



## Knowledge hub - Collection of best practices

### Summary of the best practice

1. Title of the best practice (e.g. name of policy, programme, project, etc.) \*

Using True Cost Accounting to Support Investment in School Meals

2. Country or countries where the practice is implemented \*

United States

3. Please select the **most relevant** Action Track(s) the best practice applies to \*

- Action Track 1. Inclusive, equitable, safe, and healthy schools
- Action Track 2. Learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development
- Action Track 3. Teachers, teaching and the teaching profession
- Action Track 4. Digital learning and transformation
- Action Track 5. Financing of education

#### 4. Implementation lead/partner organization(s) \*

The Rockefeller Foundation; Center for Good Food Purchasing

#### 5. Key words (5-15 words): Please add key descriptive words around aims, modalities, target groups etc. \*

school feeding; physical, mental, and psychosocial development; school-age children and adolescents; improved educational achievement; improved health outcomes; true cost accounting

#### 6. What makes it a best practice? \*

School meals are essential for the health and economic stability of communities, especially marginalized populations. True Cost Accounting helps decision makers understand the full value of these programs. Equipped with this new data and analysis, policymakers, food professionals, advocates, communities, and individuals can work together to maximize the benefits of school meal programs to support a more regenerative, equitable, and nourishing food system.

## Description of the best practice

#### 7. Introduction (350-400 words)

This section should ideally provide the context of, and justification for, the practice and address the following issues:

- i) Which population was affected?
- ii) What was the problem that needed to be addressed?
- iii) Which approach was taken and what objectives were achieved? \*

The application of True Cost Accounting to school meals in the U.S. enhances our understanding of the impact that programs such as school lunch and breakfast have on students, families, and communities. School meals provide critical nutrition for 30 million children and their families across America. When children have their basic needs met, they are healthier and they learn better. For them, school meals often provide the healthiest food they have access to each day and a foundation for their wellbeing and long-term success. While school meal programs cost \$18.7 billion per year to run, they provide nearly \$40 billion in human health and economic benefits, providing at least \$21 billion in a net benefit to society even when we measure only their benefits to human health and economic equity. Enhancements to school meal programs can increase their net value even more as they expand their benefits to additional impact areas.

## 8. Implementation (350-450 words)

Please describe the implementation modalities or processes, where possible in relation to:

- i) What are the main activities carried out?
- ii) When and where the activities were carried out (including the start date and whether it is ongoing)?
- iii) Who were the key implementation actors and collaborators? (civil society organizations, private sector, foundations, coalitions, networks etc.)?
- iv) What were the resources needed (budget and sources) for the implementation?

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Using the True Cost Accounting methodology, The Rockefeller Foundation and the Center for Good Food Purchasing found that every dollar invested in U.S. school meal programs provides more than \$2 in benefits to society. These findings reinforce existing data that shows school meals are essential for the health and economic stability of students and communities. It also clearly identified three primary drivers of change that would grow the reach of the school meal programs and produce a higher return on investment for the programs:

- 1) Maximizing student participation Improving dietary composition
- 2) Improving dietary composition
- 3) Optimizing procurement to support the purchasing of environmentally sustainable and locally sourced food.

Together these actions would result in at least around \$10 billion in additional net value for students, parents, and communities around the country.

## 9. Results – outputs and outcomes (250-350 words)

To the extent possible, please reply to the questions below:

- i) How was the practice identified as transformative? (e.g., impact on policies, impact on management processes, impact on delivery arrangements or education monitoring, impact on teachers, learners and beneficiary communities etc.);
- ii) What were the concrete results achieved with regard to outputs and outcomes?
- iii) Has an assessment of the practice been carried out? If yes, what were the results? \*

Applying True Cost methodology to the existing benefits we quantify from the current school meal programs, it is evident that the programs more than pay for themselves by reducing health care costs and alleviating poverty; they return two dollars to society for every dollar invested, by our conservative estimates. And, they can do so much more with full participation in the programs, enhanced dietary composition, and optimizing product sourcing. Many of these shifts would require new investment and policy support, with the monetized benefits of these investments considerably outweighing the costs.

The work done by The Rockefeller Foundation and Center for Good Food Purchasing shows that increasing the reimbursement rate for school meals by an additional 25 cents per meal, for the purpose of increasing local, equitable, and climate-friendly procurement would amount to a total cost of \$1.8 billion annually, only 10% of the current total expenditure of the school meal programs, and provide benefits in excess of this amount in the areas of economy/wages, livelihoods, environment/biodiversity, equity, animal welfare, and health.

