

Offering nutritious meals to students can improve diets and counter obesity across Europe

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When the lunch bell rings at the Sancta Maria primary school in the Belgian city of Leuven, standard packed meals aren't on the menu for dozens of hungry children.

Instead, the pupils receive freshly prepared, hot organic vegetarian fare delivered daily to the school canteen. The meals come by bicycle from nearby, purpose-built kitchens belonging to "Foodatelier César"—a service set up by a parent keen to promote healthy diets.

Eye-opening menus

The students are participating in a project that received EU funding to improve the nutritional value of meals served at schools across Europe. Called [SchoolFood4Change](#), the four-year initiative runs until the end of 2025.

At Sancta Maria and two other schools in Leuven, a medieval city located 25 kilometers east of the Belgian capital Brussels, the new menus were introduced in November 2023. Some early resistance by [children](#) has waned as they get accustomed to the cuisine, according to Tom Berghmans, the parent behind the catering service.

"We notice that the way the food is served, who serves it and what they do to motivate the children play an even bigger role in getting them to try new things than the taste itself," said Berghmans, a local architect who has two children getting to sample the new school offerings.

SchoolFood4Change features 3,000 schools and 600,000 children in total across Europe. The cities represented are in 11 EU countries besides Belgium: Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden.

The goal is to make healthy food a regular part of children's lives. With

obesity on the rise in Europe and awareness growing of industrial agriculture's threat to the environment, the idea is to instill in young people an appreciation of eating habits that benefit both people and nature.

Whole view

The European branch of a global network of local and regional governments known as [ICLEI](#) is running the EU project.

"We're looking not just at getting the food on the table but also at how it gets there and the potential, from an educational point of view, to help foster healthier diets and eating habits," said Amalia Ochoa, head of sustainable food systems at ICLEI's Freiburg office in Germany.

Who produces the food, where it comes from and how meals are prepared are all of concern to SchoolFood4Change—in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as well as the EU's [Farm to Fork](#) strategy.

In what it calls a "whole school food" approach, the project encourages cooperation among small farmers, schools, local food suppliers and caterers.

"This approach looks at the bigger scheme of things—of achieving a healthy and sustainable food culture in and around schools, including public procurement of food, training school chefs and getting the chefs and farmers that grow the food to work with children," said Ochoa.

In making sure that every participating child has at least one healthy meal each school day, the project is also contributing to an EU goal to ensure [free school meals](#) for all children in need in Europe.

In 2022, almost [1 in 4](#) people under the age of 18 in the EU was at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

"For children from disadvantaged families, lunch may be the only good meal that they have," said Ochoa. "Some schools are also looking at breakfast snacks because many children are coming to school on empty stomachs."

She said that numerous cities in SchoolFood4Change are working with schools in more disadvantaged areas but not exclusively because children in general are considered a vulnerable group.

Obesity influences

Poverty can increase the likelihood of obesity by limiting people's access to healthy foods.

Roughly one in three children in Europe is overweight or living with obesity, according to a 2022 [report](#) by the World Health Organization.

Obesity, which can lead to diseases such as diabetes and cancer, has drawn the attention of Professor Franco Sassi, director of the Center for Health Economics and Policy Innovation at Imperial College London in the U.K.

He led an EU-funded research project that examined the spread of childhood obesity in European countries and what policy responses would be the most effective.

Called [STOP](#), the project wrapped up in November 2022 after more than four years and brought together researchers from across Europe as well as from New Zealand and the U.S.

Using cutting-edge techniques to measure biomarkers in children and identify the main factors linked to obesity, the experts concluded that its origins begin before birth.

The health of both parents starting from before conception, and particularly of the mother during pregnancy, plays an important role. This suggests that tackling obesity in children requires addressing the health of young mothers.

"We need to ensure that women of child-bearing age are able to have a healthy lifestyle and live in an environment that is conducive to healthy choices," said Sassi.

Poverty link

The STOP research also reinforced the connection between obesity and poverty.

Living in disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances entails a number of risk factors for obesity, according to the project.

These factors include neighborhoods that lack green spaces and are difficult or unsafe for children to walk through, an excess of food outlets that typically sell little or no fresh fruit and vegetables and a high share of fast-food stores.

STOP also identified that children who get more than 30% of their calories from ultra-processed foods—junk food—are much more likely to become obese early in life.

Sassi said regulation is an effective way of making healthy choices the easy option, not only by limiting the number of fast-food shops in any neighborhood but also by encouraging suppliers to produce intrinsically

healthier products.

"Incentives for industry to reformulate their products make it a lot easier for people of low socioeconomic status to eat healthy diets," he said.

In the U.K., for example, a tax on sweetened drinks prompted a fall in consumption and pushed manufacturers to drop the sugar content by 40%.

STOP suggests such taxes could be widely extended to food products as well as drinks.

Back to school

The researchers examined ways to help families tackle weight troubles in children and to build obesity-prevention programs into regular school activities.

The project tested an app for parents meant to encourage physical activity for their children and improve food choices.

It enables parents of pre-school children to log their intake of sugary foods as well as fruits, vegetables and drinks. Feedback comes at the end of each week—as do regular notifications with tips drawn from current diet and exercise guidelines for pre-schoolers.

The app was trialed in Romania, Spain and Sweden by 150 families. While the results are still being analyzed, the app could lead the way in making treatment for early childhood obesity more accessible and effective, according to Sassi.

The STOP team also worked with national public health agencies in six European countries—Estonia, Finland, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia and

Spain—to identify the barriers to stepping up physical-activity programs at schools.

The inspiration was a [school](#) program in Slovenia that improved access to sports and regularly monitored children's fitness levels, providing a benchmark for the pupils and their families.

While such arrangements cost money, they should be seen as a long-term investment in public health, according to Sassi.

"In the overall scheme of things, compared to the running of schools generally, it's a minor investment that is required," he said. "The intervention is justified by its benefits going forward, including in terms of reducing future medical expenditure."

Meanwhile, back in Leuven, Berghmans emphasized how a little imagination can help children overcome resistance to healthier meals and even ultimately embrace them.

He said that, at one of the Belgian schools taking part in SchoolFood4Change, pupils willing to try a meal they frown on receive a gold-colored spoon as a recognition.

"Especially for the younger children, this is a game changer," Berghmans said.

More information:

- [SchoolFood4Change](#)
- [STOP](#)
- [International School Meals Day](#)

- [Food2030](#)

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