

# School meals in Finland

Investment in learning



FINNISH NATIONAL  
BOARD OF EDUCATION

# School meals in Finland

Finns believe that it is important to ensure that everyone has equal access to education. We have one school for all.

At the age of six children have the opportunity to start their education at pre-school. Basic education is compulsory in Finland. This means that all children above the age of 7 must complete nine years of basic education or acquire an equivalent education in some other way. Once they have completed their basic education, they can continue at upper secondary level, either at an upper secondary school or at a vocational institution, and from there on to a polytechnic or a university.

Pre-primary and basic education are provided free of charge for all, and this includes school meals, teaching materials, school transport, and pupil welfare services.



*Free school meals have long traditions in Finland.*



*As a result of our geographical location in Northern Europe, our food culture has received strong influences from both the east and west.*

## Food culture in Finland

Pure Finnish food is safe and healthy. In Finland we can grow oats, barley, wheat and rye, and we also have turnip rape fields, potatoes, root vegetables, onions and cabbages. Cows, pigs and poultry are reared here. We get fish from the many thousands of lakes and from the sea. Our forests provide an abundant supply of berries and mushrooms and great hunting grounds. These things form the foundation of Finnish food culture. They are also one of the basis of Finnish school meals.

## School catering since 1948

Finland was the first country in the world to serve free school meals. 1948 is seen as being the year when free school catering really started, though catering activities on a smaller scale had been around since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Until the beginning of the 1960's school food

mainly consisted of soups, porridges and thin porridge-type dishes. Children brought bread and milk with them to supplement their school lunch, which was generally not very substantial.

In the 1960's school meals slowly became more varied. Frozen and processed foods started to be used and more vegetables were served. In the 1970's the school menus often contained new food products, such as rice and spaghetti, that were yet to be popular at pupils' homes. Many children also learned to eat grated root vegetables, salad and fruit at school.

## The legislation behind the school meals

The municipalities are responsible for monitoring and evaluating school meals in Finland. The statutory obligations are based on the following:

- The Basic Education Act (628/1998)
- The General Upper Secondary Schools Act (629/1998)
- The Vocational Education and Training Act (630/1998)

The common guideline is a free meal every school day.

Section 3 of the Basic Education Act, The 'foundation for education' reads as follows:

1. Education shall be governed by a unified national core curriculum in accordance with this Act.
2. Education shall be provided according to the pupil's age and capabilities and so as to promote healthy growth and development in the pupil. (Amendment 477/2003)

Section 31 of the Basic Education Act states that pupils attending school must be provided with a properly organised and supervised, balanced meal free of charge every school day.



*Essential part of entire school system is pupil. Cooperation between all participants is needed for succesful learning.*

Education must be governed by a unified national core curriculum, which forms the framework for planning education.

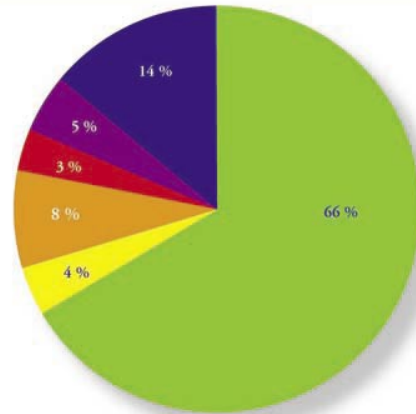
The National Core Curriculum is drawn up by the Finnish National Board of Education. It includes objectives and assessment criteria. Within this framework, schools and municipalities then form their own methods and are free to select their own teaching materials.

As part of the curriculum every municipality is obligated to draw up a plan for pupil welfare. The plan provides the key principles for arranging school meals and sets out the objectives for health and nutritional education and for teaching good manners.

To facilitate planning there is a National Nutrition Council in Finland, which observes and improves the nutritional situation by preparing dietary guidelines for schools.

- TEACHING 66 %
- ACCOMMODATION AND TRANSPORT 4 %
- SCHOOL MEALS 8 %
- SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANT SERVICES 3 %
- INTERNAL ADMINISTRATION 5 %
- PROPERTY MAINTENANCE 14 %

*The average price of a meal served at schools providing basic education accounts for about 8 % of all the education costs of education per pupil.*



The role of school meals is to be a pedagogical tool to teach good nutrition and eating habits as well as to increase consumption of vegetables, fruits and berries, full corn bread and skimmed or low fat milk.

## The plate model and a sample meal

Finnish school legislation guarantees a well-balanced meal for each pupil every school day. The objective is to maintain and improve pupils' health

and well-being and to give them energy for their school work. School catering meets these aims by following the dietary guidelines for schools issued by the National Nutrition Council. A school lunch should equate to about one third of a child's daily food intake. It should be tasty, colourful and well-balanced.

