

# GOOD NUTRITION DRIVES LEARNING OUTCOMES



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What children eat in their earliest years shapes survival, learning and future productivity. Yet for many families, nutrition is constrained by habits, misinformation and limited choices. As Uganda confronts persistent malnutrition, there is growing recognition that change requires informed communities and stronger policies. Through a month-long campaign from April to May, *New Vision* in partnership with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Ministry of Health spotlight the challenges and solutions shaping children's diets and their chances of a healthy start

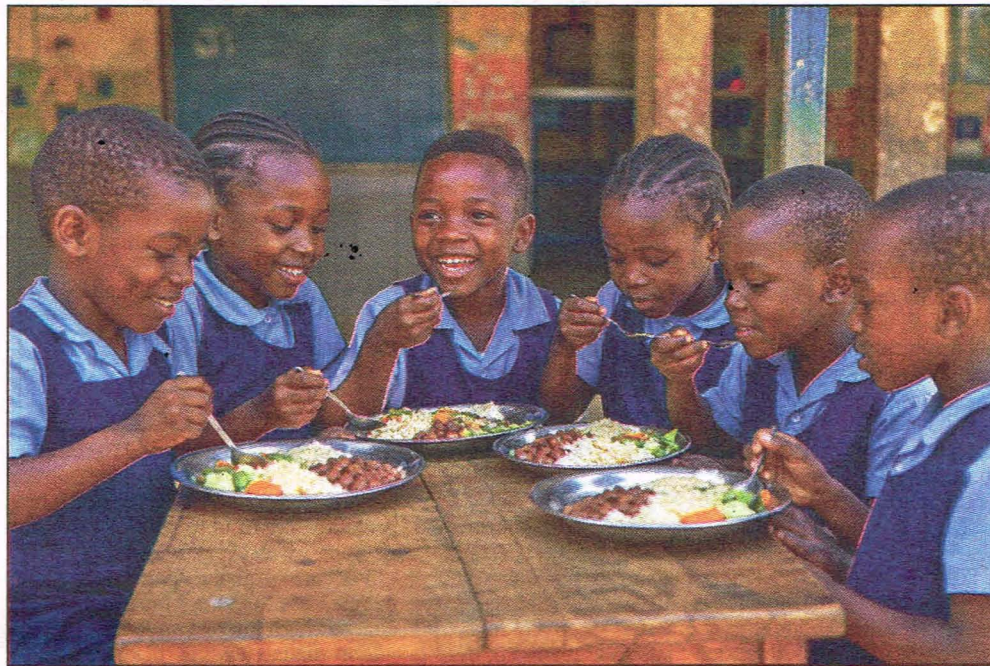
By George Bitu

**A**lthough nourishing the body and educating the mind are often treated as separate processes, science shows they are interconnected. For a learner, food is not merely sustenance; it is a prerequisite for concentration, memory and academic performance.

Feeding enables the body to perform complex tasks that underpin learning, according to Gerald Okello, a nutritionist and dietitian at Mbale Regional Referral Hospital.

"A child needs proper nutrition to see, listen, concentrate and understand. Without food in the stomach, the brain struggles to function effectively," Okello explains.

He notes that nutrients such as vitamin A for vision, iron for blood health and proteins for brain development are essential if learners are to benefit from education.



**School children eating lunch. Evidence from across the country shows that feeding programmes in schools significantly influence attendance, enrolment and academic performance**

**DANGERS OF MALNUTRITION, HUNGER** Malnutrition, particularly in the first four years of life, has irreversible consequences.

"It slows brain growth, causes cognitive deficits, poor memory and emotional disorders. These children enter school already disadvantaged," says Prof. Peter Waiswa of Makerere University School of Public Health.

Hunger, he warns, undermines cognitive ability, leading to poor school performance and irregular attendance.

"When a child is hungry, their attention span reduces, memory weakens and school attendance drops," Waiswa says.

He adds that lack of iron in a learner's meal causes fatigue and poor concentration in class.

It is also common for children to suffer from nutritional imbalance.

"A child may eat cassava for supper, roasted cassava for breakfast and then report to school. The stomach is full, but the body is starved of essential nutrients needed for good memory and learning," he notes.

On the other hand, good nutrition improves concentration. "Well-fed children attend school more regularly, which reduces dropout rates, increases enrolment and results in better academic performance."

**WHAT A BALANCED MEAL LOOKS LIKE**

A balanced diet should combine carbohydrates, proteins, fats, fruits and vegetables, according to Waiswa. Carbohydrates can be sourced from cassava, Irish or sweet potatoes, maize (posho) and sorghum. Proteins can be sourced from groundnuts, fish, soya beans, millet and simsim, while fats come from avocado, fish and sunflower seeds. Fruits and vegetables include oranges, mangoes, *sukuma wiki*, eggplants and cabbages.

