

## Lebanon: Our Meals, Our Voice

### What's this about?

World Vision is leading the School Meals Child-led Research initiative, a unique effort that ensures children's voices are at the centre of shaping school meals programmes. Across 13 countries, children took the lead in asking questions, gathering stories, and sharing what matters most to them about school meals. They explored critical root causes, gaps and potential solutions, always through the lens of their lived experiences in schools.

The study used a qualitative approach, including semi-structured interviews, a discussion to validate findings, and an open letter to communicate our concerns. The data collected by child researchers was analysed thematically, reflecting the priorities and perspectives of their peers.

In Lebanon, this child-led research is part of World Vision's ENOUGH campaign, which amplifies children's voices in national, regional and global advocacy efforts. By listening to children and learning directly from their experiences, this initiative highlights not only the challenges faced by children in Lebanon, but also their aspirations for a future where every child can thrive and enjoy nutritious meals at school.

### Our Country

Lebanon, our beloved country, is facing one of the world's worst economic crises, leaving many households unable to afford basic food needs and driving widespread food insecurity across the country. In Lebanon, there is no national school-feeding programme and has the lowest coverage of school feeding programs in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, with only 6% of children receiving meals through the World Food Programme in 2022 (Al-Jawaldeh et al., 2023). According to the World Food Programme, about one in five people in Lebanon, around 1.17million individuals, is now acutely food insecure.

In the North governorate, which includes our city of Tripoli, households experience high rates of moderate or severe food insecurity (Hoteit et al., 2021). In times like these, school meals are no longer an option, but an essential need for our well-being. And we know it works. Studies done right here in Lebanon, including one with refugee students, showed that when kids get a healthy snack at school, they eat better, get healthier, and are more likely to come to school (Jamaluddine et al., 2020). The World Food Programme (2022) found providing school meals directly resulted in improved concentration among students in class by alleviating their short-term hunger. However, the report concludes that this initiative alone is not sufficient, it needs a comprehensive enabling school environment as when combined with other essential services as nutrition education, health programs, and psychosocial support. Despite all this evidence, there is still no proper school meal program for all students across Lebanon. This leaves a huge gap for us, students, especially in cities like Tripoli where we need it most. We are missing basic support that could protect our health and our chance to get a good education.

## Who We Are

We are a group of young students, aged 12 to 17, from the Al-Tebbaneh and Zehrieh neighborhoods in Tripoli, Lebanon, who wanted to share what school feels like when there are no school meals. We did this research because many people do not know this is a problem. **We want to raise awareness among children, parents, schools, and the government, so that school meals become a reality.** We did this research to share our ideas and the voices of other students like us, so that more people see why having school meals really matters.

## What We Did

This is part of a wider research project that brings together children from many countries to discuss ways to improve school meals. We all shared our views on why school meals matter, what is missing, and what we want to see change.

We created three questions to help us understand other children's experiences and thoughts. The questions were about the roles of school meals in children's lives, children's preferred types of foods and ingredients, and children's recommendations. The research was conducted between May and June 2025, using interviews and observations, which included us as child researchers. We spoke with students from different backgrounds, especially those living in the most vulnerable communities where poverty and school dropout rates are high. We asked our peers to share their experiences and collected the input of seventy-four children. After data collection, we reached the following findings.

## What we see at school

When we asked students about school meals, we found a profound understanding among students that food is not a separate part of the school day, but the very fuel that powers it. Every child we spoke with agreed that school meals are essential for health, learning, and well-being. This highlights that school feeding programme is not merely about providing food; it addresses essential needs that support students' education and mental and physical health, and it helps to reduce social disparities.

Most of the students linked a simple meal to enhanced concentration and improved academic performance. Results showed **28** mentions stating that school meals help them concentrate in class, and reports of enhanced energy levels recurred **20** times. One of the students said, **"School meals are very important – they give students energy and focus throughout the school day and improve performance."** The link between meals and improved academic performance was further reinforced, with the theme of 'academic support' emerging **12** times. This was powerfully captured by one student's explanation: **'School meals are important – they help students focus and feel energetic, increasing class participation and preventing fatigue and hunger.'**

School meals change our mood too. Some students described how feeling hungry leads to distraction, while nourishment allows them to engage fully with teachers and lessons, transforming classroom time from a countdown to lunch into a period of active participation.

