carrots, cherry tomatoes, and radishes; citrus fruits like oranges, lemons, and grapefruits; and spring delights like strawberries, blueberries, flat peaches, and loquats.



These playful yet purposeful sessions nurture curiosity and help children build a joyful, informed relationship with food. They encourage exploration and conversation, while also developing sensory awareness and laying the groundwork for a healthier future.



HEALTHY SCHOOL BREAKFAST

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At the all-day elementary school in Odoakergasse, located in Vienna's 16th district, the Healthy School Breakfast is more than just a meal - it's a cornerstone of education for sustainable development (ESD) and a daily commitment to raising awareness about healthy food and eating habits. This initiative is designed to include all pupils, regardless of their background, making healthy living a shared experience embedded in everyday school life.

Vienna's 16th district is marked by a rich diversity of family origins and socio-economic circumstances. The school embraces this diversity through its breakfast program, which is primarily funded by the school budget, with a small annual contribution from parents and caregivers.

Held twice each semester, the Healthy School Breakfast brings every class together to foster social cohesion and shared learning. It offers children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds the chance to prepare and enjoy nutritious meals in the company of their peers. Older pupils team up with younger ones to cook, creating a spirit of cooperation and mentorship. The meals are shared at large communal tables in classrooms or corridors, turning healthy eating into a joyful, inclusive social event.

What might seem like internal differences are seen here not as obstacles, but as opportunities - to collaborate, to grow, and to engage with food and nutrition in a thoughtful, responsible way. Together, the school community turns healthy habits into a collective experience of care, learning, and connection.



TABLES OF INEQUALITY



1 in 5 children (under 18)
in the EU are living in households at
risk of poverty or social exclusion

That amounts nearly

18 million
children that are at risk of
poverty or social exclusion



adolescents from lower-income families are



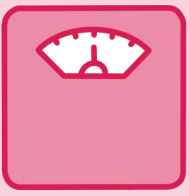
**less likely
to eat
fruits**
(32% versus 46%)



**less likely
to eat
vegetables**
(32% versus 54%)

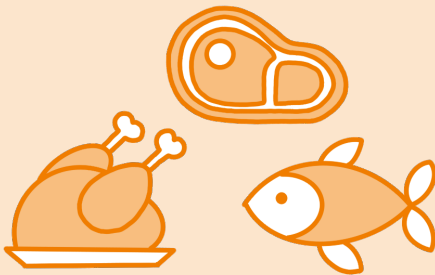


**more likely
to consume
sugary drinks**
(18% versus 15%)



**more likely
to be obese
or overweight**
(27% versus 18%)

compared with their wealthier peers



10.5% of children under 16 in Europe who
are at risk of poverty or social exclusion

**don't have access to
meat, chicken, fish, or
a plant-based alternative,**

compared to only 1.1% of children
who are not in that group

Resources
World Health Organization (2025). *The inequality epidemic: low-income teens face higher risks of obesity, inactivity and poor diet.* Retrieved from World Health Organization.
Europese Raad (2025). *Europese kindergarantie: hoe beschermt de EU kinderen?* Retrieved from Europese Raad - Raad van de Europese Unie.



FOOD PREFERENCES

FOOD SUITCASES AT ENGSKOLEN

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At Engskolen, one of Copenhagen's innovative "Food Schools", teachers have developed specialized teaching materials to spark students' curiosity and conversations about food. Engskolen serves children with special needs, many of whom face challenges around food - whether due to past negative experiences or side effects from medication that reduce appetite.

To make food education accessible and stress-free, staff created "food suitcases" - a creative and tactile learning tool. These suitcases contain laminated images of fruits and vegetables, alongside red, yellow, and green smiley faces. The smileys help guide a dialogue about healthy choices, with the green smiley signaling foods that are beneficial to eat regularly.

Importantly, this approach allows children to explore and learn about food without needing to be in the kitchen or handle ingredients directly. It gives teachers a concrete, cross-curricular tool to integrate food themes into everyday learning in a safe, supportive environment.

The overarching goal of the food school is to provide nutritious meals and to use food education as a way to enhance learning, life skills, and wellbeing.

At Engskolen, food becomes not only nourishment, but a pathway to confidence, curiosity, and connection - tailored to meet every child exactly where they are.



CANTINA S3: SERVING SOLIDARITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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The Cantina S3 project was launched in 2020 at Enric Valor Secondary School, which serves more than 700 students from Picanya and surrounding areas. Each day, the school lunchroom provides meals to 60 students and staff, and its canteen offers healthy snacks to the entire school community. The "S3" in the name stands for Healthy, Sustainable, and Solidarity - three core pillars that guide the project's actions.



This commitment to solidarity became especially meaningful on October 29, 2024, when Picanya was hit hard by devastating floods that affected much of Valencia. The town was left partially isolated, with damaged roads and bridges, and days without electricity, drinking water, or gas - even the school itself was impacted.

In response, the Cantina S3 team, alongside the educational community and local volunteers, took swift and compassionate action. After cleaning and preparing the school facilities themselves, they began offering food - both cooked meals and non-perishable items - as well as essential supplies to families who were unable to cook, shop, or travel for food.

