

## Scoping review on school food and nutrition policies

World Health Organization (2021). *Assessing the existing evidence base on school food and nutrition policies: a scoping review*. Geneva. WHO. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

The prevalence of overweight, obesity and diet-related noncommunicable diseases among children and adolescents is rising globally. Furthermore, the prevalence of wasting and stunting rates remains high in many low-income settings. The school setting provides an environment in which the health of children and that of the wider school community can be protected and promoted, making school food and nutrition policies a critical area when tackling malnutrition. However, there has been a notable weakening in school health and nutrition programming over the past decade. In response, the World Health Organization (WHO) is currently developing school food and nutrition policy guidelines.

This report presents the results of a scoping review conducted in 2019 to support the development of the WHO guidelines on school food and nutrition policies. The review identifies and maps existing evidence on the effects of school food and nutrition policies on health-related outcomes in children of school age. Policies and interventions were mapped in terms of their impacts on the following policy areas: school community, the school curriculum, the school food and nutrition environment and school nutrition and health services. The report does not discuss the effectiveness of the different policies and programmes.

A total of 69 reviews (67 systematic reviews and two protocols) were included in this scoping review. Of these, 66 assessed the effects of school-based policies or interventions and three assessed the factors influencing the implementation of interventions. In total, five systematic reviews specifically assessed food and nutrition policies. Of the 66 effectiveness reviews, the majority reported on primary and secondary school-aged children (n=20/66) or pre-school, primary and secondary school-aged children (n=17/66). Many primary studies included multi-component interventions, for example interventions that addressed the school curriculum and community. Overall, reviews that assessed the impact of policies or interventions on the school curriculum were most common (n=48/66) followed by reviews that assessed the impact of policies or interventions on the school food and nutrition environment (n=39/66), the school community (n=22/66) and school nutrition and health services (n=10/66). Interventions included many different activities including nutrition education, gardening, food procurement policies and the provision of food in schools. Nutrition policy options, including food and nutrient standards and pricing policies, were the subject of only a handful of reviews. Questions related to obesity and overweight dominated the evidence base; there were no reviews that assessed underweight, stunting or wasting. The most reported outcomes were anthropometric and diet-related.

The scoping review also identified key gaps in the existing evidence base. Going forward, there is a need for longer-term follow-up studies, more studies in lower-income countries, greater inclusion of theoretical models to support the implementation of interventions, more studies that make comparisons between interventions with and without parental participation as well as across socio-economic divides, the extension of outcomes of interest beyond the physical outcomes - to include cognitive and academic outcomes as well as environmental determinants - and more studies that assess the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of the interventions. Based on the findings of this scoping review, the WHO has commissioned a new systematic review to underpin its upcoming recommendations on school food and nutrition policies.



Save the Children International (2021) *Investing in the now and the future*. [Savethechildren.net](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net).

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/investing-now-and-future/>

Save the Children UK and Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Youth Leaders recently released a brief making the case for prioritising adolescent health and nutrition and setting out recommendations for governments to implement a gender-transformative, adolescent-responsive approach to health and nutrition. The brief provides model commitments for advocates, governments and donors and calls for governments to increase their commitment to invest in gender- and adolescent-responsive, integrated health and nutrition services. This global brief was created in recognition of the multiple commitment-making moments in 2021 and beyond (including the Nutrition for Growth Year of Action, the Global Financing Facility Replenishment Event, the UN Food Systems and Lives in the Balance Summits, Family Planning 2030 and the Generation Equality Summit) and the opportunity these moments present to further adolescent health and nutrition. The brief also aims to equip national advocates and youth leaders with an interest in adolescent health and nutrition with a clear briefing explaining why this issue is important and what needs to be done.

### Key content and recommendations

The brief provides a summary of the challenges that adolescents face in gaining access to health and nutrition services and maintaining their health, nutrition and economic wellbeing – these barriers include stigma and discrimination, dependence on support from others and adolescents falling between the services designed for children and those designed for adults. It highlights the increasing de-prioritisation and reduced investment in adolescent health and nutrition in this critical period when adolescents face increasing health risks and gender inequities further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It uses programme evidence and experience from SUN Youth Leaders to demonstrate barriers and opportunities for adolescents

## Investing in the now and the future: Why governments should commit to adolescent health and nutrition

in nutrition and health and provides an evidence-informed resource demonstrating the links between gender equity, girls' empowerment and health and nutrition.

The brief calls for adolescent-responsive health and nutrition systems and gender-transformative approaches. An adolescent-responsive approach is a systems approach that integrates adolescent services into each building block of the health and nutrition system and adapts policies, procedures and programmes to respond to the unique and diverse needs and preferences of adolescents. Gender-transformative approaches attempt to promote gender equality by (i) fostering a critical examination of inequalities and gender roles, norms and dynamics, (2) recognising and strengthening positive norms that support equality and an enabling environment, (3) promoting the relative position of women, girls and marginalised groups and transforming the underlying social structures, policies and broadly held social norms that perpetuate and legitimise gender inequalities. The brief identifies the core components of adolescent-responsive and gender-transformative minimum services. These include (i) how systems can specifically support adolescents, (ii) specific measures to improve nutrition, including through community entry points, (iii) how information environments can promote stigma-free access to services and (iv) measures to address and transform gender inequalities in health and nutrition outcomes.

Finally, the brief sets out nine model commitments that governments can make to deliver on adolescents' right to health and nutrition amongst others, emphasising the importance of a multi-sector, integrated approach that adopts adolescent responsive health management information systems, partners with adolescents and youth at all levels of policy and programming and allocates increased domestic resources to strengthen health and nutrition systems and to improve the quality of care for adolescents everywhere.