



POLICY BRIEF 2021:8

Perspectives into topical issues in society and ways to support political decision making.

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The school meals of the future

Stronger cooperation and equal access to snacks

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The Finnish Government Programme of Prime Minister Marin includes the objectives of preparing a development programme for school meals and implementing a Finnish model for leisure activities, the aim of which is to provide pupils with free-of-charge and meaningful leisure activities as part of the school day. This new model for leisure activities also presents the need to develop the meals provided over the course of the school day, such as snacks, to ensure that pupils have sufficient energy to participate in both lessons and leisure activities.

Pupils' eating habits and the current state of school meals were studied in the Balanced School Lunch and Smart Snacks project. The results of the study were used as the basis for proposing measures for developing school meals. The aim of the proposed measures is to encourage policy-makers to promote efforts for making more attractive and increasing the quality of the Finnish innovation of equal and equality-promoting free-of-charge school meals. The proposed measures are aimed at national and municipal policy-makers, operators responsible for education and food services, principals and all adults operating in the school community.

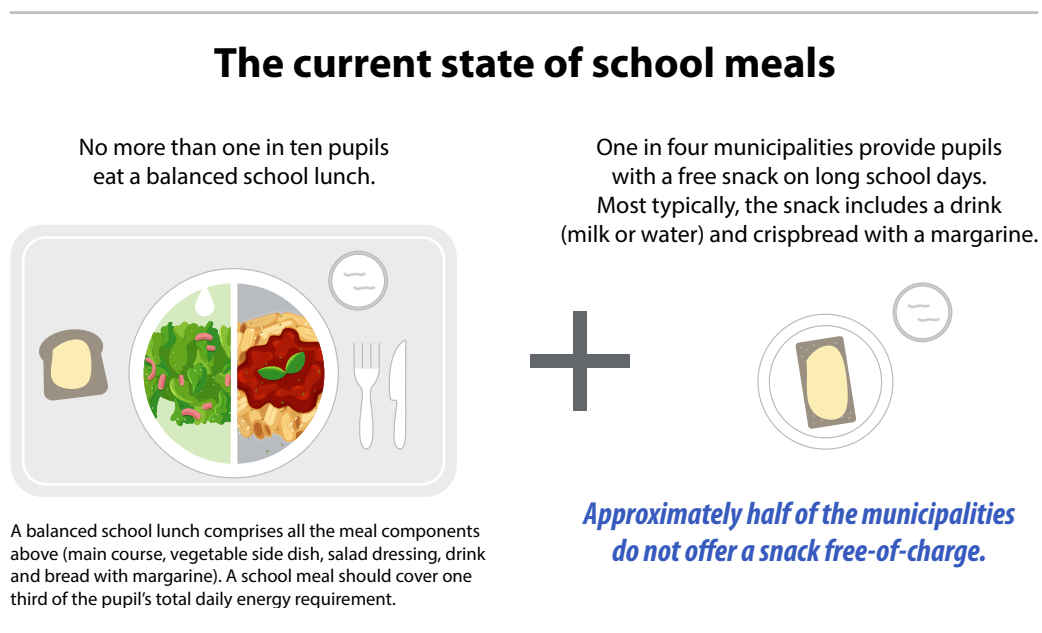
Measures for developing school meals

Providing pupils with a healthy snack as part of school meals

According to the national recommendations for school meals, a complete and nutritionally balanced **school meal** should cover **one third of the pupil's total daily energy requirement** and be **appropriately organised**.

