



5th Annual Research Statement to the Members of the School Meals Coalition

*Prepared by the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition,
an initiative of the School Meals Coalition*

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Task Force edition – prepared for the Ministerial Meeting of the School Meals Coalition Task Force,
Rome, 14 October 2026

For the attention of Task Force member states:

Introducing a consultation on the Research Consortium's 2027–2031 Strategy

The 2026 Task Force Ministerial Meeting of the School Meals Coalition occurs at the halfway point of the Research Consortium 10-year research strategy – a period in which the Consortium has grown into a global network of 1,500 experts based across Coalition member states, and an additional 120 million children worldwide have gained access to school meals. The Consortium's success so far has rested on the Task Force's recognition of the value of independent, nationally-led evidence to guide decision-making. As it prepares for the next five years, the Consortium is therefore turning first to Task Force countries for guidance, opening a consultation phase to inform the development of its 2027–2031 strategy.

The Consortium will introduce this process briefly during its presentation at the Ministerial Meeting on 14 October. In the months that follow, it will consult Task Force countries, then Coalition partners and members of the Global Academy, to develop its research strategy for 2027–2031, which will be presented at the School Meals Coalition 3rd Biennial Global Summit in 2027. As a starting point, the Consortium has identified three emerging priorities on which it would particularly welcome the Task Force's reflections:

1. Deepening alignment between the Consortium and the other Coalition Initiatives, so that scientific and technical expertise is matched with financing and programmatic action;
2. Establishing or formalising regional research hubs that build on existing regional peer-learning networks; and
3. Decentralising the Consortium's leadership so that it becomes increasingly Southern-led and regionally rooted.

The Consortium looks forward to working closely with Task Force countries over the coming months to ensure that its next five years are shaped by the priorities of the governments it serves.

About the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition

The Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition was launched in 2021 to provide all members of the School Meals Coalition with access to independent, quality-assured evidence in support of their shared mission: a nutritious school meal for every child by 2030.

To this end, the Consortium generates and synthesises research on the design and benefits of school meals programmes, distilling it into practical approaches that policymakers can apply in their own national contexts. At the heart of this work is the Consortium's Global Academy: a "brains trust" of more than 1,500 researchers, policy advisors and practitioners based across 137 countries – the Coalition's member states plus 24 countries considering membership. The Academy is organised into seven thematic Communities of Practice, each responding to a specific evidence need identified by member states: nutrition; good practice; value for money; food systems transformation; planet-friendly approaches; impact across sectors; and learning from Brazil.

Evidence is produced and disseminated at the national, regional, and global levels. *Nationally*, the Consortium works with Global Academy members based in each Coalition country, often the main advisors to their governments, to help analyse the national programme, identify good practice, and estimate returns on investment. *Regionally*, it partners with established regional bodies and learning networks to compare programmes across neighbouring countries and share common lessons. *Globally*, it produces and shares public goods that strengthen the evidence base for all countries – including systematic reviews of impact, seminal white papers, high-impact journal articles, and contributions to influential cross-sector policy guidance – helping to establish school meals as a mainstream public policy investment. Its work is made possible by the support of a broad range of development partners.

About this statement

This is the Research Consortium's Fifth Annual Research Statement.¹ As in previous years, this statement reports new programmatic and policy insights that have emerged from the Global Academy's analyses since the previous edition – building on the insights that were presented to Coalition policymakers and parliamentarians at the School Meals Coalition 2nd Biennial Global Summit in Fortaleza, Brazil, in September 2025.

The Statement was prepared by the Research Consortium as an input to the School Meals Coalition for the parliamentarians and policymakers of its member countries, and draws on analyses led by the Global Academy, as indicated under each finding below.² Part 1 summarises the new evidence generated over the past year and its implications for policy; Part 2 describes how evidence is being put to use by governments and regional institutions; and Part 3 reports progress against the priorities set in the 2025 Statement and sets out priorities for the year ahead.

¹ The 2022 – 2024 Annual Research Statements can be accessed here: Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition. Policy Insights for national school meals programmes: Annual Research Statements to the members of the School Meals Coalition – 2022, 2023, 2024. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 2025 (13). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2025.1416165> and the 2025 Annual Research Statement can be accessed here: <https://doi.org/10.17037/PUBS.04677497>.

² Disclaimer: Please note that the views presented in this paper are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the School Meals Coalition and its members.

