

A WASTED OPPORTUNITY?

Leveraging school meals to reduce child hunger and improve academic success

Issue Brief – April 2024

The National School Nutrition Programme: combatting malnutrition in schoolchildren

The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), introduced in 1994, aims to provide nutritious meals to 9 million schoolchildren in 20 000 schools across South Africa. Evolving from the recognition of malnutrition's impact on education, it emphasizes nutrition education, community involvement, and sustainable food production. The School Governing Body (SGB) is responsible for the recruitment of community volunteers to prepare meals supported by the NSNP. Nutrition provision programmes such as these have been proven to reduce wasting and stunting in schoolchildren.¹ However, reports have identified problem areas in these nutrition provision programmes which can negatively impact schools.



Monitor the food supply chain to enforce healthy and good standards of practice

Source: SABC News



What can the President of the SGB do to maximize the NSNP's impact?

- 1** Provide culturally- and community- appropriate recipes to volunteers to improve meal taste.
- 2** Implement additional training for volunteers on hygienic food practices and preparation.
- 3** Appoint an SGB member to facilitate monitoring and evaluation of food quality and preparation (self or by DBE proxy).
- 4** Implementing regular feedback sessions with schoolchildren receiving meals to gauge their satisfaction.

Is the NSNP having the desired effects?

Within the past three decades, stunting has decreased by only 0.5% among primary schoolchildren, and surprisingly, increased by 1.5% among secondary schoolchildren². Furthermore, child hunger in South Africa reduced from 30.1% to 11.1%, however, increased from 17.1% to 18.0% in the Western Cape Province.³ Some success was achieved by the NSNP, however, preliminary findings and anecdotal evidence from both the Food-SAMSA and Adolescent MetS studies, in the Western Cape Province, show that schoolchildren are reluctant to eat the NSNP school meal. This reluctance among schoolchildren leads to hunger at

school, disturbed focus, weakened physical and emotional state, poor behaviour, and overall decline in health and academic performance.⁴ This highlights the opportunity to optimise the existing program, which holds promise for significant enhancements in child health and academic performance.

Implications

Recipes to improve meal taste

Community home recipes will be familiar to the schoolchildren and taste better, which should improve participation in the school meal programme. Given that the SGB is partly made up of parents, gathering home recipes that the schoolchildren enjoy could be easily facilitated. If the taste is not improved, schoolchildren will keep rejecting the much-needed nutritious meals.

Food preparation and training for volunteers

The DBE provides guidelines on food preparation, however, there is no reported formal training of volunteers⁷. The responsibility of training volunteers on food preparation and hygienic practices would thus fall on the SGB. The SGB does not necessarily have the capacity or knowledge to implement training. Hence, a cost-saving training approach could be to enlist committed parents to teach volunteers the recipes and food preparation. If food preparation practices do not improve, schoolchildren will continue to suffer from gastric consequences and avoid the meals.

Appointing a monitoring and evaluation officer

The DBE has a severely limited capacity of 21 officials to monitor compliance with their requirements, including the quality of meals served, and food preparation⁷. By appointing an invested SGB member to consistently monitor and evaluate compliance, food quality will improve, while the risk of food-borne pathogens will decrease.

Evaluating meal satisfaction

Determining meal satisfaction could be as easy as asking children who received the meal whether it was palatable and if they felt ill afterward. This process could also be formalized by introducing a quick survey to random students. Schoolchildren's feedback could highlight potential areas of improvement and flag concerning food preparation practices, which need to be urgently addressed.

References:

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Key findings

1 Schoolchildren are choosing not to eat the provided school meal because they find the food unappetizing due to bad taste and high incidences of diarrhoea and vomiting.⁵

2 Poor food quality and unhygienic food-washing practices expose schoolchildren to food-borne pathogens.⁶

3 The Department of Basic Education (DBE) monitored the meal quality and preparation compliance of a meagre 1.76% of the schools that have implemented the NSNP.⁷

4 There is no official evaluation of satisfaction among schoolchildren who eat the provided school meal.

This Issue Brief was developed with support from the Center for Evidence based Health Care (CEBHC) at Stellenbosch University.

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