For several, school meals have a direct emotional influence; some students specifically considered the meals a "mood changer," and others described them as a source of vital emotional support. One student said, 'I love school meals because they improve my mood. For example, when I'm hungry, I feel irritable, but after eating, I smile and have energy to participate'. Another student added, 'School meals give us vitality and energy to continue studying and focus with the teacher. Hunger distracts us and makes us wish the day would end quickly'. This highlights how children see school meals' influence on their psychological and physical state.

For some students, school meals are a key form of compensation for food insecurity and perceived economic relief for their parents who struggle to provide. One student said, "School meals are very important – some students don't have food at home". Many of us arrive at school without breakfast because our families cannot afford it. The thing that drives some of us only eat cheap snacks from the school kiosk, but these are often unhealthy and overpriced, sometimes costing double what they do outside school. Another student added "School meals are important for educational and economic reasons. Some parents can't provide food or drinks. During recess, some kids have nothing to eat and feel embarrassed when asked why."

School meals provide us with a sense of equality. One student said, "When food is the same for everyone, students don't feel differences between rich and poor. It's beautiful to share one table." For us, hunger doesn't just make it harder to study; it affects how we treat each other. Students who have food sometimes bully those who don't. When our classmates suffer from malnutrition, instead of helping them with food, parents just pull them out of school to avoid embarrassment. In this context, a shared meal means no student feels the shame of an empty lunchbox, creating a community where everyone, regardless of their family's means, can sit at the table as equals, cared for and ready to learn.

### **A proper school feeding program can:**

- Help more children come to school
- Help children do better in their studies
- Prevent children from dropping out of school
- Make children healthier and stronger
- Support children's wellbeing
- Establish a sense of equality between children

### **Do adults listen to us?**

Most of us have never been asked what we think about the food served at our schools or if we need school meals. But almost all of us say that school meals are needed. We also want to be heard. Right now, it feels like everyone says they can't help. Parents say they're incapable of doing so. Schools say they're incapable of doing so. The government says it's incapable of doing so. So, who can take responsibility? Are we supposed to sacrifice our education, health, and

future? Should we drop out of school just to take control of our lives and earn enough to eat? We believe children should be involved in decisions that affect us. We're ready to share our ideas, and work with schools and leaders to make them a reality. In our open letter to the Ministers of Education, Health, and Social Affairs, we said clearly that school meals are not just about food; they are about giving children the chance to stay in school, learn better, and be healthy.

### What We Would Like to See

We described our school meal preferences in terms of ingredients and types of food. Our collective vision for ideal school meals is one that honors both our health and our right to enjoy what we eat, while also respecting our traditions and culture. This is reflected in our requests, where demands for proteins and fruits within school meals were the highest, recurring **32** times each. The call for vegetables, dairy products, and carbohydrates widely recurred across answers, each of which mentioned **29** times. One student said, “**Meals should be diverse and not boring – not the same food every day.**” Our shared commitment to healthy eating was powerfully underscored by the fact that almost one in four students specifically emphasized this value. As one of the students clearly mentioned, ‘**Meals should be light, healthy, and fat-free – no fried food – to give energy.**’

We envision meals that are fundamentally filling yet light, and nutritionally complete, prepared based on the principle of incorporating balanced food group and served early during the school day, when we need the energy. We also demand to have safe, hygienic, and allergy-friendly meals to ensure that every student, regardless of his diet restrictions, can enjoy school meals without exclusion.

