



NATIONAL  
**HEALTHY START**  
**SCHOOL FEEDING**  
P R O G R A M M E

# BELIZE SCHOOL FOOD AND NUTRITION POLICY



## FOREWARD

The Government of Belize and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) affirm every child's fundamental right to quality education and access to nutritious food. Recognizing that poor nutrition and hunger are significant barriers to learning and development, the Ministry continues to implement targeted initiatives that enhance students' health, wellbeing, and academic outcomes.



The School Food and Nutrition Policy represents a landmark achievement as Belize's first national policy dedicated to promoting healthy school environments. It provides a structured, evidence-based framework to guide the transformation of school food systems and supports the broader objectives outlined in *Plan Belize 2.0*, the *National Nutrition Policy*, and the *Sustainable Development Goals*. The policy also operationalizes the 2023 Cabinet decision to ban the unhealthy foods and beverages in schools.

There is clear evidence that poor nutrition negatively affects student health, behavior, and academic performance. In response, this policy provides a comprehensive, actionable roadmap to transform school food environments and promote lifelong healthy eating habits. Schools across the country stand to benefit, with the policy serving as a guiding document for the development of healthy school environments.

This policy was developed through meaningful collaboration with both national and international partners, with special acknowledgment of the ongoing support of the *Mesoamerica Hunger Free AMEXCID-FAO Programme*. Ultimately, this policy lays the foundation for a future where every child's right to health and nutrition is prioritized and supported across all schools in Belize.

Hon. Oscar Requena  
Minister, MoEST

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ACRONYMS

<b>MoECST</b>	Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology
<b>MAFSE</b>	Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security and Enterprise
<b>MOHW</b>	Ministry of Health and Wellness
<b>BPAHM</b>	Belize Parliamentary Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition
<b>NHSFP</b>	National Healthy Start Feeding Program
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Program
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>WASH</b>	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
<b>NCD</b>	Non-communicable Disease
<b>SSBs</b>	Sugar Sweetened Beverages
<b>BMI</b>	Body Mass Index

POLICY AT A GLANCE

Governments and societies have the responsibility to ensure children’s health is protected and nourished. Foundational to health are the foods and beverages children consume. Food environments can either encourage the consumption of nutritious foods and beverages, or influence children to choose unhealthy options. Schools are a vital location for these choices, as children spend a large amount of their growing up on campuses. Belize’s first School Food and Nutrition Policy is intended to support the creation of healthy school environments, to ensure children’s rights are enabled and sustained.

Children in Belize today face many choices throughout their day; choices that contribute to their health, but also choices that are detrimental. Nutritious foods, combined with physical activity, help a child grow and develop physically and mentally. Consumption of unhealthy foods, especially ultra-processed food products, increase the risk of malnutrition, especially overweight and obesity, and developing non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Unfortunately, currently many schools in Belize are environments where the presence of unhealthy, ultra-processed food products is pervasive. Meanwhile, access to healthy foods, safe drinking water, and spaces for physical activity may be limited or even unavailable to students on school campuses.

Indicators of growth and development, such as children’s weight and height, and the categorizations of stunting, underweight, overweight and obesity, help signify the health of a population. In Belize, a high percentage of school aged children are identified as stunted, overweight, and obese. In addition, food consumption surveys in school children show that children drink high amounts of sugar sweetened beverages, and consume more unhealthy, ultra processed food products than nutrient-packed healthy food options. These dietary patterns and health outcomes will lead to long-term consequences, including increased risk of NCDs such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension. Poor nutrition also affects development and academic performance, limiting children’s ability to reach their full potential and contributing to a cycle of poverty and inequality. However, schools can be places where healthy eating and activity habits are developed and supported, leading to improved health outcomes, and a more resilient population.

The Belize School Food and Nutrition Policy

- **Purpose:** This policy intends to empower healthy behaviors and healthy choices in school children in primary and secondary school, ages 5 - 16 years old. By optimizing school environments, nutrition education, and healthy activities, it seeks to strengthen children’s development; including their education, nutrition, physical fitness, mental wellbeing, and lifelong healthy habits.
- **Vision:** Healthy school environments with healthy foods and physical activity are a normal part of a child’s school experience.
- **Target Population:** All Government and Grant-Aided primary and secondary schools throughout Belize.

