



Food and Agriculture
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From school cooks to school cooks

Top tips and recommendations for supporting
tasty and enjoyable school meals

School meals are important, and in many cases critical, for children's nutrition and education all over the world. In most countries the planning and preparation of these meals need to follow careful guidance to ensure that they are nutritious and adequate to students' requirements.

However, there is seldom guidance on how to ensure that such meals are actually eaten and enjoyed by most children.

Here are some tips and recommendations that school cooks around the globe have shared in an effort to help others with this endeavour.

Add colourful fruits and vegetables and play with dish presentation



- If possible, use two or more veggies/fruits of different bright colours in recipes or dishes that have low acceptability.
- If possible and available, use different-than-usual/atypical colour vegetables, such as non-orange carrots.
- Cut up fruits that are wasted the most.
- Use different cutting techniques for the same veggies/fruits to increase interest.
- Use (well washed) raw vegetables, to add a “crunch” to meals, like legume-based dishes.

Use different culinary techniques and ingredients

- Blanch veggies (especially cruciferous like broccoli, cauliflower, cabbages, radishes and other greens) to maintain a firm texture, bright colour and flavour.
- Avoid adding too much oil or fat to dishes, especially when there are longer waiting times for children to eat.
- Try out various techniques, such as marinating, reducing sauces or toasting spices, to add more flavour to meals.
- Ensure that foods such as starchy cereals are not overcooked to avoid “mushiness”.
- Use lemon juice to avoid fresh foods, like apples and bananas, going brown.
- Ensure that dishes are served at adequate temperatures, to avoid undesired changes in texture and taste.



Prepare meals with flavours familiar to children

- Use local herbs and spices that are common in typical dishes, for example lemon and cilantro in Mexico, berbere in Eritrea, curry mixes in India, cumin in Lebanon or achiote in the Caribbean.
- If possible, prepare special meals during festivities and traditional days, while following nutrition guidelines.
- Combine familiar foods or dishes with less-familiar ingredients.



Support an eating environment that encourages healthy eating and enjoyment of foods

- Encourage school officials to invest in making pleasant the space where children consume their meals.
- Propose low-cost ways to make the meal space more appealing, such as having children draw their favourite meals and hanging them, or using preserved greens and wildflowers to adorn the space.
- Inform school officials if children take too long in queuing, resulting in their meals going cold or in children rushing to eat their meals.



Use products from school gardens to familiarize children with nutritious foods

- Propose to school authorities and teachers that implement the garden curriculum to conduct simple demonstrations on how to prepare delicious meals using foods from the school garden.
- Use herbs and aromatics from the school garden to add flavour to soups, salads and mixed dishes.
- Use produce picked by the children themselves to prepare meals on the same day.
- Use simple but creative signs to highlight which ingredients in the day's menu were grown in the school garden.



Support more sustainable preparations that are also delicious

- Keep track of food waste as an indication of which dishes and preparation are least accepted. Ask students what specifically they dislike about these dishes, and enquire what they propose to make them tastier.
- Use (clean and safe) veggie discards to make stock for cooking staples and soups.
- If possible, experiment with legumes as main dishes, such as having lentil burgers.
- Use seasonal ingredients also to maximize flavour, fragrance and freshness.
- Share details with children on how the ingredients for their meals were sourced and prepared, to spike their interest.
- Ask school staff about how sustainability is included in the curriculum, and think of ways of using the meal preparation to exemplify main lessons.



Important note: all tips and recommendations are subjected to food availability and flexibility in procurement; and availability of adequate storage, preparation and serving infrastructure and equipment. They should never put compliance with nutrition and food safety guidelines and standards at risk, and are meant as examples of what can be tried out.