

## Feeding the Future

*In line with our pro-poor policies, the Department of Basic Education plans to introduce breakfast meals in all National School Nutrition Programme schools, writes Angie Motshekga.*

**16 October 2023:** Today, on World Food Day, we celebrate the intricate relationship between food and water, and we reflect on South Africa's journey towards ensuring holistic nutrition for our learners, especially through the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). This year's theme, "Water is Life, Water is Food. Leave No One Behind," serves as a reminder of an enduring truth, one that we might have occasionally overlooked: the inseparable connection between water and life.

Established in 1994, by the late President Nelson Mandela, the NSNP was envisioned as a beacon for learners hailing from rural, informal settlements, and economically marginalised urban precincts. It is a critical investment in our children's future, as it helps to improve their health, well-being, and academic performance.

Over the years, we have learned valuable lessons about the depth and breadth of this pro-poor programme such as school nutrition. Foreinstance as recently as February 2023, a [new report](#) from the United Nations Agency, World Food Programme, says that investing in the health and nutrition of children and adolescents in school is more important than ever as the world grapples with colliding food, climate and learning crises that threaten children and their development.

The report concludes that school-based programs like free meals, vaccinations, and deworming can be game-changers for school-age children and adolescents, especially from poorer backgrounds. It insists such schemes also help keep kids in school, ensuring education investment is not wasted.

Furthermore, a broader lens provided by Graham et al. ([2015](#)) supports the broader view that the NSNP has a positive impact on both learners' health and academic performance. The study found that learners who received meals through the NSNP had a lower prevalence of stunting and underweight, and higher cognitive test scores than learners who did not receive meals through the program.

Our Constitution, now 27 years old, pledges that every child has the right to basic nutrition. A promise, while lofty, is grounded in evidence.

However, as we champion these nutritional programmes, the intricate role of water comes to the fore. Our 2016 survey found that almost half of our NSNP schools grappled with erratic or non-existent water access. In a nation where water scarcity is palpable, ensuring that our meals are not just nutritious but also safe becomes paramount. Safe food storage, meticulous hand-washing, and adequate water supply are intertwined challenges, demanding multi-faceted solutions.

Despite formidable challenges, we've remained undeterred. Responding to water and hygiene concerns, the National School Hygiene Programme was initiated in 2017. Over the past five years, it has benefited more than five million grade 1 learners across over 15,000 public primary schools, funded through our partnership with Unilever.

Furthermore, recognising the role of holistic health, the National Deworming Programme was initiated in 2016, aiming to optimise the health benefits drawn from NSNP meals. Both these initiatives encapsulate our adaptive, responsive approach.

On World Food Day, we celebrate our ongoing commitment to the NSNP, a vision grounded in three pillars: feeding, nutrition education, and food gardens. This programme impacts over 9.6 million learners in 21,274 schools across the country, educating them on the significance of food and equipping them with the skills to cultivate it. Supported by a substantial R9.4 billion grant from the National Treasury, the NSNP exemplifies our nation's united commitment. Each school day, it ensures that these 9,689,000 learners from primary, secondary, and special schools receive a nutritious lunch meal.

But as I pen this, I'm reminded that the success of the NSNP isn't the Government's alone to claim. It's a testament to what can be achieved when the public and private sectors come together, championing a cause. Partnerships, with entities like Pioneer Foods which sponsors breakfast meals, bring us one step closer to a dream where every child, irrespective of their socio-economic background, begins their day with a nourishing meal.

Recognizing the importance of a hearty breakfast to kickstart young minds, the programme is ambitiously expanding. Over the current Medium Term Expenditure Framework, we aim to introduce breakfast in all NSNP schools. Research on the impact of school breakfast programs on child growth and development justifies the expansion of the NSNP to include breakfast in all schools. A 2013 [study](#) published in the journal Pediatrics found that a school-based breakfast program in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, South Africa led to a 4.7% decline in severe stunting among participating learners within a concise span of 10 months. Additionally, there were positive indications in other facets of child growth, including height and weight gain (Hochfeld et al. 2013).

Yet, the narrative of the NSNP isn't just about meals. It's a story of community, collaboration, and empowerment. Through this initiative, 3,337 service providers and 241 Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) have found avenues for growth, securing contracts to procure and deliver food items. Furthermore, the programme has deepened its roots in local communities. Currently, 61,314 volunteer food handlers, drawn from parents and community members, passionately prepare these meals, receiving a stipend in recognition of their invaluable contribution.

Beyond these figures lies a larger impact, one that might not be immediately quantifiable but is palpable. The NSNP is more than a feeding scheme; it's an enabler. Schools have reported discernible improvements in punctuality and attendance, reflecting the programme's direct impact on learners' outcomes. But even more profoundly, the general well-being of these young individuals has been uplifted. They are more attentive, more engaged, and display a zest for learning, corroborating the programme's foundational belief: a well-nourished child is better positioned to grasp educational opportunities.

As we approach 2030, the NSNP stands as both a beacon of our progress and a reminder of the work ahead. Our goal is: to ensure every child, nourished and ambitious, is ready for tomorrow's promise. The NSNP remains central to this vision.

*Angie Motshekga is the Minister of Basic Education.*

1. <https://www.uj.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/tbf-nutrition-report-2015-final-web-version.pdf>
2. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305960967> *Does school breakfast make a difference An evaluation of an in-school breakfast programme in South Africa*
3. <https://www.wfp.org/news/new-report-confirms-game-changing-impact-health-and-nutrition-school>