

# How School Feeding Programmes Can Increase Enrolment, Reduce Dropout and Improve Learning Outcomes in Primary Schools

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**EVIDENCE FOR EDUCATION POLICY AND  
INVESTMENT**

**POLICY WHITE PAPER**

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## 1. Executive Summary

School feeding programmes are among the most practical policy instruments for improving children's access to education, strengthening nutrition and supporting household resilience. Evidence synthesised in this paper indicates that sustained investment in school meals is associated with higher enrolment and attendance, lower dropout, stronger concentration and improved performance in literacy and mathematics.

### Policy message

School feeding should be treated as an education investment rather than only a welfare intervention. Its effects extend across enrolment, retention, learning, gender equity, nutrition and local economic development.

Globally, approximately 84% of countries operate school-feeding programmes, and about 47% of primary-school children receive meals at school. Government-led programmes reportedly reach approximately 466 million children, compared with 388 million in 2020. Public spending increased from an estimated USD 43 billion to USD 84 billion between 2020 and 2024.

### Key messages for policymakers

- Expand predictable public financing for school meals, prioritising food-insecure and low-enrolment areas.
- Link school feeding to measurable education indicators, including enrolment, daily attendance, dropout and learning outcomes.
- Use home-grown school feeding models to connect schools with local farmers and strengthen local food systems.
- Build gender-responsive programme designs because attendance gains are often stronger among girls.
- Integrate nutrition quality, procurement transparency, monitoring and community accountability into programme governance.

## 2. Why School Feeding Matters

For households facing food insecurity, the daily school meal lowers the immediate cost of sending a child to school. For learners, regular meals reduce short-term hunger and support concentration. For education systems, these effects can translate into improved attendance, retention and classroom engagement. For local economies, home-grown procurement can create stable markets for farmers and employment throughout the food supply chain.

### Estimated return on investment

The source document reports that every USD 1 invested in school feeding may generate approximately USD 7-35 in combined social and economic returns. These figures should be interpreted as indicative ranges that vary by programme design and context.

### 3. Global Evidence at a Glance

| Indicator   | Reported level or change |
|---|--------------------------|
| Countries operating school-feeding programmes           | 84%                      |
| Primary-school children receiving school meals globally | 47%                      |
| Children reached by government-led programmes           | 466 million              |
| Children reached in 2020                                | 388 million              |
| Increase in children reached since the COVID-19 period  | 80 million               |
| Government spending, 2020-2024                          | USD 43B to USD 84B       |
| Additional children reached, 2022-2024                  | 21 million               |
| Additional children reached in Africa, 2022-2024        | 20 million               |
| Estimated annual jobs supported                         | 7.4 million              |
| Average national enrolment change linked to investment  | 3%-9%                    |

The scale of these programmes shows that school meals have become a central component of social protection and education policy. The sharp rise in public expenditure and programme coverage after 2020 also suggests that many governments increasingly view school feeding as part of education-system recovery and resilience.

#### Regional patterns in enrolment outcomes

| Region | Indicative enrolment outcome                    | Main explanation  |
|--------|---|---|
| Europe | Stable enrolment; stronger equity and inclusion | Established programmes and near-universal enrolment         |
| Asia   | 8%-15% increase                                 | Major expansion in large systems, including India and China |

| Region               | Indicative enrolment outcome | Main explanation  |
|----------------------|------------------------------|---|
| <b>Africa</b>        | 10%-18% increase             | High food insecurity and substantial unmet education demand             |
| <b>South America</b> | 5%-10% increase              | Improved retention among poorer learners                                |
| <b>North America</b> | 1%-3% increase               | Near-universal enrolment; gains concentrated in retention and nutrition |
| <b>Oceania</b>       | 3%-7% increase               | Stronger participation in food-insecure Pacific communities             |