Part 1. New Policy-Relevant Evidence on the Impact, Benefits, and Design of School Meals Programmes

1. **An updated systematic review reinforces evidence that school meals programmes improve children's health and educational outcomes, while sharpening estimates of where those effects are strongest.** Building on an earlier 2007 review of 18 studies, an updated 2025 Cochrane review evaluated 40 studies and found moderate-certainty evidence of improvements in height-for-age and weight-for-age among children in low- and middle-income countries, while evidence on reducing the risk of unhealthy weight gain remains very low certainty, given the limited number of studies examining overweight and obesity. Among academic outcomes, the review found high-certainty evidence of improvements in school enrollment and math performance, with little to no effect detected on attendance or reading. While the estimated effects on growth, enrollment, and math scores are modest at the individual level, they carry meaningful implications at the population level, and the review reinforces that school meals programmes generate an important return on investment for children — especially those facing the greatest disadvantage, while still benefiting all children.

The Impact & Evidence Community of Practice of the Research Consortium; additional sources: [1-2]

2. **Economic analyses continue to demonstrate that school meals programmes represent good value-for-money at both the national and sub-national level.** National value-for-money analyses, conducted with government counterparts, are now complete or underway in 16 countries. These analyses continue to estimate benefits within the range of \$3–\$9 per \$1 invested. Disaggregating these findings shows that the returns are not confined to a single sector: the evidence attributes part of the benefits to immediate gains in health, nutrition, and school retention; and part to indirect effects on local agriculture and jobs. This growing evidence base is what allows the value for money of school meals programmes to be defined with increasing precision.

The Analytics & Metrics Community of Practice of the Research Consortium; additional sources: [3-13]

3. **Analysis of national school meals case studies published over the last five years identifies 40 good practices across nine domains.** The vision is to help governments document national programmes in all 113 member states of the School Meals Coalition, and to use this global evidence to identify "what works." Comparing published case studies through an approach grounded in solutions science identified 40 good practices, validated against the scientific literature and grouped into nine domains — including the development of nutritional standards for school meals, the use of locally sourced foods through quotas and facilitated procurement procedures, and the strengthening of governance, notably through the establishment of multisectoral coordination structures. This work has been consolidated into a *good practices toolbox* to support policymakers and implementation stakeholders. In parallel, two new indicators now make it possible to map 99 countries according to the extent and quality of school meals programme implementation, by combining the number of meals served per year with programme coverage and dietary diversity. This analysis has highlighted country programmes showing positive deviance — those that have succeeded in implementing more-efficient-than-average programmes despite limited resources — with political commitment and intersectoral coordination emerging as particularly important factors. In a new development with the Cities Feeding the Future Initiative, the case study methodology has now been adapted to municipalities, extending the analysis and sharing of good practices at the sub-national level, starting with Milan and Montpellier.

The Good Examples Community of Practice of the Research Consortium; additional sources: [14-53]

4. **Emerging evidence from a seminal White Paper points to school meals as a meaningful, if still under-realized, lever for diet-related cardiometabolic disease (CMD) prevention across the life course.** A Consortium-led White Paper, developed with contributions from more than 115 global experts from 71 organizations in 44 countries, discusses that diet-related CMDs in middle age remain among the leading causes of death worldwide and diet is the leading modifiable risk factor, making school meals programmes a natural point of intervention. The White Paper finds that school meals consistently improve dietary intake, diet quality, and micronutrient status, with the largest gains in low- and middle-income settings where nutritional deficits are greatest, and that these effects appear to spill over into what children eat at home and among peers. Health impacts are most consistent for anthropometric outcomes in middle-income settings, with metabolic marker improvements observed specifically where meals meet high nutritional standards; medium- and long-term evidence on direct CMD endpoints remains limited, though modeling studies project substantial population-level impact at scale. Across the evidence, meal quality — not provision alone — emerges as the active ingredient: programmes with binding nutritional standards show measurably stronger effects, underscoring that investment in coverage without parallel investment in quality is unlikely to deliver on this potential. Evidence gaps remain most significant in low-income countries, where the CMD burden is rising fastest.

