



Free school meal in Croatia: its importance as a universal entitlement

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Abstract From January 2023 all children in primary schools in Croatia have the right to a [free school meal](#) following the government's decision to introduce it from the second semester of 2022-2023 academic year, thanks to the [Initiative 'Every Child's Right to a School Meal'](#).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR](#)), one of the world's most important human rights instruments, states in Article 25(1) that everyone has 'the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family', which include nutrition, health care and the necessary social services that are provided to people who are vulnerable for some reason. Article 25(2) also points out that childhood is entitled to special care and assistance, as well as that all children should enjoy equal social protection. In addition, Article 26 recognises education as a basic human right that should be free and affordable for everyone. Similar provisions can be found in the [Constitution](#) of the Republic of Croatia, as well as in the Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC](#)), which emphasise the duty of the state to protect children and provide them adequate nutrition, housing

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and social protection for a dignified life. In particular, Article 27(1) of the CRC recognises the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. Under Article 27(3), states parties to the CRC,

in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.

One of the ways that will make it easier for parents to feed their children is to provide school meals for primary school students in the form of a right as established under the Education in Primary and Secondary Schools [Act](#) following the [norms](#) for students' nutrition.

Health benefits of school meals

First of all, it is necessary to emphasise the health benefits of school meals as they are directly related to the growth and development of the child. Accordingly, good quality school meals contribute to the healthy nutrition of students and their physical development by providing existential energy-nutritional needs.

Furthermore, school meals contribute to the reduction of [student obesity](#) and reduce [skipping breakfast](#). Before the introduction of free school meals for all students, in [Croatia](#) children also faced such challenges related to obesity, skipping breakfast, and unhealthy eating habits, especially children from families of lower socioeconomic status. However, one county stood out by providing high-quality, warm and healthy school meals because the ingredients used to prepare the school meals were from [local organic growers](#). Schools also could deliver school meals in the form of healthy sandwiches for students, which are a complete and nutritionally rich school meal as a worthy substitute for a [cooked school meal](#).

Educational contributions of school meals

Further positive effects of providing school meals concern educational outcomes and how the school meal contributes to students' school success. Experiences in the EU indicate that school meals encourage school participation and reduce dropping out of school, as well as reduce behavioural problems among students and improve students' abilities to concentrate at school that boost their [learning skills](#).

These findings have been confirmed in subsequent studies ([Belot and James](#) 2011, 501; [Dotter](#) 2013, 3-4; [Schwartz and Rothbart](#) 2019, 25; [Van Lancker and Parolin](#) 2020, 243-244) which highlight the improvement of students' cognitive abilities and school success, especially in mathematics, reading, and language, during the use of school meals

The prevalence of school meals in EU member states

There are different practices of regulating school meals in the countries of the EU. Some countries ensure the right to a school meal for primary school students in the form of universal programmes. For example, [Finland](#) has since 1948 been providing universal free school meals for all children attending school. A similar practice is also provided by the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and Sweden, while they differ only in the coverage of students who exercise that [right](#). Another group of EU countries is specific in ensuring the right to a free school meal for target groups of children on the basis of household income (more precisely, low-income households) and for some groups of children who may face disadvantages, such as children in public care and refugee families and children. They include: Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain. However, this way of providing school meals carries the risk of stigmatisation, increased administration in identifying these groups and the risk of excluding those [most in need](#).

A third group of countries provide subsidised school meals and/or free meals that do not cover their whole territories. For example, some countries have school-based targeting and some schemes are conducted by national or local governments and a few NGOs (in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Ireland, Italy and Romania), while other countries have an individualised approach to school nutrition (in [Portugal and France](#)).

In another group of EU countries there is [no free or subsidised provision](#) of school meals for students, such as in The Netherlands and in Denmark.

The progressive implementation of school meals in Croatia

The process of introducing the right to a free school meal to all elementary school students in Croatia was launched on [June 15, 2020](#) thanks to the initiative '[Every Child's Right to a School Meal](#)', which has been supported by professors from the Faculty of Law at the University of Zagreb – in particular, Ivana Dobrotić, Olja Družić Ljubotina, Marijana Kletečki Radović and Antonija Petričušić. Motivated by the [story](#) that some children did not have a school meal during classes because their parents could not pay for it, these teachers launched the initiative and advocated the right of every child to a school meal. Primarily, they sent an [open letter](#) to the Croatian government, pointing out the importance of school meals, the fact that every fifth child is at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and that the way back then of financing school meals was through EU funds and projects that are unsafe and do not cover all children.

After two years of advocating and pointing out the necessity of introducing free school meals in primary schools and numerous meetings of members of the initiative with relevant Croatian ministers, in October 2022 the government made the [decision](#) to introduce free school meals for all pupils in primary schools. On December 1, 2022, the government held a [session](#) at which the President of the

Croatian Parliament submitted a proposal for a law to amend the Education in Primary and Secondary Schools Act in order to include the right to a school meal as an urgent procedure.

Finally, the Croatian [government](#) decided on the criteria and methods of financing the cost of meals for elementary school students for the second semester of the 2022/2023 academic year at its session held on December 29, 2022. That laudable decision introduced a new school meal system, which includes all [elementary school children](#) with free school meals which will be financed by the Ministry of Science and Education from the state budget, whereby the price of an individual school meal is 1.33 Euros.

This is a really big step forward, since before the introduction of free school meals only [30](#) percent of children had free meals, 20 percent had partially co-financed meals, and for the remaining percentage of children parents paid school meals. The previous system had numerous shortcomings, such as [regional unevenness](#) in the provision of school meals, [unclear criteria](#) for determining students who are entitled to free school meals, as well as [infrastructural and staffing problems](#) related to the preparation and serving of school meals.

For this reason, it is important to emphasise that the current system is uniform and universal for everyone, while previous difficulties related to distribution have been overcome by the delivery of school meals from [other schools or institutions](#). Because of this, some students have a hot meal, while other students have a cold nutritionally rich meal, but the ultimate [goal and purpose](#) is to [equalise the opportunities](#) of all students to receive one meal a day and to act in the direction of reducing the impact of [inflation](#), and consequently [child poverty and social exclusion](#).

Looking ahead

Following the approach already taken by other EU countries such as Finland, Estonia and Sweden, Croatia has been able to overcome the critical provision of school meals in a way that was [uneven](#), unsustainable and inapplicable for all children in primary schools.

It is worth highlighting that school meals are particularly difficult to provide in times of crisis and pandemics. During the COVID-19, many children in Croatia were deprived of an important part of everyday school life, and children from families living in poverty or at risk of poverty, including Roma, lost their entitlement to a meal and study support and did not have adequate tools for monitoring online classes.

The strongly advocated [aim](#) has become that all children have a warm, cooked, nutritionally rich school meal. Therefore, it is crucial to support the promising efforts of the Croatian [Ministry of Education](#) to enable relevant infrastructure conditions and staff by 2027, primarily the equipping and construction of school kitchens and dining halls as well as the employment of cooks to serve hot school meals in schools.