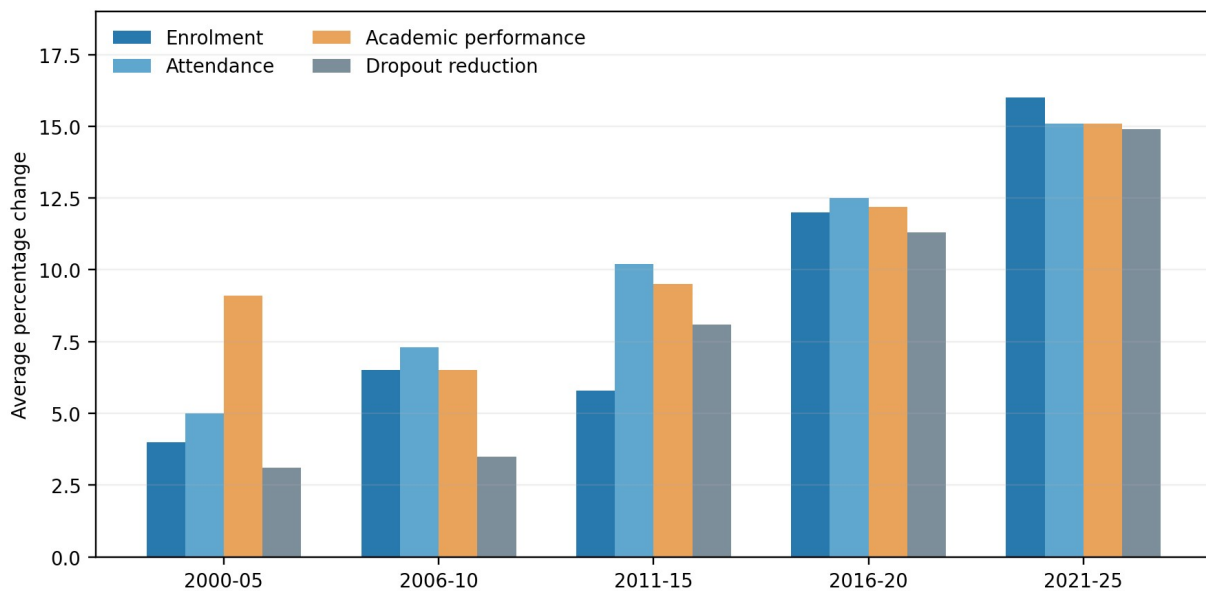
### Interpretation

The size of the enrolment effect depends on the starting point. Countries with near-universal enrolment tend to record smaller enrolment gains but may still achieve important improvements in attendance, nutrition and learning.

## 4. School Feeding in Africa

Africa has recorded some of the fastest growth in school-feeding coverage. The number of children receiving school meals reportedly increased by approximately 30% between 2022 and 2024. Expansion has been particularly notable in countries such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, Chad and Madagascar. Over the longer period, average enrolment in Sub-Saharan Africa increased from approximately 62.2% to 79% between 2000 and 2025, alongside broader education reforms and investment.

| Period    | Enrolment | Attendance | Academic performance | Dropout reduction |
|-----------|-----------|------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| 2000-2005 | 3%-5%     | 4%-6%      | 3%-15%               | 2%-4%             |
| 2006-2010 | 5%-8%     | 6%-9%      | 5%-8%                | 4%-7%             |
| 2011-2015 | 1%-10%    | 8%-12%     | 7%-11%               | 6%-10%            |
| 2016-2020 | 10%-14%   | 10%-15%    | 10%-14%              | 9%-13%            |
| 2021-2025 | 14%-18%   | 12%-18%    | 12%-18%              | 12%-18%           |



**Figure 1: Indicative changes in education outcomes associated with school feeding in Africa**

The pattern suggests progressively stronger outcomes after 2015. However, school feeding operates alongside other education policies, economic changes and social-protection programmes. The results should therefore be interpreted as associations rather than as the effect of school meals alone.

