

# How schools can close gaps in feeding

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Dr Robert Fungo, a researcher in nutrition and food technology at the Department of Food Technology and Nutrition at Makerere University, explained that posho (maize meal/ugali) and beans alone cannot provide enough balanced nutrition, especially for the growing Ugandan school learners including children and adolescents. ..

"Posho and beans provide a basic combination of energy and protein, but fall short in several key areas, ... Growing children need more nutrients because hunger or poor nutrition affects attendance, focus, and performance by the learners," Dr Fungo said.

In addition, Mr Bwambale also urged schools to establish vegetable gardens and small-scale farming projects to support feeding programmes and teach learners practical agricultural skills.

"It should even be mandatory that all schools have gardens where they produce vegetables," he said, adding that school should engage in farming using the available spaces in their institutions.

Mr Bwambale explains that compound gardening can help schools plant vegetables like cabbage, dodo, eggplants, sukuma wiki, spinach at little or no cost while also helping learners understand food production and nutrition.

He added that it should be made mandatory that all schools have a piece of land where they are producing vegetables.

"Ideally, if I were to develop a programme for vegetable production in schools, I would make it per class so that each class has their own garden, and they start competing to produce food," Bwambale said.

He emphasized that schools with large pieces of land should also consider poultry keeping, dairy farming and fruit growing to supplement feeding programmes.

Dr Fungo adds that there are better low cost ways schools to prepare posho and beans to improve nutrition by preparing biofortified food varieties, use vitamin - A maize (orange maize) for posho/porridge, which naturally boosts vitamin - A for immunity, vision, and growth without changing taste or preparation much.

"Fry onions, tomatoes, and vegetables with beans, and or steam/mix greens into the dish. Also use school gardens to grow tomatoes, cabbage, kale and make this cheap and educational to learners. These will add vitamins (A, C), minerals, fiber, and antioxidants. Vitamin C from vegetable improves iron absorption from beans," Dr Fungo said.

Another way is to use iron-rich beans (high-iron and zinc varieties) which help combat anemia, common in school children. Many schools now grow these crops in school gardens or source them locally, improving nutrition while supporting farmers.

He also emphasized, incorporating affordable local vegetables like cabbage, kale (sukuma wiki), spinach, nakati, dodo, tomatoes, or pumpkin leaves into the bean sauce or as a side.

Devis Amanywa, another nutritionist also suggests occasionally replacing posho with locally available staple foods like sweet potatoes, cassava, Irish potatoes or matooke depending on the region where the school is located, as it can be sourced at a cheaper price.

"School feeding should not only fight hunger, but also support learning, growth, immunity, and future health. Affordable dietary diversity is possible when schools maximize local foods wisely," he said.