There are examples across the United States that show when the investments are made, the programs stabilize and improve. In the school year 2018-2019, Austin Independent School District (AISD) spent \$13,500,000 on food and served 11.7 million meals. AISD projected that with an additional 25 cents per meal directed towards value-based purchasing, they could source a total of 10% of their food locally with at least 5% of their overall food budget spent on supporting small, historically disadvantaged producers, 5% from organic producers, 10% from fair producers, 10% from humane producers, and 45% of food budget qualifying as whole and minimally processed.

The research also shows that maximizing participation in the program would yield net benefits. If every student who was eligible for free or subsidized meals under federal rules participated fully, meals served would increase by 40% and generate an additional \$7.5 billion of net value. Extend free meal access to all children may have additional benefits by helping to reduce stigma, reducing administrative burden on schools, and opening up new opportunities for innovation in school foodservice.

Finally, additional improvements to dietary composition of school meals would produce new benefits. Food served in school meal programs is regulated by federal guidelines making it healthier than the average American diet. According to one recent study, the current nutrition standards adopted in 2010 have already prevented 500,000 cases of child obesity among students from low-income families. Shifting nutritional quality even further, away from foods like processed meat and those high in added sugar, and toward meal patterns higher in whole grains, legumes and vegetables, would further help to prevent diet-related diseases and also have environmental and climate benefits. This change could yield more than \$1.5 billion in additional net value each year.

## 10. Lessons learnt (300 words)

To the extent possible, please reply to the following questions:

- i) What were the key triggers for transformation?
- ii) What worked really well – what facilitated this?
- iii) What did not work – why did it not work? \*

True Cost Accounting, a methodology that takes into account the multiple dimensions of a food product, program, or system, can help communities and policymakers understand the broader societal effects of the food we eat. It can also build an evidence base to guide decisions that help transform the food system. It also helps to clearly identify areas that need further study.

With this work, we know that we need access to more data, especially in the areas of quantifying impacts on racial and gender equity, job creation and quality, and academic impacts attributable to school meals.

But it is clear that school meal programs already produce benefits to society that are not seen when viewing only their program costs. With strategic investments in certain areas, those benefits will continue to grow.

## 11. Conclusions (250 words)

Please describe why may this intervention be considered a “best practice”. What recommendations can be made for those intending to adopt the documented “best practice” or how can it help people working on the same issue(s)? \*

Since the 1940s school meal programs have provided meals to tens of millions of American children, especially those who have been most underserved by our nation’s food and economic systems. These programs help alleviate poverty and promote healthier learning environments. Yet we deeply undervalue our school meal programs—and many other social programs—when we look only at their price tag.

Understanding the true cost is revolutionary and extremely difficult. Realizing a better food system requires facing hard facts. We must accurately calculate the full cost we pay for food today to successfully shape economic and regulatory incentives tomorrow. A better appreciation for food’s true cost can help those trying to provide healthy and affordable food for all consumers. It can lead to better long-term decision making about fair, livable wages, and safe conditions for all workers. It can promote innovation to deliver more viable farming methods for rural farmers. And it can help protect, not harm, our planet.

True Cost Accounting helps us understand a program’s full benefits to society and opportunities to generate higher returns. Using True Cost Accounting, we can now see how that investment pays off, and we have a clear path forward on how to strengthen them and expand their impact. With the right actions to prioritize sustainable and equitable food purchasing, open the plan to more children, and improve nutrition, school meal programs can be a driver of a better food system for all.

We believe there is real value for governments to use True Cost methodologies to evaluate existing programs. All the tables and calculations used by The Rockefeller Foundation and Center for Good Food Purchasing teams are free for download on our website.

## 12. Further reading

Please provide a list and URLs of key reference documents for additional information on the “best practice” for those who may be interested in knowing how the results benefited the beneficiary group/s. \*

Full School Meals Case Study, and Technical Appendix:

<https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/true-cost-of-food-school-meals-case-study/>

Full report on the True Cost of Food in the United States (including a free-to-download analytical modeling tool): <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/news/report-true-cost-of-food-in-u-s-totals-3-2-trillion-communities-of-color-disproportionately-pay-the-price/>

Short explainer video on True Cost Accounting:

<https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/video/what-is-the-true-cost-of-food/>