

School Meals – Finland’s experience



Photo credit: Ulla-Majaja Hämmänen

More than 70 years of school meals

In Finland, free-of-charge school meals have been provided since the 1940s, with the aim of supporting children’s learning, nutrition, and health. Initially, school meals served to address post-war poverty and malnutrition. They also facilitated children’s equal access to education and improved their cognitive development. Nowadays, all pupils and students from pre-primary to upper secondary schools are entitled to a full meal each school day.

School meals are an investment in the future

- **Social protection:** School meals support equal opportunities and education for all, including girls and children from poor families.
- **Improved health and learning capacity:** School meals educate children in healthy diets and improve their learning capabilities.
- **Additional economic growth:** School meals support gender equality and make it easier for parents to work outside home, increasing female labor force participation, and thus supporting economic growth.
- **Stronger local economy and heritage:** School meals provide an opportunity to source local products and promote local food culture.



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Musketti: Kansatieteiden kuvakokoelma

The teacher distributes soup or porridge to pupils. Lunch is eaten in the classroom. Harjula school, 1950.



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An example of a typical school meal.

The Finnish model in a nutshell

Throughout the system, cooperation and trust between the authorities, municipalities and schools create the basis for a successful school meal scheme.

Some schools serve surplus food to the public after the school day for a small charge: no food waste.

Ministries and agencies provide funding, legislation, instructions and recommendations.

Pupils are encouraged to take part in the planning, implementation and evaluation of school meals.

All school kitchen staff must pass a hygiene proficiency test, the hygiene passport.

Municipalities take care of procurement, preparation and serving of meals and monitoring.

The Fineli database contains information on the nutrient content of over 4,000 foods and 55 nutrient factors of foods used in Finland.

Covering 30% of pupils' daily need of energy.

Accounting for 6% of costs of comprehensive school education.

Digital innovations support the planning of healthy and sustainable meals and assist in reducing labour, costs and food waste.

Strengthening equality, in particular during difficult economic times.

Participation in school meals and the quality of the food and the meal break are monitored and evaluated regularly.

More information

- School Meals for All-School Feeding Investment in Effective Learning – Case Finland
- Eating and Learning Together - recommendations for school meals
- <https://www.oph.fi/en/statistics-and-publications/publications/student-meals-benefiting-health-and-communities>
- Nordic nutrition recommendations
- <https://www.wfp.org/school-feeding>
- <http://www.fao.org/school-food/en/>
- <https://www.unscn.org/>