## 5. Gender Equity and School Participation

School feeding can be especially influential for girls in contexts where household food insecurity, care responsibilities and water-fetching duties affect school participation. The source data indicate that attendance gains among girls were consistently higher than those among boys between 2000 and 2020.

| Period    | Boys: attendance improvement | Girls: attendance improvement |
|-----------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 2000-2005 | 3%-5%                        | 4%-7%                         |
| 2005-2010 | 5%-8%                        | 6%-10%                        |
| 2010-2015 | 7%-11%                       | 9%-13%                        |
| 2015-2020 | 10%-14%                      | 12%-17%                       |



**Figure 2: Average attendance improvement after school-feeding expansion, by gender**

### Gender-responsive design

School feeding can improve gender equity most effectively when combined with safe sanitation, menstrual-health support, protection measures and community engagement that addresses the specific reasons girls miss school.

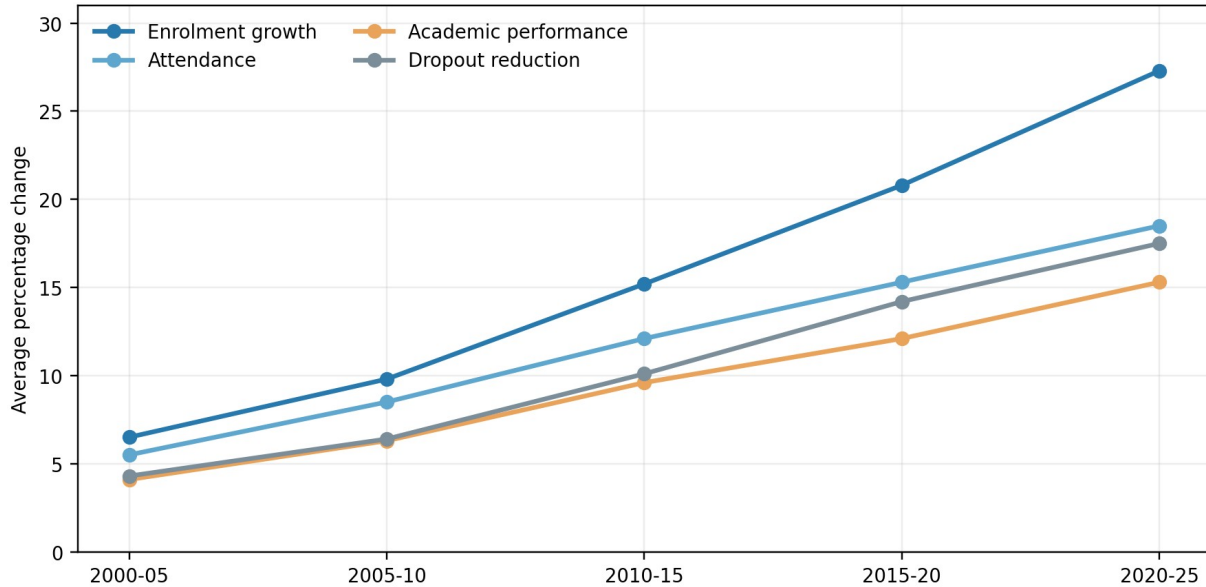
## Policy implications for gender

- Prioritise schools serving communities with large gender gaps in attendance and completion.
- Monitor programme participation and attendance separately for girls and boys.
- Coordinate school meals with water, sanitation and menstrual-health interventions.
- Protect girls from additional unpaid work associated with food preparation or programme delivery.

## 6. Evidence from Kenya

Kenya recorded substantial growth in primary-school enrolment between 2003 and 2020, alongside the introduction of free primary education and the expansion of school-feeding interventions. The strongest benefits have been observed in arid and semi-arid counties, drought-prone areas, pastoral communities and urban informal settlements, where food insecurity is more likely to interrupt schooling.

| Period    | Enrolment growth | Attendance | Academic performance | Dropout reduction |
|-----------|------------------|------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| 2000-2005 | 5%-8%            | 4%-7%      | 3%-5%                | 3%-5%             |
| 2005-2010 | 8%-12%           | 7%-10%     | 5%-8%                | 5%-8%             |
| 2010-2015 | 12%-18%          | 10%-14%    | 8%-11%               | 8%-12%            |
| 2015-2020 | 18%-24%          | 13%-17%    | 10%-14%              | 12%-16%           |
| 2020-2025 | 24%-30%          | 16%-21%    | 12%-18%              | 15%-20%           |



**Figure 3: Indicative changes in enrolment, attendance, performance and dropout reduction in Kenya**

The trends show stronger improvement over time across all four indicators. The largest gains occur in enrolment, followed by attendance and dropout reduction. Academic performance improves more gradually, reflecting the fact that learning outcomes also depend on teacher availability, instructional quality, class size, learning materials and home support.