Penholders of the Research Consortium's second White Paper:³ Patricia Eustachio Colombo, SubbaRao Gavaravarapu, Jacqueline Kung'u, and Bruno Valim Magalhaes; additional source [54]

Part 2. From Evidence to Action: How Research is Shaping Policy and Practice

1. **Updated benchmarks offer the most robust understanding to date of the costs of delivering school meals, which can support programmatic design to meet the gap between what is currently spent and what is needed to meet children's nutritional needs.** A joint research team including representatives from the Research Consortium, CGD, IFPRI, GCNF, and WFP has updated a comprehensive set of national programme cost estimates using a detailed process, last applied in 2009, to examine data from 181 school meals programmes. Average yearly programme costs ranged from US\$36 per child in low-income countries to US\$487 in high-income countries; when standardized to a typical 200-day school year delivering 700 kilocalories per meal — roughly one third of daily energy needs — costs rose to a range of US\$82-US\$640 per child. Critically, most programmes across all income groups fell below both the 200-day and 700-kilocalorie benchmarks simultaneously, suggesting that underinvestment in both the duration and the nutritional content of provision is widespread, and is often used by countries as a means to manage costs. While the absolute cost of school meals rises with national income, the relative cost as a share of education expenditure declines — from approximately 20% in low-income countries to a more manageable 6% in high-income countries — underscoring that school meals represent a proportionally heavier fiscal burden precisely where need is greatest and resources most constrained. These findings reinforce the case for adequate and sustained financing of school meals programmes, with nutritional quality treated as a condition of investment.

Research Consortium Secretariat, CGD, IFPRI, GCNF, and WFP; additional sources [55]

³ The first White Paper developed by the Research Consortium is entitled, "School meals and food systems: Rethinking the consequences for climate, environment, biodiversity, and food sovereignty" and was published in 2023. The White Paper can be accessed here: <https://doi.org/10.17037/PUBS.04671492>

2. **Application of diet-modelling tools at the country level suggest that planet-friendly school meals can simultaneously improve children's nutrition and health as well as reduce diet-related disease and adverse environmental impacts.** Following the publication of a seven paper collection in *Lancet Planetary Health* on school meals as a catalyst for food-systems transformation, a new Diet Impact Assessment tool was trialed in partnership with government, policy, and research institutions in Kenya and Rwanda, using government-approved school meals scenarios: in Kenya, a more diverse diet could reduce undernourishment from 20% to 15% and increase the share of diet-related deaths avoided from 3% to 12%, while in Rwanda, improved meals were estimated to reduce undernourishment by around 770,000 people among the primary-school population, with reducing food waste key to managing the associated costs and environmental impacts. Separate modeling of clean cooking transitions, using real-world school cooking data, found that in Kenya, electric pressure cookers could make some meals at least 50% cheaper than improved firewood stoves and reduce water use by 24.6%, while also highlighting the need for reliable electricity and adequate appliance capacity to realize these gains.

The Diets & Planetary Health Community of Practice; additional sources [56-63]

3. **Aligning school meal procurement with regenerative agriculture practices, through school and community gardens, is increasingly translating into concrete policy and institutional pathways.** Emerging evidence from multi-country research in Rwanda, Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria has shown that these practices can improve dietary diversity and nutritional quality while catalysing wider adoption of regenerative agriculture and policy change. Building on this evidence base, National Communities of Policy and Practice (CoPPs) on regenerative school meals have now been established in Nigeria, Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, and Ethiopia, with further CoPPs planned for Morocco and Tunisia. The CoPPs have already catalysed tangible policy engagement: in Rwanda, the Ministry of Agriculture is providing policy and operational support to regenerative school farms; in Kenya, the CoPP has opened important conversations on water policy in arid and semi-arid lands; and in Nigeria and Ghana, the national agencies responsible for food systems transformation are being engaged directly in policy design for regenerative school meals.

The Food Systems Transformation Community of Practice; additional sources [64]

4. **Regional and national networks are increasingly driving school meals research, policy, and practice, with new research hubs emerging from collaboration among national institutions in Africa, India, and Latin America (LAC) and the Caribbean.**
- **Africa:** Nutritionists from the African Nutrition Society (ANS), the Federation of African Nutrition Societies (FANUS) and the International Malnutrition Task Force (IMTF) of IUNS came together in 2026 to establish the African Technical Working Group on School Feeding (ATWG), fostering regional collaboration among researchers, governments, and partners to harmonize standards, promote home-grown approaches, and address shared challenges such as sustainability and dietary quality.
 - **India:** The M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) established the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) Centre for Advanced Research on Climate-Resilient and Nutrition-Sensitive Food Systems Across the Life Course. This Center will generate evidence on the interconnections between climate, food systems, nutrition, and health and foster interdisciplinary research on school meals.
 - **LAC and Brazil:** School meals academicians established the School Feeding Researchers Network (REDPAE) to strengthen research partnerships on this topic, initially in Brazil and now within the region as a whole, in part by linking with existing regional structures, such as the School Feeding and Sustainability Network for Latin America (RAES).

