

Review of the EU school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme

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The EU school scheme has been evaluated as an overall effective instrument with potential to enhance the consumption of products that contribute to healthy and sustainable diets. Also, the combination of supply and demand measures is a cost-effective lever to benefit both health, farmers and public budgets alike and thus to simultaneously and coherently contribute to the objectives presented in the Farm to Fork Strategy, in Europe's Beating Cancer Plan and in the European Child Guarantee (1). However, this potential is undermined by a small budget (2) and other shortcomings mainly concerning its coverage (3); the definition of eligible products (4); and the distribution and implementation methods (5). Beyond suggestions for specific improvements, EPHA invites to consider an update to the basic nature of the school scheme to improve its contribution to the transition towards sustainable food systems in line with EU policy. This could be achieved by transforming the EU school scheme into a wider instrument to financially support the advancement of healthy and sustainable public food procurement in schools (6).

1. Policy coherence

Current dominant European diets are not sustainable from an environmental and public health perspective. This is especially illustrated by the rising concern of childhood obesity, with 1 in 3 11-years olds being overweight or obese in the WHO European region ([WHO, Data&statistics](#)). In this context, the revision of the EU school scheme offers great opportunities to align with the ambitious targets of the Farm to Fork Strategy for the creation of a favourable food environment that makes it easier to choose healthy and sustainable diets (Action 25); but also, as part of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan to improve health promotion through access to healthy diets and physical activity (Action 3.4). And finally, as presented in the European Child Guarantee, to ensure effective and free access to at least one healthy school meal each school day for all children at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

2. Budget

The potential of the EU school scheme to contribute to public health objectives by promoting the consumption of fruit, vegetables and milk among schoolchildren together with educational activities is huge. But the current budget is too small to reach ambitious targets and to enable all children and schools to fully benefit from the scheme. For the 2017-23 period, an amount of €250 million per school year was set, of which up



to €150 million for the distribution of fruits and vegetables and up to €100 million for milk. This budget is then broken down by country, but it remains inadequate to ensure effective educational activities combined with the distribution of various fruits, vegetables and milk for all 76,2 million European pupils ([Eurostat, 2020](#)).

Also, the inception impact assessment and the individual country reports indicated that the use of the available budget does not reach 100%; for instance, France only used 10% of its allocated envelope in 2017/18 ([France school scheme strategy 2017-2023](#)).

Recommendation:

- Gradually increase the budget for this scheme, in line with increased take-up, and enhance co-financing rates for schools in economically deprived areas where vegetable and fruit intake is especially low.
- Ensure national strategies make full use of their envelope to widely tackle the decreasing consumption of fruit and vegetables and to reconnect all schoolchildren to primary food production.

3. Coverage

The EU school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme should benefit all European school children throughout their school years, from nurseries to upper secondary level education, to effectively promote “healthy eating habits and the consumption of local products” from the youngest age.

However, the [2019/20 summary report](#) on the implementation of the scheme indicated that only [19,1 M](#) children in [142,1 k](#) schools participated in the programme, while 76,2 million pupils are enrolled in the European education system ([Eurostat, 2020](#)). This report also showed that only 4 countries distributed fruit and vegetables on a daily basis, and 6 supplied children with milk every day. Thus, most of the schools do not regularly offer the products to schoolchildren but only make them available under the educational measures, such as tasting or cooking workshops or theme days.

Recommendation:

- Ensure inclusive participation of all member states and of all kinds of schools, from nurseries to upper secondary education to ensure all children benefit from the scheme and no one is left behind.

4. Eligible products

The EU school scheme contributes to efforts to reduce overweight and obesity by simultaneously promoting the consumption of fresh or processed fruit and vegetables but also of milk and selected milk products in line with national dietary



recommendations and food based dietary guidelines. Moreover, school schemes' main long-term value is when children effectively discover and become accustomed to the variety of tastes and organoleptic qualities of vegetables and fruits, building acceptance, especially of vegetables, at a young age and providing a knock-on effect for food choices throughout life ([EPHA, 2016](#)).

However, the fact that products distributed through the scheme may contain "*limited*" quantities of added sugar, salt and/or fat is worrying despite the need for authorisation by national health authorities. In this light, the proposal made in the inception impact assessment to reconsider these current exceptions and the further possibility to include other products, such as plant-based drinks and/or whole grains, which are part of a healthy and sustainable diet, could be an effective way to ensure school schemes' main long-term value.

Recommendation:

- School schemes distributing processed vegetables and fruit products, but also milk products should apply nutrient profiling to determine which products, according to levels of salt, saturated fat and/or sugar, may be distributed to children. Only products that conform to health, environmental and ethical criteria, as well as cultural products from the region and/or using short supply chains, should receive EU co-financing.
- School schemes should be used as an opportunity for schoolchildren to discover and to be sensitized to new products, which are not always popular among children, such as plant-based alternatives and/ or whole grains products.

5. Distribution and implementation methods – a potential cost-effective new approach to the scheme

As already highlighted, EU school schemes have great potential to increase the consumption of the eligible products, but also to contribute to viable healthy and sustainable food production and consumption. Thus, it is a cost-effective tool to address the concerning issue of childhood obesity by combining the distribution of fruit, vegetables, milk, but also plant-based and whole grain products, children are not used to, with educational measures.

The impact assessment introduces the possibility to enlarge the model of distribution to exploit synergies with breakfast initiatives and distribution of regular school meals. In this light, the revision of the EU school scheme could go hand in hand with the revision of public procurement guidelines to support healthy and sustainable public food procurement in schools.





Recommendation:

- Ensure both sourcing of vegetables and fruit and the educational elements are combined into one consistent activity, for the EU school scheme to achieve its full potential.

6. Leverage funding under the School scheme to support sustainable innovation in national and local public food procurement policies.

The transition towards more sustainable and healthy public procurement practices, as envisaged by the Farm to Fork Strategy, will involve transition costs ([EPHA & HCWH, 2019](#)). Even if a more sustainable procurement contract is not necessarily more costly, different accompanying measures will be needed to effectively operationalise a sustainable procurement strategy. Such costs include training, the additional time and effort needed to review procurement processes, investments into enabling infrastructure and so forth. The EU could provide significant added value to communities and schools, especially those with fewer resources, to support the implementation of innovative food procurement strategies, especially in light of the minimum procurement standards to be proposed by the EU.

Recommendation:

- Consider mechanisms to transition the EU school scheme into an instrument to financially support for healthy and sustainable public food procurement in European schools, to maximise the transformative potential of this measure.

The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) is a leading European NGO alliance advocating for better health in EU policies. Food Systems & NCD Prevention is a priority policy area. <https://epha.org/>