Our meals should have healthy and fresh vegetables like cucumber, which was requested by eleven students, and carrots. For fruits, apples and bananas were favored, with nine and five mentions respectively. Proteins like cheese, a top request from twenty students, in addition to eggs were essential. The request for wholesome sandwiches was strong, with eighteen students mentioning labneh, thyme or cheese; among these, labneh sandwiches were a standout choice for eleven students some students suggested incorporating manakeesh, pizza, pasta, and whole grains on a rotational basis. **Twenty-one** students proposed to have these meals paired with beverages like milk, water and orange juice. According to **17** students, meal experience would be completed with the occasional joy of snacks like nuts, cakes or chocolate to create a fully satisfying meal.

#### *Here's what we want:*

- *Meals that high in protein for all students*
- *Nutritious meals with fresh fruits and nuts*
- *Food that respects our traditions and meets our health needs*
- *Meals to be served during the school day, when we need the energy*

## What we'd change

We strongly advocate for our schools to provide healthy meals and guide us toward healthy eating habits through practical nutrition education that explains why certain foods benefit our bodies and minds. As one student suggested, ‘Offer nutrition lessons every two months and explain the benefits of healthy meals to encourage students to eat them.’

Our hopes extend beyond the contents of a lunchbox, reaching for a future where our voices shape our well-being. We ask for a system that supports student participation in meal selection to ensure that our preferences are respected. One student powerfully asked, “Why don’t they ask us what we like? Some students like certain types of meals and sometimes they return home hungry if they didn’t like the meal provided.” Another student said, ‘Ask us what we like instead of giving us food we dislike and end up throwing away’.

We recommend to have a school committee that empowers students to effectively participate in creating weekly school menus based on collective preferences. One student said, “I suggest to create a student committee to choose and monitor meals,” highlighting the need for a participatory approach to meal planning and monitoring that ensures the consistent inclusion of allergy-friendly options, the provision of sufficient large portions and adherence to key standards as food diversity. Another student added, “Meals should be available in sufficient quantity and with variety—change the menu every month.”

Some students requested for the school administration and Ministry of Education to support school meals provision through collaboration with parents, NGOs, or even by including school meal fees within tuition fees. One student mentioned “Parents could organize a gathering to provide free food for children.” Another student said: “There should be free light meals for everyone – enough to satisfy hunger and distributed daily. Restaurants with surplus food should package and donate it to schools.”

We call upon our leaders to turn this vision into action, to answer the simple, urgent question of “Why not provide every student in Lebanon with healthy, tasty, and affordable meals that meet everyone's needs?” We hope for a Lebanon where no student has to choose between learning and eating and for schools that care about our health, our happiness, and our future.

We imagine a school where girls and boys feel welcome, safe, and are treated with dignity, where the smell of freshly cooked food fills the school. A school with a clean kitchen where cooks prepare hot, healthy Lebanese meals every day: rice and vegetables, lentils, fresh salad, some protein like chicken or meat, and maybe even soup on cold winter mornings. A school that listens to our ideas and adapts its rules to prioritize our health. A student noted the need to adapt eating time. A designated eating area is important for children: “We picture a bright dining space where we can sit together with our friends, laugh, and eat without shame or worry.”

Our message is simple: Our voice matters. Our school meals matter. Our future matters.

**Reference:**

Al-Jawaldeh, A., Matbouli, D., Diab, S., Taktouk, M., Hojeij, L., Naalbandian, S., & Nasreddine, L. (2023). School-based nutrition programs in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(22), 7047. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20227047>

Hoteit, M., Al-Atat, Y., Joumaa, H., Ghali, S. E., Mansour, R., Mhanna, R., Sayyed-Ahmad, F., Salameh, P., & Al-Jawaldeh, A. (2021). Exploring the impact of crises on food security in Lebanon: Results from a national cross-sectional study. *Sustainability*, 13(16), 8753. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13168753>

Jamaluddine, Z., Choufani, J., Masterson, A. R., Hoteit, R., Sahyoun, N. R., & Ghattas, H. (2020a). A community-based school nutrition intervention improves diet diversity and school attendance in Palestinian refugee schoolchildren in Lebanon. *Current Developments in Nutrition*, 4(11). <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdn/nzaa164>

Lebanon: World Food Programme. UN World Food Programme. (n.d.). <https://www.wfp.org/countries/lebanon>