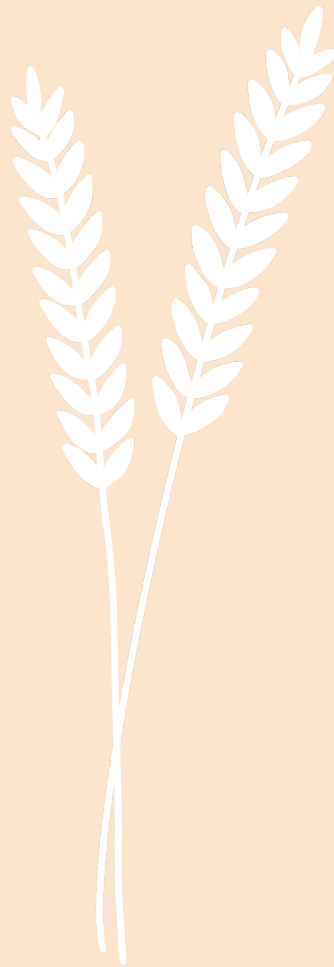
It began with simple offerings: sandwiches and water. By the third day, after securing butane gas, they were able to distribute hot meals, which families collected at the school. Food was sourced from unaffected municipalities, despite the significant logistical challenges.

Thanks to the remarkable solidarity and cooperation of the school and wider community, over 75,000 food rations were provided in just 12 days - a testament to the power of collective effort, compassion, and resilience in times of crisis.



SCHOOL BREAKFAST CLUB

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Breakfast clubs take place every school day, offering local students a warm and welcoming space to start their morning with a shared, nutritious meal. Served buffet-style, breakfasts feature fresh, well-balanced food with minimal processed ingredients. Children are active participants - helping younger classmates, tidying up, decorating the dining space, and sometimes even taking part in meal preparation.

While these clubs meet a fundamental need - addressing long-term hunger experienced by around 20% of pupils - their impact goes far beyond nutrition. They foster responsible eating habits, encourage food waste reduction, and promote the use of fresh, whole ingredients. For families facing economic hardship, they provide crucial relief while strengthening the connection between school and home.

The clubs also nurture community spirit and contribute to a more positive atmosphere in both the school and the wider city. Regular thematic breakfasts - featuring exotic fruit tastings or special gatherings like student council meetings with city leaders - introduce children to new experiences and open channels for civic engagement.

These daily moments of connection have a lasting impact. Breakfast clubs improve school attendance, boost student engagement in learning and extracurricular activities, and enhance focus and development. In this way, the school becomes more than just a place of education - it becomes a community hub, supporting well-being and social cohesion at every level.



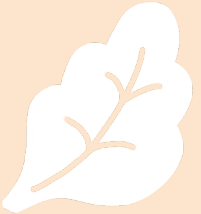
FREE SCHOOL MEALS FOR EQUITY AND HEALTH IN VIIMSI

Viimsi / Estonia

In Viimsi Municipality, every child receives a free hot lunch each school day, featuring a rich and colourful variety of salads. Twice a week, the meal is enhanced with soup and dessert, and children from low-income families are also offered a free breakfast to start their day right.

This initiative is a powerful commitment to health equity, ensuring that every pupil, regardless of socio-economic background, has access to nutritious, balanced meals. By prioritizing healthy eating habits, the program supports children's physical well-being, learning capacity, and daily energy levels.

Beyond nourishment, this effort helps to foster a school culture rooted in inclusivity and care, where food becomes a shared experience that nurtures not only bodies, but also a sense of belonging. It is a daily investment in both educational success and social cohesion.



THANK YOU!

As we close this edition, we extend our sincere gratitude to everyone who has contributed to the ongoing transformation of school food systems across Europe - especially those working to ensure that no child is left behind.

This issue has explored a critical theme: the valuable impact of the Whole School Food Approach on vulnerable groups. Behind every policy, project, and school meal is a child whose life can be changed. For low-income families, migrant communities, and those experiencing food insecurity, access to nutritious, sustainable, and culturally appropriate school food is not just a benefit - it's a lifeline, particularly in times of social and economic uncertainty.

The stories and insights you've read here, including those from experts like Professor Manuel Franco, highlight the urgent need to connect health, education, and social equity. They show us how schools can become powerful platforms for change: reaching the most vulnerable, improving public health, and strengthening communities.

We are deeply grateful for the tireless work of educators, school staff, municipal leaders, and partners who are bringing this vision to life. Your

efforts help ensure that school food is more than just a meal - it's a right, a support system, and a pathway to a more just and sustainable future.

However, the many good practices featured in this publication are more than inspiring stories - they are proof that local actors are already translating the Whole School Food Approach into concrete, impactful action on the ground.

However, their efforts cannot, and should not, stand alone. Meaningful, lasting change requires bold leadership, sustained investment, and political courage. Both local and national authorities have a crucial role to play in turning promising ideas into everyday realities, ensuring that no child is left behind. Let this serve not as a conclusion, but as a call to action. By investing in inclusive food systems, we are investing in something far greater: the health of our children, the strength of our communities, and the future of our planet. The time to act is now. The power to create lasting change lies in our hands - together, we can make it happen.

