

Case Study 3

Improving eating habits in India: The Eat Right School programme

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Background

The triple burden of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and rising overweight/ obesity, particularly among children, is threatening social and economic growth in India. At least half of boys (58.1%) and girls (50.1%) 5-19 years of age are underweight while approximately 9.9% of boys and 7.7% of girls are affected by overweight or obesity. Given that childhood dietary behaviours track into adulthood and food preferences are often formed during the school years, cultivating healthy food choices in school-age children via age-appropriate interventions is essential.

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) initiated the Eat Right School programme in 2017 as an interactive learning model designed to help schoolchildren to develop safe, healthy and sustainable eating habits. The FSSAI was established under the Food Safety and Standards Act 2006, primarily to set science-based standards for safe and wholesome food and to regulate its manufacture, storage, distribution, sale and import. As part of its core regulatory functions, the FSSAI sets globally benchmarked standards for food safety and uses surveillance mechanisms to monitor compliance and assess food quality.

The aim of the Eat Right School programme is to educate children about food safety and healthy diets, empowering them to take charge of tackling any kind of malnutrition by awareness and sensitisation activities. Within the programme, schools are certified as Eat Right schools based on points awarded for implementing Eat Right activities within the school curriculum and during extracurricular activities under the themes of 'Eat Healthy,' 'Eat Safe' and 'Eat Sustainable'. A number of interactive media strategies have been used to allow for the sharing of information and to provide an engaging digital environment.

The initiative began by training master trainers, including school principals, teachers, non-governmental organisation employees, independent experts and nutritionists, via in-person and online platforms. College students were subsequently included to act as mentors. Schools were guided through a 5-step implementation process using a comprehensive and user-friendly online portal. Via this portal, schools were registered, accessed information and nominated schoolteachers and/or parents as health and wellness coordinators. Schools were certified by the FSSAI using an online programme and Eat Right activities were implemented, often within existing school activities. A self-compliance assessment tool was used to monitor, evaluate and submit progress reports. Those schools com-

plying with the Eat Right Matrix were then awarded Eat Right School certificates.

The FSSAI created a rich repository of content that may be adopted into the school curriculum. All resources are openly accessible online and have been incorporated into the School Health Programme by the Ministries of Health and Education. Resources include:

- Information books ('The Yellow Books') and an activity book to provide age-appropriate information on healthy eating habits in 11 regional languages as well as fun-filled activities to reinforce key messages.
- A teacher training manual to provide an in-depth understanding of food safety and nutrition concepts that can be integrated into teacher training programmes.
- Food Safety 'Magic Boxes' and booklets that include over 100 easy hands-on tests and experiments to make food science relevant for students.
- Educational videos and games that cover topics of food safety, health, hygiene and nutrition and feature appearances from celebrities such as Virat Kohli, Rajkumar Rao and Sakshi Tanwar to engage students.
- Guidelines for the safe re-opening of school canteens that provide clear and actionable guidance for safe operations through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19.

The Eat Right School programme employs several engagement strategies aimed at children and adolescents, including:

- An Eat Right Creativity Challenge (ERCC) that capitalises on children's creativity to encourage healthy dietary habits. Two phases of the challenge were successfully completed in 2018 and 2020. In 2018, the ERCC included a range of activities: an 'On the Spot Poster' Competition, a Wall Art Competition, the Eat Right Sustained Champion School Competition and the Digital Creative Competition. In 2020, the challenge was conducted online due to COVID-19 restrictions and included poster making and photography on the themes of 'Eat Right a way of life' and 'Food safety during COVID-19'.
- An online Eat Right Quiz that uses an interactive learning process to engage students and encourage them to improve their food habits.
- Social media engagement focusing on various monthly thematic topics, including the health benefits and sources of various food groups and micronutrients, incorporating fruits and vegetables in the diet, mythbuster challenges and a 21-day challenge to reduce fat, sugar and salt intakes.

Results

To date, 53,043 schools have registered and approximately 50,000 activities have been conducted. For example, during the programme's introduction, 15,000 mascot activations were carried out in schools across the country to sensitise them to the programme and inform children and parents about healthy eating habits. Although school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic slowed the pace of the programme, efforts have been made to engage students through online webinars and competitions. For example, in 2018, over 75,100 students from 3,621 schools participated in the ERCC. During the second ERCC conducted online in 2020, a total of 4,587 schools participated.

Since the programme is voluntary, participation by schools has grown organically and the learning and experience of different stakeholders has informed the development of a self-compliance assessment tool: the Eat Right Matrix. While no data is currently available on the impact of the programme, a monitoring and evaluation strategy is being developed in collaboration with domain experts to be implemented once schools resume their normal routine. Since the certification programme is administered through an online portal accessed by school administrators and health and wellness coordinators, implementing a self-structured questionnaire via the portal will enable data collection over the period of certification.

Next steps

The FSSAI plans to continue the efforts via the online platform, as well as through parallel activities to improve school environments, with a focus on ensuring that children have access to safe, healthy food in and around school. To support this effort, in 2020 the FSSAI developed a new regulation, the Food Safety and Standards Regulation, focusing on safe food and balanced diets for children in school. It does not permit junk food (foods high in fat, salt and sugar) to be sold or marketed in schools or within 50 metres of the school gate. To ensure compliance, food safety commissioners of each state conduct enforcement drives and inspections to ensure the Eat Right School programme is implemented successfully, adhering to the regulations. Finally, finalising and implementing a robust monitoring and evaluation mechanism is a priority for the Eat Right School programme to assess impact and inform scale-up.

For more information, please visit the FSSAI's website at <https://eatrightindia.gov.in/eatrightschool> or contact the FSSAI at snfatschool@fssai.gov.in

References

Global Nutrition Report (2020) Country profiles: India. Available at: <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/asia/southern-asia/india/>