Together, these examples point to a common insight: durable progress on school meals increasingly depends on the strength of networks — connecting researchers, institutions, and governments to translate ideas into action.

Nutrition COP and Brazil Research COP; additional sources [65]

Part 3. Progress and Priorities: Developing Global Goods to Support Coalition Member States

A. Progress on the five objectives for 2026 as outlined in the 2025 Annual Research Statement

Below are the five research priorities outlined in the 2025 Annual Research Statement, with a summary of progress to date:

Objective 1: Synthesize accumulated evidence on effective and cost-effective national school meals programmes: The Research Consortium advanced this objective on three fronts: it continued national value-for-money studies with government counterparts, with key findings across the analyses completed being published in *Nature Health*; it grew the collection of country case studies underway or completed to 55; and it continued to consolidate and disseminate the latest evidence on how school meals affect human capital outcomes.

See also Part 1, paragraphs 1 – 3

Objective 2: Support the roll-out of a new school meals planetary health toolkit: Together with academicians and government counterparts in Kenya and Rwanda, the Research Consortium trialled its diet-impact assessment modelling tool, then convened delegations from seven countries – Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia – to preview how this and other tools can help governments strengthen national programmes.

See also Part 2, Paragraph 2

Objective 3: Quantify the potential for school meals procurement policies to drive food systems transformation and support regenerative agriculture and agroecological practices: New Communities of Policy and Practice (COPPs) have been established in seven countries, brought together under an umbrella regenerative food system alliance. The CoPPs facilitate peer learning, stakeholder engagement and capacity building on this topic.

See also Part 2, Paragraph 3

Objective 4: Develop a new White Paper focused on the role of school meals in non-communicable disease prevention: The Research Consortium led a multi-partner White Paper with academics and institutions globally to assess the potential for nutrient-dense and diverse school meal programmes to prevent or reduce non-communicable diseases in middle age, with dissemination anticipated in early 2027.

See also Part 1, Paragraph 4

Objective 5: Develop an AI-powered evidence synthesis tool to enhance access by Coalition member states to the Research Consortium's evidence base: Building on the Global Academy's multisectoral evidence base, the Research Consortium has developed an AI-powered tool that synthesizes this evidence into clear policy-insights; its beta version is

now being tested by the Academy to determine its utility with delivering high-quality evidence on demand for policymakers.

See also Part 3, Section B, Paragraph 2

B. The Research Consortium's primary research objectives over the coming year

The following five areas were identified by governments of the 113 School Meals Coalition member states, partners, and the Global Academy of 1,500 experts as priority research areas. We are currently exploring our capacity to undertake these five areas of research.

1. **Better methods for countries to use to evaluate the multisectoral impact of their national school meals programmes.** To begin this process, we are currently exploring methods and techniques with the Governments of the Philippines and Indonesia, both of which are rolling out new programmes.
2. **Expand existing efforts to use case studies of national programmes to help identify good practices and innovation.** To accelerate this process, we are seeking to undertake case studies of all School Meals Coalition member states national programmes in the continent of Africa. The Consortium's new AI-powered evidence synthesis tool will draw upon these case studies, along with the broader evidence base generated by the Global Academy, to help make this research more accessible for decision making.
3. **Explore the role of programme planning tools to support governments in the design of cost-efficient and planet-friendly school meals programmes.** The Consortium will trial novel methods for identifying how interventions such as improved school meals quality might help address dietary micronutrient deficiencies, starting in the Dry Corridor of Central America, in partnership with the Inter-American Development Bank. In parallel, the Consortium will explore how to best consolidate complementary tools to school meal planning and evaluation, including for menu design and food waste reduction, clean cooking, local and regenerative sourcing, WASH, and geospatial planning for procurement.
4. **Better methods to evaluate the dietary quality of school meals.** The Consortium's White Paper on school meals and CMD prevention found that meal quality, rather than provision alone, is what drives health impact – but realizing this potential depends on understanding the composition of school meals menus that are delivered in practice.
5. **Improve the evidence on the role of school meals on transforming food systems and promoting the use of regenerative school foods.** This will build on the momentum of existing national Communities of Policy and Practice, and the potential role for interdisciplinary advisory bodies at the national level to explore related issues such as gender and social inclusion, policies and regulations, metrics and indicators, and supply chains.

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