



GLOBAL DAIRY PLATFORM

Perspective Paper

Feeding Futures: The Business Case for Dairy's Role in School Meals



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KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- School feeding programs represent one of the world's largest and fastest-growing public investments in nutrition, creating long-term opportunities for foods that deliver both health and economic value.
- Scientific evidence demonstrates that well-designed school feeding programs improve nutrition, educational participation, learning outcomes, and long-term human capital while influencing dietary habits and healthier food cultures that support local agriculture and resilient food systems.
- Dairy is uniquely positioned to contribute to healthy school food environments because it combines nutritional quality, local production, processing capability, and operational scalability.

In recent years, governments have made one of the largest public investments in nutrition in history, increasing their investment in school meal programs by 20 percent from 2020 to 2024.¹ Globally, approximately 466 million children receive **school meals** every day through programs representing an estimated USD 84 billion in annual investment. Nearly 99% of this funding comes from domestic government budgets, reflecting a shift from development assistance toward long-term national policy.¹

For the dairy sector, this is more than an avenue to better nutrition: it's market potential. Governments are not simply purchasing school meals. They are investing in healthier populations, stronger local food systems, and the dietary habits of future generations. In doing so, they are creating procurement systems, strengthening domestic agriculture, and shaping food environments that will influence consumption patterns for decades.

Few investments align public health priorities with commercial opportunities as effectively as school food environments, which is why governments are paying closer attention to how these programs are designed and funded.

Why Governments are Investing

The World Health Organization (WHO) 2026 **Guideline on Policies and Interventions to Create Healthy School Food Environments** reflects a broader shift taking place across global nutrition policy. Historically, school feeding programs were viewed primarily as social protection initiatives designed to reduce hunger and improve school attendance. Today, governments increasingly recognize them as investments in human capital.²

Analyses from the World Food Programme and partners estimate that school meal programs generate up to USD 35 in economic returns for every USD 1 invested, reflecting improvements across health, education, agriculture, local economies, and social protection.¹ Few government

investments produce benefits across so many sectors simultaneously. This explains why national investment in school feeding continues to expand.

School Food Environments Shape Future Consumers

Perhaps the most overlooked value of school feeding programs is that they shape food environments during the years when lifelong eating habits are established. Schools can influence food preferences, social norms, food literacy, and expectations about healthy diets in ways few other institutions can.^{1,2} This is of particular importance because many nutrition challenges such as undernutrition, hidden hunger, overweight, and obesity are shaped as much by food environments as they are by individual food choices.²

Japan illustrates this well. Its long-standing national school lunch program integrates meal provision with nutrition education, food literacy, and agricultural awareness. Rather than treating school meals as an assistance program, Japan incorporates them as part of the educational experience to help children understand healthy diets, seasonal foods, and connections to local agriculture.³ Studies have associated Japan's comprehensive *Shokuiku* programming with lower rates of childhood overweight and obesity compared with other high-income countries.⁴

The recent WHO guidance is reflective of this type of programming. Rather than focusing on changing individual behavior, WHO encourages countries to build healthier school food environments that make nutritious choices easier and more accessible, ultimately normalizing them.² Healthy food environments reduce the burden placed on both consumers and manufacturers by creating systems where healthier choices become the default rather than the exception.

The Opportunity for Dairy

School food environments create demand for foods that are nutritious, practical to deliver at scale, compatible with local agriculture, and supported by reliable supply chains. Few food categories align as naturally with those objectives as dairy.

Milk and dairy foods provide high-quality protein together with calcium, iodine, vitamin B12 and other nutrients important for growth and development. Equally important, dairy systems already possess many of the characteristics governments seek when designing school feeding programs. They can source from local farmers, support rural economies, and operate across both smallholder and commercial production systems.

Further, dairy nutrition can be delivered through refrigerated, fermented, powdered, or shelf-stable formats depending on local context. In other words, dairy is not simply another food supplied to schools; it is part of the infrastructure that makes healthier school food environments possible.

School Feeding Creates Markets as Well as Meals

One of the most significant opportunities for the dairy sector lies beyond the school gate. Countries investing in school feeding programs are simultaneously investing in procurement

systems, processing capacity, agricultural value chains, and domestic food production. Those investments strengthen local food systems while creating stable institutional demand that benefits producers, processors, distributors, and communities.

These opportunities are not confined to emerging markets. Even as school feeding programs expand rapidly worldwide, implementation remains highly variable. Many countries, including high-income economies, continue to operate fragmented, regional, or limited programs rather than comprehensive national systems. Others are actively redesigning school food standards in response to rising obesity, persistent micronutrient deficiencies, and growing interest in healthier food environments.

For dairy leaders, this represents an opportunity to engage early in shaping the next generation of programs, helping define the standards, sourcing models, and product formats that will guide school feeding for years to come.

Alignment of Public and Private Sector Priorities

Nutrition policy rarely aligns so closely with commercial opportunity. Governments want healthier populations, parents want healthier children, and schools want students who are ready to learn. Farmers need reliable markets and communities need resilient local food systems. The dairy sector contributes to all of these wants and needs, making it part of the solution to some of the world's most pressing nutrition and health challenges.

DAIRY LEADERSHIP: A CALL TO ACTION

The dairy sector should be actively involved in creating healthy school food environments worldwide because they represent long-term investment in healthier populations, stronger food systems, and future consumers.

The global dairy sector should:

- **Advocate for evidence-based school feeding programs in markets where national programs remain absent, fragmented, or underdeveloped.**
- **Partner with governments, multilateral organizations, educators, and public health leaders to position dairy as a trusted contributor.**
- **Invest in research that demonstrates not only the nutritional outcomes of comprehensive feeding programs, but also their implementation models, economic returns, local procurement effects, and contribution to food system resilience.**
- **Innovate on delivery, including shelf-stable products, local sourcing approaches, and scalable processing solutions that expand access across diverse markets.**

For more information on the Global Dairy Platform's Perspective Papers, please reach out to Dr. Beth Bradley at beth.bradley@globaldairyplatform.com.

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