Policy Objectives

1. Enhance child nutrition and wellbeing through improved access and availability of healthy foods in schools
2. Ensure healthy school environments
3. Promote lifelong healthy behaviors in children
4. Incorporate the community to foster healthy behaviors
5. Create and sustain support systems for healthy schools

I. INTRODUCTION

Children’s bodies and minds are rapidly growing and developing during their school years. These years are formative, as lessons and habits internalized during this time follow children to adulthood and remain throughout life. Schools have a foundational role in children’s development, and therefore must uphold the great responsibility of ensuring that the best possible environment is provided for their children. A school food and nutrition policy shapes the school environment; and therefore enables healthier choices and healthier habits in students.

A. Purpose of the Policy

This policy intends to empower healthy behaviors and healthy choices in school children in primary and secondary school, ages 5 - 16 years old. By optimizing school environments, nutrition education, and healthy activities, it seeks to strengthen children’s development; including their education, nutrition, physical fitness, mental wellbeing, and lifelong healthy habits.

B. Rationale: The Importance of School Food Environments

Healthy growth and development of school-aged children relies on the consumption of foods that nourish a growing body. Eating a diverse diet, rich in fruits and vegetables, helps a child be and feel healthy; and a child that feels well engages in learning and play. Children have a right to safe, healthy, and adequate food and water, and government and society have a responsibility to uphold this right.<sup>1</sup> Schools in particular must protect this right, as they care for children during the school day for much of their childhood.

Many factors influence what a child chooses to eat; including the foods available and accessible during their day, what they are served at home, what their peers eat, their knowledge about food, their own personal taste preferences, and the influence of marketing from the food industry. All these elements are part of their food environment. Schools should be an environment where all of these factors are considered, and healthy choices and behaviours are promoted and supported. Schools have a key role to play in guiding children towards a healthy lifestyle, as school spaces greatly influence what children consume and can often answer why children make food choices. Access and availability of safe water and food items in a space determine what foods can be obtained; other influencing factors are attractiveness, price, convenience, marketing to children, and the culture of the school; for example, peers and adults modeling healthy eating choices. Evidence shows healthy school environments positively affect the health of children.<sup>2</sup> Environments influence the choices of food and behaviors, and these choices affect children’s health and wellbeing.

Unfortunately, many times school food environments promote unhealthy foods and create barriers to healthy choices. Unhealthy, ultra-processed food options are taking over the food

<sup>1</sup> United Nations. “Convention on the Rights of the Child.” Article 24 (1989). Treaty no. 27531. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.  
<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. *Nutrition Action in Schools: A Review of Evidence Related to the Nutrition-Friendly Schools Initiative*. World Health Organization, 2020. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/338781>.



environments in Belize, and are omnipresent on school campuses, displacing healthy options. Ultra-processed food products high in sugars, salt and saturated and trans fats such as chips, candies, and frozen treats are brightly packaged, inexpensive, attractive to children, and easily accessible throughout the school day. Sugar sweetened beverages are available in even the most remote places, and competitively priced with water. In contrast, fruits, and especially vegetables, may not even be available to children at schools. These food environments are influencing what children eat, and the types of malnutrition affecting children. Consumption surveys conducted in Belizean schools show high rates of unhealthy food intake among children; with sugar sweetened beverage consumption a daily habit. Children are consuming more unhealthy foods and sugar sweetened beverages than foods high in nutrients such as fish, eggs, seeds and nuts, fruits, and vegetables, and even water. This consumption is happening during school hours, as children utilize breaks to buy and consume the unhealthy foods for sale on school campuses.<sup>3</sup>

Children in Belize today face the threat of multiple forms of malnutrition. Malnutrition is often thought of as caused by a lack of food. However, the reality today is that children face a double or even triple burden of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiency, and notably the rising prevalence of overweight and obesity, which is becoming a significant concern.<sup>4</sup> Undernutrition and micronutrient deficiency lead to underweight and stunted children. Underweight children are those whose weight is significantly below average for their age and sex. Stunting results when a child has a long term lack of micronutrients, and is below average height for age and sex. Belize has high rates of stunted children, especially in the Southern Districts. In a 2024 survey done in 10 schools in the Stann Creek and Toledo Districts, 23% of students aged 5-15 were found to be stunted.<sup>5</sup> This student survey also identified an alarmingly high prevalence of overweight and obesity, which is body weight that is higher than the average healthy weights for the child's age and sex. In both boys and girls, over 40% were identified as either overweight or obese. Similar rates of overweight and obesity were also found in a 2023 survey of students in the Northern Districts of Corozal, Orange Walk, and Belize.<sup>6</sup>