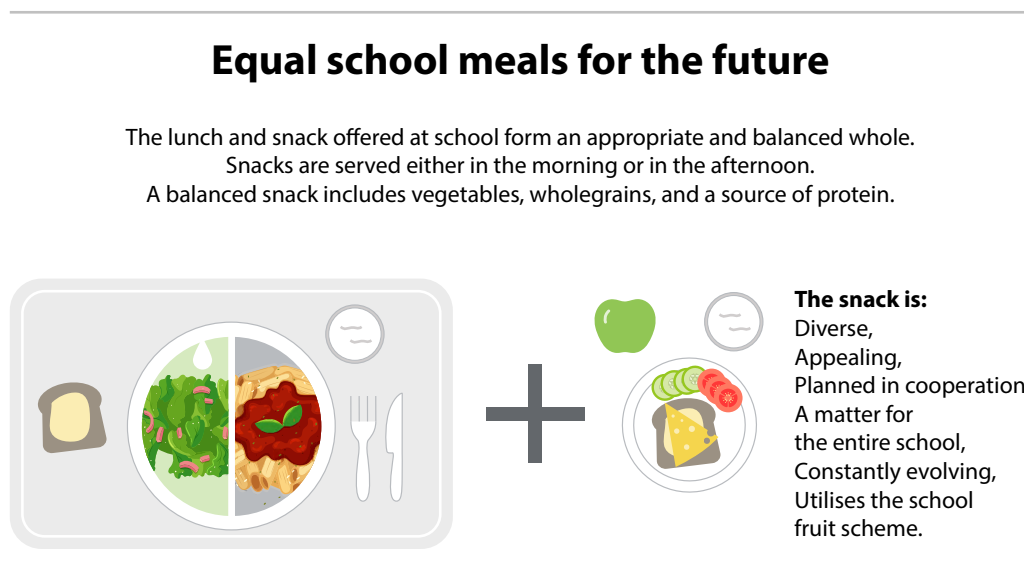
In practice, however, this recommendation is not followed by pupils. A complete and balanced school meal is eaten by no more than one in ten pupils, and the practices related to providing snacks at school differ significantly between municipalities and schools (Figure 1). This puts pupils in an unequal position depending on their place of residence. Over half of Finnish municipalities (56%) do not offer a free-of-charge snack to pupils, and 42% of municipalities offer a free-of-charge snack only to some pupils. Only one in four municipalities provide pupils with a free snack on school days that continue for more than three hours after lunch. The snack provided on long school days typically consists of a drink (milk or water) and crispbread with margarine. Snacks provided at school clubs for a fee are the most likely to be nutritionally balanced. Other snacks subject to a fee can also include products that contain plenty of salt, fat and added sugar.

Figure 1. The current state of school meals – school meals offered to pupils and the consumption thereof.



To ensure pupil equality, attention should be paid in the future on providing pupils with an appropriate, free-of-charge and healthy snack in addition to lunch (Figure 2).

Figure 2. A vision for equal school meals for the future.



In the future, the Finnish model for leisure activities may lengthen pupils' school days. In response, legislation should be updated so as to define the appropriate school meal as consisting of a complete and nutritionally balanced lunch and a snack (Figure 2). The principle of appropriateness must be concretely defined. In addition to this, instructions that are more practical than the ones currently in use and quality criteria, including examples, must be issued for providing snacks.

***School meals are ultimately a value issue for municipalities –
how much resources should be allocated for promoting
the health and well-being of young people?***

In the municipalities that responded to the survey, the average cost per pupil of a snack was €1.04 (range of variation €0.50–2.00), including ingredient and personnel costs. If the offering of snacks is expanded, municipalities will incur additional costs due to **food, personnel, transportation, equipment, facility and waste management costs**, depending on implementation. The costs incurred as a result of arranging snacks should be taken into account in the **central government transfers** paid to municipalities, and it is the duty of municipalities to prioritise **comprehensive funding** for arranging high-quality school meals. Additional financial support to municipalities is also available via the EU's school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme.

Streamlining the utilisation of the school fruit and vegetables scheme

School fruit and vegetable scheme products offered as snacks (vegetables, fruit and berries) can contribute to increasing the consumption of fruit and vegetables among children and young people, which is still too low in relation to recommendations. The utilisation of the EU's school fruit and vegetable scheme is still rather low in Finland. Of the municipalities that responded to the survey, only 35% reported having applied for aid for all of their schools under the scheme. In the future, the aid provided under the scheme can decrease the costs incurred as a result of arranging snacks.