"Half the plate should contain fruits and vegetables, one quarter proteins and the remaining quarter

## GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Recognising the link between hunger and poor learning outcomes, the Government plans to implement a national school feeding programme. With some learners missing meals because parents cannot afford fees, the intervention is seen as urgent. Without it, disadvantaged children risk both hunger and poor academic performance.

During a presentation of the National Resistance Movement party's manifesto progress report at State House, Nakasero recently, the First Lady and Minister of Education and Sports, Janet Museveni, confirmed that the programme would start this year, focusing on primary schools where nutritional deficits are most harmful.

A dedicated fund under Universal Primary Education will be introduced, with allocations based on enrolment and local food prices, according to the education ministry, spokesperson, Dr Dennis Mugimba.

"The funds will be disbursed depending on pupil numbers in each school and the prevailing cost of food," Mugimba says.

Education experts argue that the programme's success will determine whether nutrition becomes a universal foundation for learning rather than a privilege for a few.

carbohydrates," he explains.

Affordable local foods can be used to achieve this balance, says Godfrey Arims, a teacher in Nakapiripirit district.

"Posho or sweet potatoes with eggplants and groundnuts make a nutritious and affordable meal. The groundnuts and greens are often got from school gardens, now common in institutions across Karamoja and beyond," Arims says.

**FEEDING IMPROVES ENROLMENT**

Evidence from across the country shows that feeding programmes significantly influence attendance and enrolment.

John Bosco Loibok, the headteacher of Karenga Boys Primary School in Karenga district, says the introduction of school feeding transformed the institution.

"When I arrived in 2022, we had 1,200 learners. After we started feeding them, enrolment rose to 1,700," Loibok explains.

From its six-acre garden, the

school produces vegetables and tubers, providing meals that are both nutritious and dependable in a food-scarce community.

At Magogo Primary School in Iganga district, donor support enables the feeding of 1,352 pupils.

"We secured support from Busoga Education Initiative, which provides porridge at lunchtime. A child who eats at school stays in class and concentrates better," says Lydia Namwebya, the headteacher.

Donors are also funding a nutrition governance programme under the Development Initiative for Northern Uganda (DINU), launched in 2016 and funded by the European Union and implemented by UNICEF.

Vasco Kura, the former Nebbi district education officer, says 132 schools in the district benefit from the programme.

"Schools provide land for farming to local communities. The farmers grow crops and contribute to school feeding so their children can learn better," he says.

Some schools have integrated feeding with production, reducing dependence on parents and donors. At Iganga Secondary, the school farm supplies a varied menu.

"We have a fish pond, piggery, banana plantation, passion fruits, poultry and a dairy section. Learners regularly eat fish, matooke, fruits, chicken and drink milk," says James Isooba, the teacher in charge of the school farm.

Isooba notes that milk is a complete food that supports normal bodily functions.

Kabale Secondary School deputy headteacher Justus Tusasibwe echoes this approach.

"We provide beans for protein, posho for energy and fruits and greens for vitamins. The menu is adjusted depending on resources so learners receive a balanced diet," Tusasibwe says.

He links consistent feeding to improved performance in national examinations.

**FEEDING IMPROVING PERFORMANCE**

Research supports these observations. A 2009 study in Bomet district in Kenya found that school feeding programmes significantly improved pupils' academic performance under Universal Primary Education. The researcher, Evelyne Chemutai, noted that 36% of schools lacked foods such as meat and milk, which corresponded with poorer results.

Similar conclusions emerged from a 2024 study by Martin Kwape of Uganda Christian University.

"The study found that poor nutrition and related health complications among schoolchildren contribute to inefficiencies in the education system and lower scores, particularly in mathematics," Kwape says.

**BARRIERS TO GOOD FEEDING**

Ignorance, poverty and climate change remain major obstacles.

"Some parents decline to contribute towards school meals out of ignorance," Arims says.

Poverty worsens the situation.

"A child comes to school weak and complaining of stomach pain. After a cup of porridge from the school kitchen, the problem ends," he explains.

Climate variability also affects feeding programmes. "Prolonged dry spells reduce harvests and disrupt school feeding," Loibok notes.

Sharp disparities persist between rural and urban learners.

"The village child often survives on starch-heavy meals and arrives at school hungry," Kura says.

Children with disabilities face additional risks. "When food is limited, a child with a physical disability may miss out because they are slower to reach the kitchen," Kura notes.

He argues that prioritising learners with special needs during meal distribution would address this inequality.