Poor diet quality contributes to the burden of malnutrition. Consumption of adequate, balanced meals containing a range of foods from different food groups is an indicator of a healthy diet; lack of this dietary diversity means children are less likely to be getting the nutrients they need for healthy development.<sup>7</sup> Like many countries in the world, a convergence of factors has contributed to a nutritional transition in Belize. Diets are changing from locally produced staple foods to imported, processed foods which are cheap and easy to access throughout the country. Ultra-processed foods are manufactured industrially, and contain many chemicals and additives to improve taste, color, and shelf life.<sup>8</sup> These foods provide energy, but do not provide needed nutrients, and many are high in fats, sodium, sugar, and food additives.<sup>9</sup> They replace other, healthier foods in children's diets. A driving factor for increasing rates of overweight and

<sup>3</sup> MoECST and FAO. "Student Nutrition Survey", (unpublished 2023); MoECST and Fyffes "Student Nutrition Survey", (unpublished 2024)

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF. "The State of the World's Children 2019. Children, Food and Nutrition: Growing Well in a Changing World." New York, NY: UNICEF, 2019. <https://www.unicef.org/media/63016/file/SOWC-2019.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> MoECST and Fyffes. "Student Nutrition Survey," (unpublished 2024)

<sup>6</sup> MoECST and FAO. "Student Nutrition Survey," (unpublished 2023)

<sup>7</sup> WHO and FAO. *What are healthy diets? Joint statement by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Health Organization*. Geneva: World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; 2024. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd2223en>

<sup>8</sup> PAHO. "Pan American Health Organization Nutrient Profile Model." Washington D.C. , 2016. <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/18621>.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Children's Fund and United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. "Protecting Children's Right to a Healthy Food Environment." Geneva: UNICEF and United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019. <https://www.unicef.org/media/96101/file/Protecting-Childrens-Right-Healthy-Food-Environment.pdf>.

obesity is the dietary shift towards processed and ultra-processed foods.<sup>10</sup> Research also links consumption of ultra-processed foods to increased risk of many Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs), particularly heart disease and type 2 diabetes.<sup>11</sup>

Along with the shift to high intakes of calorie rich foods and sugary drinks, children are less physically active. This is seen especially with the rise of technology and social media consumption, with many activities carried out online, and children spending leisure time on devices. These dietary patterns and sedentary behaviors influence both present and future health. Children living with overweight and obesity experience mental health issues, health concerns, and decreased participation in activities.<sup>12</sup> As well, all forms of malnutrition in childhood increase the risk of developing NCDs as an adult. The high prevalence of overweight and obesity in Belize's school-aged children is of great concern, and a public health issue, as overweight children and adolescents are more likely to become overweight and obese adults, and at higher risk for developing additional NCDs. Belize currently suffers from high rates of NCDs in the adult population; the major causes of death in Belize are diseases including type 2 diabetes and heart disease.<sup>13</sup> If the nutrition and health issues are not prioritized in children, as they grow to adults the healthcare system will be overwhelmed by high prevalence of NCDs in the population, causing increased morbidity and mortality in the population.

Poverty and its effect on access and affordability of healthy food is a major challenge for the youth of Belize; 59.8% of children under the age of 14 are living in poverty.<sup>14</sup> Short term hunger—students arriving at school without a meal—has been identified by principals and teachers as a concern at many schools. COVID 19 likely amplified the effects of poverty and food insecurity; in 2021, 45.5% of the population was estimated to suffer from moderate or severe food insecurity.<sup>15</sup> Moderate food insecurity was defined in this survey as decreased intake or quality of food, while severe food insecurity means meals were skipped due to lack of food. In the years since, inflation has consistently increased the price of food, particularly fruits and vegetables, making affordability a real issue for families. A 2024 Caribbean Food Security & Livelihoods Survey reports that 95% of surveyed Belizeans note food prices rising, and 41% remain food insecure.<sup>16</sup> In Belize, nutrition, education, and poverty are interlinked. Poor nutrition and health as a child puts a child at risk of poor educational performance, due to school absences and difficulty concentrating in class. This can lead to financial struggles as an adult. In Belize, education level is correlated to income; those with the least education have the highest incidence of poverty, and as education levels rise, poverty prevalence falls.<sup>17</sup> Thus, supporting nutrition and

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Lane, Melissa M, Elizabeth Gamage, Shutong Du, Deborah N Ashtree, Amelia J McGuinness, Sarah Gauci, Phillip Baker, et al. "Ultra-Processed Food Exposure and Adverse Health Outcomes: Umbrella Review of Epidemiological Meta-Analyses." *BMJ*, February 28, 2024, e077310. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2023-077310>.