According to our study, the utilisation of the school fruit and vegetable scheme could be promoted with the following measures:

- by allocating aid for the entire school year, expanding the range of products included in the scheme and allowing the reasonable sweetening of berries by amending national regulations,
- by clarifying the instructions for applying for aid and the aid system, and by providing the Finnish Food Authority with the resources for promoting these measures,
- by allocating funds from the national budget for providing aid under the school fruit and vegetable scheme in the event that the amount of aid available from the EU is exceeded.

Appointing a national school meal development and coordination group

According to our study, there is room for improvement in the food education cooperation between food services, the education sector and pupils, especially **in terms of collecting feedback from and promoting the participation of pupils**. Municipalities, schools and food services engage in very little information and experience sharing about school meals and food education with each other. However, there is a clear demand for information about the best practices of other operators as regards promoting pupil participation and the ways in which the providing of snacks is arranged, for example. One of the obstacles to sharing information about school meals and food education is the lack of an appropriate channel accessible to practical operators and different administrative branches.

The aforementioned challenge can be addressed by appointing a national school meal development and coordination group, the duties of which would include **information gathering, communication** and **facilitating cooperation** related to school meals and food education.

Increasing information about children and young people's nutrition, school meals and food education

Knowledge-based management and the systematic development of school meals require an extensive, high-quality and regularly updated knowledge base. At present, this knowledge base is lacking in terms of **children and young people's nutrition, school meals, comparable school meal costs and the food education provided by schools**. As regards children and young people's nutrition, national-level information gathering should be increased and the information should be more actively utilised in the future. In addition to this, a **commensurable reporting method** should be developed for comparing the costs associated with school meals. As regards school meals, information gathering would be handled by the **national school meal development and coordination group**.

Creating standard operating procedures for the arrangement of school meals during states of emergency

When Finland declared a state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, only some Finnish municipalities had contingency plans in place that covered the arrangement of school meals during a pandemic. During the state of emergency, information about the arrangement of school meals was received primarily from the authorities, colleagues and via food and education sector networks. Operators responsible for municipalities' food services and education would like state of emergency guidelines to be **more practical, take regional differences into account and increase multidisciplinary cooperation** in the future. National guidelines for arranging school meals during states of emergency should be updated based on experiences gained and best practices established during the COVID-19 pandemic. **The national school meal development and coordination group** would serve as the central operator in charge of **guidelines, communications and cooperation between different operators** related to school meals during states of emergency.

Parties responsible for the proposed measures

The development of school meals and food education requires cooperation between different administrative branches. Safeguarding equal school meals, ensuring the equal exchange of information and promoting the utilisation of the EU's fruit and vegetable scheme require national-level measures from both ministries and other government organisations. The consumption of balanced school meals promotes the health and well-being of school-aged municipal residents. The continuous development of school meals in municipalities reflects the values of the municipalities and municipal policy-makers. [The project's website](#) includes a checklist regarding school meals and food education aimed at municipalities and schools for the implementation of best practices (in Finnish).

Execution of the study

The Balanced School Lunch and Smart Snacks project carried out the study as part of the Finnish Government's analysis, assessment and research activities over the period of 1 April 2020–30 April 2021. The project was carried out by the University of Eastern Finland, the Finnish Professional Catering Association, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare and South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences – Xamk. The project was steered by a steering group that included representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

The source material for the study consisted of existing literature and unreported study material (Physical activity and nutrition in children (PANIC) study, Maistuva koulu ('Tasty School') study and initial assessment of the EU school distribution scheme), online surveys and interviews targeted at those responsible for municipal food services (n=154) and education services (n=135), expert interviews and workshops, which included expert representatives from different occupational groups.

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Further information:

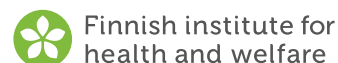
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The Balanced School Lunch and Smart Snacks project was carried out as part of the implementation of the 2020 Government plan for analysis, assessment and research.

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Government's analysis, assessment and research activities

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