## 7. Policy Priorities for Effective School Feeding

### 1. Secure predictable financing

Create protected multi-year budget lines and clear cost-sharing arrangements between national and county governments, development partners and communities.

### 2. Target areas of greatest need

Use poverty, food insecurity, enrolment, attendance and dropout data to identify priority schools and avoid politically driven allocation.

### 3. Strengthen home-grown procurement

Develop transparent purchasing systems that enable qualified local farmers and cooperatives to supply schools while maintaining food-quality standards.

### 4. Protect nutritional quality

Set age-appropriate meal standards, diversify menus and integrate food safety, clean water and hygiene requirements.

### 5. Link meals to learning

Track whether improved attendance translates into classroom participation and learning, and address teacher, textbook and infrastructure constraints.

### 6. Build accountable delivery systems

Publish budgets, menus, supplier information and delivery schedules; strengthen school-level oversight and grievance channels.

### 7. Plan for climate and price shocks

Use contingency stocks, flexible procurement and emergency financing so meals continue during droughts, floods and food-price spikes.

## 8. Results and Accountability Framework

| Results area  | Suggested indicators                                       | Reporting frequency |
|---------------|--|---------------------|
| Access        | Enrolment rate; new entrants; re-entry after dropout       | Termly              |
| Participation | Average daily attendance; chronic absenteeism              | Monthly/termly      |
| Retention     | Dropout and completion rates                               | Termly/annual       |
| Learning      | Literacy and numeracy performance; classroom concentration | Termly/annual       |
| Nutrition     | Meal coverage; dietary diversity; reported hunger          | Monthly/termly      |
| Equity        | Results by sex, disability, location and poverty level     | Termly              |

| Results area      | Suggested indicators                                     | Reporting frequency |
|-------------------|--|---------------------|
| <b>Economy</b>    | Local procurement share; suppliers and jobs supported    | Quarterly           |
| <b>Governance</b> | Delivery timeliness; complaints resolved; audit findings | Monthly/annual      |

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## 9. Recommendations

- 1. Adopt school feeding as a core education intervention.** Position meals within education-sector plans and budgets, with explicit enrolment, retention and learning objectives.
- 2. Prioritise universal standards with targeted expansion.** Set national service standards while initially concentrating additional resources in the most food-insecure and educationally disadvantaged areas.
- 3. Institutionalise evidence-based monitoring.** Build interoperable school-level data systems that connect meal delivery with attendance, dropout, assessment and equity indicators.
- 4. Scale home-grown models carefully.** Support local producers while preserving competition, food safety, value for money and reliable supply.
- 5. Strengthen coordination.** Clarify responsibilities across education, health, agriculture, social protection and county administrations.
- 6. Commission independent evaluation.** Use phased expansion and comparison designs to distinguish the contribution of school feeding from other education reforms.

## 10. Conclusion

School feeding programmes can help governments bring children into school, keep them attending and create better conditions for learning. Their strongest effects are likely in communities where hunger, poverty, drought and household vulnerability directly constrain education. The evidence also shows that programme design matters: reliable financing, nutritious meals, accountable procurement, local economic linkages and rigorous monitoring determine whether school feeding becomes a durable education investment or a short-lived welfare measure.

### Final policy takeaway

A well-designed school-feeding programme is not simply a plate of food. It is a coordinated investment in access, retention, learning, gender equity, nutrition and local resilience.

### Data note

This white paper reformats and synthesises the statistics and narrative provided in the source manuscript. The reported ranges are presented as indicative evidence and should be validated against the original datasets and cited studies before use in formal budgeting, impact evaluation or statutory policy documents.