<sup>12</sup> "Plan of Action for the Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents." PAHO, 2016. <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/49138>.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Health and Wellness. "National Nutrition Policy." Ministry of Health and Wellness, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Statistical Institute of Belize. "Poverty Study 2018/2019." Statistical Institute of Belize, 2021. <https://sib.org.bz/wp-content/uploads/Poverty-Study2018.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> FAO. "Prevalence of Food Insecurity in Belize- 2021." FAO, 2021. [https://sib.org.bz/wp-content/uploads/FIES\\_AnalysisReportBelize.pdf](https://sib.org.bz/wp-content/uploads/FIES_AnalysisReportBelize.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> WFP. "Caribbean Food Security & Livelihoods Survey Regional Summary Report: April 2024." Caribbean Food Security & Livelihoods Survey. World Food Program, 2024. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/caribbean-food-security-livelihoods-survey-april-2024>.

<sup>17</sup> Statistical Institute of Belize. "Poverty Study 2018/2019." Statistical Institute of Belize, 2021. <https://sib.org.bz/wp-content/uploads/Poverty-Study2018.pdf>.

education go hand in hand to help the most vulnerable children break the cycle of poverty. Schools must be spaces free from hunger, ensuring access to healthy diets for their students and promoting healthier habits and lifestyles. By ensuring access to nutritious meals and a supportive environment, children are given tools they need to succeed both academically and in life. Better nutrition fuels not only their bodies but also their ability to concentrate, learn, and perform well in school. Over time, this can lead to better job opportunities, higher incomes, and improved overall wellbeing, helping to reduce poverty and create a healthier, more prosperous society for future generations.

### C. Situational Analysis: A Snapshot of Belize's Current School Food and Nutrition Environment

Belize is a culturally diverse nation; diets reflect both distinct cultural influences and the blending of influences into unique food traditions. In addition, unlike many neighboring Caribbean countries which rely heavily on food imports, a significant amount of locally produced foods are available, ranging from staples such as rice, beans, and chicken, to fruits, vegetables, eggs, dairy products, and fish. The diverse cultural heritage of Belize is evident in the school environments. Local cultural dishes such as caldo, hudut, and relleno are served along with regional staples like stewed chicken with rice and beans. Also prevalent, however, are fast foods such as fried chicken, burgers, and hot dogs.

The following is an overview of the factors making up the Belizean school food and nutrition environmental context:

**Meals** are provided at many schools, through different modalities including:

- Government funded meals, which are provided by the National Healthy Start Feeding Program or the Education Upliftment Project and are free for students. These meals are cooked fresh each day at kitchens on each school campus.
- Donor provided meals, arranged by individual schools. These meals may be free or low cost for the student. The meals may be cooked on or off site.
- Meals sold on campus by school cafeterias, with cooks provided a stipend by the school. The price for these meals varies, and any profits are generally used to support the cafeteria. This requires a higher level of involvement and oversight by administration.
- Meals sold on campus by authorized vendors, who rent kitchen or serving facilities from the school. Vendors set the price for these meals, and retain the profits. Food may be cooked on or off campus.
- Meals brought to school by children or delivered by caregivers (packed lunch).

Currently, there are few regulations for school meal production. Per Ministry of Health and Wellness and MoECST regulations, all cooks, kitchen workers, and vendors selling on school campuses should have a valid food handler's license (Rule 28(1)). However, understanding and enforcement of this regulation varies widely. Food handler's licenses are monitored and Public

Health officers inspect school kitchens in those schools enrolled in the National Healthy Start School Feeding program (NHSFP) and Educational Upliftment (E-UP) programs. Monitoring of kitchens and enforcement of food handler's licenses for all schools is difficult, because there is no registry of schools providing meals. Awareness of the rule requiring a food handler's license and the need to renew this license annually varies, and currently relies on school administration to monitor at individual school levels.