The school menu contains all the components of a well-balanced meal, which are:

- fresh and cooked vegetables covering half of the plate
- potatoes, rice, or pasta covering one quarter of the plate
- fish, at least once, preferably twice a week, or meat (or beans and sprouts as part of a vegetarian diet) covering the remaining quarter of the plate
- skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, fermented milk
- water to quench the thirst
- bread with vegetable margarine or butter-margarine blend
- berries or fruits for dessert



*Lunch is only well-balanced if all the components of the meal are eaten. It is recommended that a sample of the meal is on display on a tray at self-service school canteens.*

A dessert is served with school lunch if the nutrient content of the main course is not adequately diverse or if its energy content is not very high. A dessert can also be served on special occasions or just to give variety.

## Self-service catering in a comfortable dining area

School meals should be served from 11 am to 12 noon every school day. A good school canteen encourages pupils to enjoy an unhurried meal and offers them healthy choices. A pleasant, quiet dining area allows pupils to take their time and helps them to understand the role of eating, meal times and spending time with each other in promoting their well-being. A clean and well-lit school canteen in a nice location and with small tables is preferable and more comfortable for eating and conversation.

Special attention is paid to the taste and temperature of food. Tempting and mouth-watering presentation of food is also important. Freshly baked bread should be served as often as possible.

Catering at school canteens is provided on a self-service basis, so diners can put their own meals together. Special diets are observed and supervised personally.

## Cooperation and personal guidance

Good nutrition is about more than just food. One of the basic things is co-operation between headteachers, teachers, parents and catering staff. There are always adults present in a school canteen. Staff are professional and polite.

### *Afternoon snacks*

*Afternoon snacks are served in about 30% of Finnish schools. The selection includes various bread and milk products, drinks and fruit or berries.*

*Sweets and soft drinks are not recommended at school. Schools can decide that vending machines and canteens will not sell soft drinks and sweets and that they are closed before and during lunchtime. They can also forbid consumption of soft drinks and sweets in the canteen or in classrooms.*





It is essential for pupil well-being that meals consumed at home and at school are sufficient and varied. A breakfast at home ensures that hunger does not strike as soon as the school day starts.

The food plate model, a sample meal and personal guidance help pupils to make responsible nutritional choices, promote learning healthy eating habits, and teach good table manners and social interaction skills.

*The school canteen is an excellent place for pupils to get involved. Older pupils help their younger peers to get their meals and make healthy choices. Older pupils thus also learn more at the same time.*

## More value to school meals

'Participatory citizenship and Entrepreneurship' is one of the cross-curricular themes that helps pupils to perceive society from the viewpoints of different parties, to develop the capabilities needed for civic involvement and to create a foundation for entrepreneurial methods.

The school's methods and the culture of learning support pupils' development as independent, proactive, goal-conscious, co-operative, engaged citizens and help pupils form a realistic picture of their own opportunities to influence.



## Participation and feedback

Feedback gives us valuable and good information from customers. It is important to listen to pupils' opinions and ensure that they enjoy their school meals.

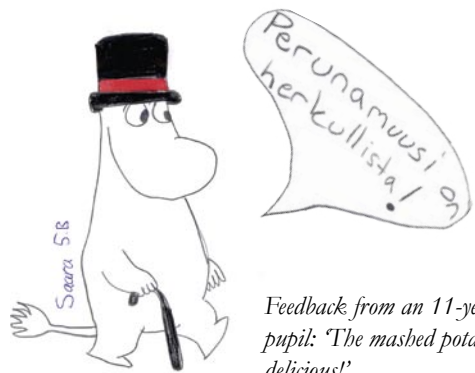
In addition to balanced nutrition, sufficient rest and exercise are also important for young people's growth, learning and well-being.

Sleep has an effect on learning and on the ability to concentrate. Exercise improves the appetite, activates and refreshes participants.

A varied diet helps young people to maintain their energy levels at school and helps them to learn. It also supports their growth and development, thereby forming a basis for their health.

A good lunch is something that gives pleasure, satisfies the need for nutrition, provides a balanced diet, maintains the ability to work, relaxes, refreshes and is safe.

In Finland, we are proud of our long history of providing free school meals.



*Feedback from an 11-year-old pupil: 'The mashed potatoes are delicious!'*



*A good school meal is an investment in the future.*

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Layout: Arctic Lemon communications

Photos: Finnish National Board of Education, National Nutrition Council, Arctic Lemon communications, The Finnish Bread Information, Polaroidis Oy, Jaana Kontinen, Tomi Sipikari

Press: Edita Oyj, 2008