**Menus** are available as guides for schools to provide healthy meals to children. The Ministry of Health and Wellness provides the "National Menus for School Feeding Programs" (2019). The 2023 MoECST School Feeding Program Menus and Protocols<sup>18</sup> was developed by a nutritionist, and provides recipes for primary schools, and kitchen standard operating procedures. A version tailored for high school student nutrition needs is also available. While schools are encouraged to reference and follow the menus, there is no requirement that schools do so.

**Beverages and snacks** at school include:

- Those given to children for free, provided by an event or caregiver, including donations
- Those sold to children directly by school or staff (usually for a fundraising event)
- Those sold to children on campus by authorized vendor (snack shop)
- Those brought on to campus by children. Often, vendors set up mobile or permanent shops close to school entrances to easily sell to children. There are currently no regulations pertaining to off campus vendors.

The gradual elimination of sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) in schools has received Cabinet support in 2023. Eighteen pilot schools in the 2023-24 school year engaged in the Healthy Habits, Healthy Schools, Healthy Belize program which targets the gradual ban of SSBs at school.

**Water:** During the school day, children can access:

- Water brought from home
- Water accessed at school dispensing points. Dispensing points include inside or outside taps, 5 gallon water dispensers, or water coolers. This may be free for the children, or require a small payment in the case of 5 gallon water bottles purchased by individual classes.
- Water sold at school (bottle or bagged).

MoECST regulations state: "*The Government of Belize in partnership with the Managing Authorities will ensure that free, adequate, safe drinking water be accessible to all children with water systems meeting international quality standards*" (Rule 23(c)). A national water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) survey was done by UNICEF in 2023 encompassing 65% of primary schools.<sup>19</sup> This survey highlighted that access to drinking water remains a concern in schools. Of the survey respondents, 79% had constant availability of water. 9% of schools reported no access to water. Only 58% reported availability of safe drinking water. In schools with potable water, the dispensing site can be a concern. Many schools rely on water dispensing from an outside faucet or handwashing sink, which is often unattractive to children due to the water being warm from the pipe, the taste of the chlorinated water, or the stigma associated with

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.moecest.gov.bz/document/school-feeding-programme-menu-and-protocols-2023/>

<sup>19</sup> UNICEF, Belize MoECST, and SIWI. "WASH in Schools Assessment," 2023.

getting water from a pipe. Access to these may be further limited by rules not allowing children to leave a classroom to get water during certain times. Especially concerning is access for those students with a disability, with only 60% of schools having a water dispensing point usable by children with a visual or mobility disability.

**Food and Nutrition Education and Physical Education in Curriculum:** Nutrition education is included in the Health Curriculum at every primary school grade. At the high school level, students can take Food and Nutrition as an elective subject. A Physical Education Curriculum is also available. However, uptake and implementation of these curriculums is not monitored. Many schools offer students the opportunity to participate in competitive sports such as basketball, volleyball, softball, and football as after school activities. Play structures are not present at every school, and some of the available structures are in disrepair. Furthermore, it may be difficult for students to utilize physical play structures due to factors such as:

- Extreme heat or wet weather making outside play unavailable, and limited indoor recreation spaces
- Teachers, staff, or caregivers discouraging physical activity during school with the concern the child may be dirty or sweating or get hurt
- Lack of accommodation for children with disabilities

**School Teaching Gardens:** Gardens are promoted both by the MoECST and MAFSE, and as a result many primary and high schools have some form of garden. Gardening as an educational tool is included in the MoECST National Curriculum Framework. The size and intensity of gardens varies;

- Some schools have small in-ground or container gardens, maintained by an enthusiastic teacher.
- Some schools have benefitted from donors and the MAFSE construction of raised beds, covered structures, and even fish ponds.
- Technical High School Agriculture programs are much more in depth, with many structures, including fish ponds, livestock, and crops. These schools have greater access to land and resources.

Schools may choose to utilize the gardens as a class activity, or take care of the gardens with extracurricular garden clubs. Produce from the garden may be shared among the students and staff, sold for profit, or utilized in meal programs. The MAFSE has extension officers in each district available to assist with school gardens. As well, a school garden manual has been produced.

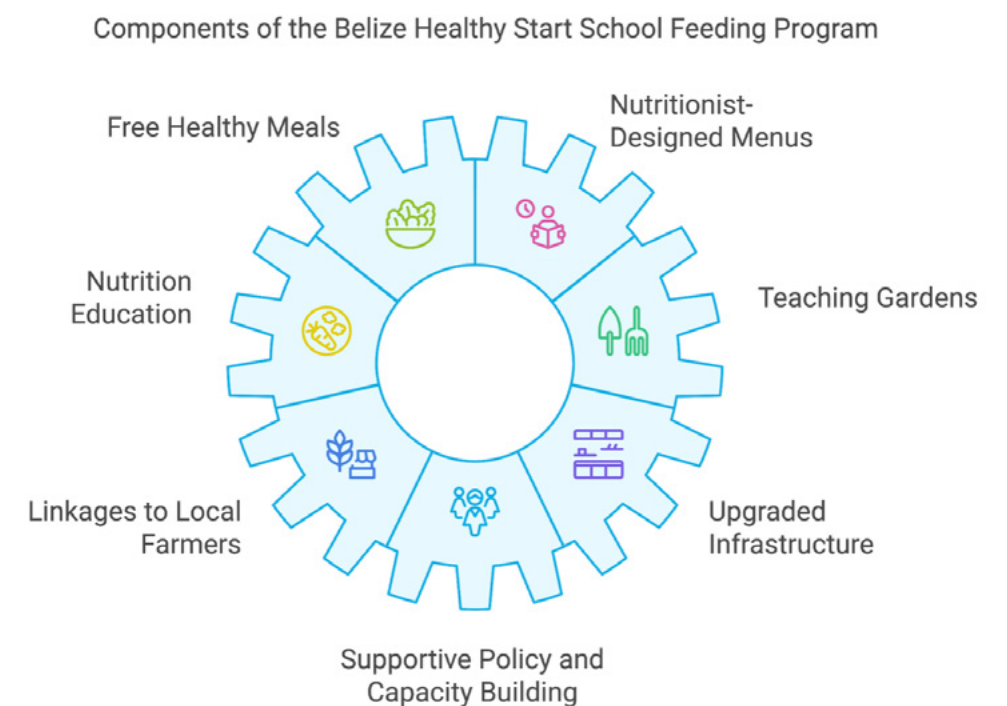
**Complementary nutrition programs:** The MOHW promotes and implements many in-school nutrition activities such as deworming, micronutrient (folic acid and iron) supplements, vaccinations, hygiene education, education of teachers, parents and communities, and drinking water testing and monitoring.

**Marketing:** Currently there are no regulations preventing marketing of unhealthy foods or beverages to children. Donations are often branded with promotional logos, and signs advertising items such as sugar sweetened beverages are present on many school campuses.

### School Meals and the National Healthy Start Feeding Program

Providing a child with a free, healthy meal during the school day is a direct method to improve the nutrition of all students. School meals are an opportunity to increase the diversity of children's diet, by including fruits, vegetables, eggs, seeds, and other nutrient dense food items that children may not be consuming otherwise. Evidence shows that children eat more fruits and vegetables when they are provided in school.<sup>20</sup> Nutritious meals with portion sizes proper for the child's age are also an important tool in the battle against rising rates of child obesity.

School meals also contribute in other areas. When all students are invited to participate in a school feeding program, equity is supported. Every child can access the same, healthy meal at school, regardless of their gender, race, or circumstances. School meals become part of the social safety net, guaranteeing that children receive at least one meal that day. Caregivers also benefit, as the cost of a child attending school is reduced and they do not need to spend money or time on a meal for their student. Principals participating in the feeding program report that attendance rates rise, as children look forward to receiving their meal and are motivated to attend, and there is a decrease in absences due to lack of food in the household. School meals are also a valuable educational resource. A healthy meal helps stabilize a child's mood, affecting behaviour in the classroom and the student's ability to focus. This helps children's participation and learning. Meals can also be used as a teaching tool; with schools taking the opportunity to educate students about healthy foods, manners, and social etiquette during meal times. Students' mental and social wellbeing are supported with communal meals and a shared school experience.



<sup>20</sup> World Health Organization. *Nutrition Action in Schools: A Review of Evidence Related to the Nutrition-Friendly Schools Initiative*. World Health Organization, 2020. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/338781>.



The Belize National Healthy Start Feeding Program was established in 2022, and is overseen by the MoECST. Foundational data was obtained and program design was determined through experiences with pilot projects under the Mesoamerica Hunger-Free AMEXCID-FAO and Mexico-CARICOM-FAO Resilient Caribbean Initiatives. Following the Sustainable School Feeding and Homegrown School Feeding models, the NHSFP encompasses multiple activities. Free meals are provided to students daily in primary and secondary schools; all students are eligible and welcome to participate. Schools are encouraged to enroll the full student population in the program, with the intent that school meals become a normal part of the school culture. Healthy meals are emphasized, with the inclusion of fruits and vegetables. Nutritious menus are provided to the schools as a resource, and school cooks are trained how to utilize the recipes to incorporate vegetables in child-friendly ways and serve proper portion sizes. Schools are encouraged to use gardens as a teaching tool for nutrition and to familiarize children with local produce. The NHSFP is decentralized, and every school cooks and serves fresh meals daily from the school kitchen. Infrastructure upgrades are supported to ensure safe, quality meals can be produced. Schools are encouraged to work with community farmers, to buy their meal supplies. Finally, capacity building sessions are held with school principals, administrators, and cooks, empowering them to fully participate as leaders and advocates for student health. As of the end of 2024, 56 primary schools and 22 high schools nationally, totalling over 15,000 students, are participating in the NHSFP. The program is implemented in qualifying grant-aided and government schools, and currently encompasses 11% of primary school students and 36% of high school students.

D. The Way Forward: Goal of the Policy

Nearly every child in Belize spends a significant portion of their childhood at school. The compulsory age of children to attend school in Belize is 5-16 years old. Children attend school on average 182 days out of the year (180 minimum), accumulating 782 hours in lower primary (4 hours per day), 910 hours in middle and upper primary (5 hours per day) and 1,092 hours in secondary (6 hours per day).

As of 2023, 59,505 children attend 314 primary schools, and 22,014 students attend 63 secondary schools. The total population of school aged children above the age of 4 and under the age of 15 years was 81,542 as reported by the 2022 Census conducted by the Statistical Institute of Belize. 67,864 of these children, or 83.2%, are enrolled in school.

The access to children and opportunity to shape children's health in this time is unlike any other time period in a person's life, and invaluable; children are a captive audience at schools. Schools can be environments that promote and support healthy choices and behaviors. Every school's goal should be to make healthy options convenient, affordable, and attractive to children; making the healthy choice the easy choice.

This policy seeks to align school environments with the following:

- 1. The Belize Food Based Dietary Guidelines, which emphasize water drinking, diverse diets rich in fruits and vegetables, and physical activity.

Belize Food Based Dietary Guidelines

- 1. Choose different types of foods from all the food groups daily
- 2. Eat more of different types of local fruits daily
- 3. Eat more vegetables daily. Choose different types
- 4. Choose to eat whole grain and ground foods more frequently
- 5. Limit your intake of fats, sugar and salt
- 6. Use natural seasonings in food preparation and cooking
- 7. Practise good hygiene when buying, storing, preparing and cooking foods
- 8. Keep active. Make physical activity a part of your daily routine

- 2. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which upholds the rights and dignity of children as people who have a right to healthy, safe, food and water. Article 24 states, "Parties shall pursue full implementation of this right and, in particular, shall take appropriate measures....to combat disease and malnutrition... through the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking-water."21 The government has a duty to protect the children's right to food and nutrition, and to protect them from unhealthy environments.
- 3. Ensuring food security, defined by the FAO as "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."22
- 4. Sustainable Development Goals in particular 2,3,4:



- 5. Following the WHO school policy framework addressing: curriculum, food service environment, physical environment, health promotion for school staff, stakeholder involvement, and monitoring and evaluation23 and as a signatory of the Global School Meals Coalition and RAES (Sustainable School Feeding Network)
- 6. Based on the guiding values and principles of equity, accessibility, cultural sensitivity, evidence and standards based, intersectoral collaboration, community enabling, and lifelong health promotion.

21 United Nations. "Convention on the Rights of the Child." Article 24 (1989). Treaty no. 27531. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

22 FAO. "Rome Declaration on World Food Security and World Food Summit Plan of Action : World Food Summit, 13-17 November 1996." Rome, Italy, 1996. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/195568?ln=en>.

23 WHO. "School Policy Framework : Implementation of the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health." World Healthy Organization, 2008. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/43923>.

## II. BELIZE SCHOOL FOOD AND NUTRITION POLICY

**Vision: Healthy school environments with healthy foods and physical activity are a normal part of a child's school experience.**

**Target Population:** All Government and Grant-Aided primary and secondary schools throughout Belize.

### Overview of the Policy Objectives

#### Objectives

1. Enhance child nutrition and wellbeing through improved access and availability of healthy foods in schools
2. Ensure healthy school environments
3. Promote lifelong healthy behaviors in children
4. Incorporate the community to foster healthy behaviors
5. Create and sustain support systems for healthy schools

#### Policy Objective 1:

**Enhance child nutrition and wellbeing through improved access and availability of healthy foods in schools.**

- 1.1 Schools have a responsibility to ensure that food products available on campus promote health instead of harm
  - a. The Belize Food Based Dietary Guidelines shall be followed for all food distributed and/or sold by the school or by authorized vendors on the school's campus.
    - Any school fundraising activity involving food or beverages shall abide by these guidelines
    - Food and beverages donated to the school must follow the Belize Food Based Dietary Guidelines
    - School principals, teachers, and staff shall encourage the community to conform to these guidelines for all foods brought onto school campuses (for example class parties)
  - b. In particular, there should be a focus on decreasing and eventually eliminating ultra-processed food products (UPPs). These are food products high in fats, sugars, sodium/salt and other additives like non-sugar sweeteners and dyes, that are unhealthy for children.
  - c. Schools that are participating in school feeding programmes must utilize the MoECST School Feeding Programme Menus and Protocols and provide healthy meals to all students.

- 1.2 Schools will improve access and availability of healthy foods and beverages to all students, as defined by the Belize Food Based Dietary Guidelines.
  - a. Water is the drink of choice (Rule 23(C). The Government of Belize in partnership with the Managing Authorities will ensure that free, adequate, safe drinking water be accessible to all children with water systems meeting international quality standards (Rule 23(c).
  - b. Only water, natural juices (juices with no added sugar), and unsweetened milk may be sold on campus.
  - c. All schools shall ensure and maintain daily availability and access to fruits, vegetables, and healthy snack options for all students, whether distributed in school meals or sold on campus.
  - d. Fortified foods provide essential micronutrients to children, and are encouraged in school feeding programs.
  - e. The MoECST in partnership with the MOHW will create a list of healthy food options to guide schools in determining what foods should be permitted within schools. The selection of permitted foods will be guided by the Belize Food Based Dietary Guidelines.

#### Policy Objective 2:

**Ensure healthy school environments**

- 2.1 Children are particularly susceptible to marketing.<sup>24</sup> Therefore only those food products that follow the Belize Food Based Dietary Guidelines and the School Food and Nutrition Policy regulations may advertise on school campuses.
  - a. This includes branded donations, and sponsorship for any school-based activity, competition, sports, etc.
  - b. The MoECST and MOHW shall develop guidelines for schools regarding sponsorships and conflict of interest, and shall explore legislation restricting marketing aimed at children.
- 2.2 The MoECST in partnership with school managing authorities and the MOHW shall ensure that all requirements for school buildings, gardens, infrastructure and related spaces for food preparation, storage and safety comply with safety specifications to establish healthy environments.
  - a. Kitchen infrastructure must support the production of safe and quality food.
  - b. Safe and clean eating areas must be provided to students.

<sup>24</sup> UNICEF, "A Child Rights-Based Approach to Food Marketing: A Guide for Policy Makers." UNICEF, 2018. <https://www.unicef.org/media/139591/file/A%20Child%20Rights-Based%20Approach%20to%20Food%20Marketing.pdf>.

- c. The MoECST shall support the Public Health Officers of the MOHW to ensure school kitchen's compliance with public health legislation through a regular schedule of inspection and monitoring.
- d. The MoECST provides kitchen standard operating procedures in the School Feeding program Menus and Protocols document, which shall be followed in every school kitchen.

**2.3** The Government of Belize shall support system strengthening and capacity building to improve the implementation of healthy environments.

- a. All those handling food / working in school kitchens shall have a valid food handlers license following Rule 28 (1) and (2) of the Revised Edition Education Rules (2003) "any person responsible for food preparation at school must have a food handlers license."
- b. School cooks and / or vendors shall receive annual training in food safety, nutrition, and topics related to school feeding programs.
- c. MoECST shall provide annual training for school staff on food based dietary guidelines and establishing healthy school environments.
- d. MAFSE shall train community farmers in good agricultural practices to ensure the safety and quality of produce obtained for feeding programs.

#### **Policy Objective 3:**

##### **Promote lifelong healthy behaviors in children**

**3.1** The MAFSE along with the MoECST shall support the installation, maintenance, training and monitoring of school gardens as a teaching tool on every school campus.

**3.2** Nutrition education and physical activity shall be strengthened through continued support and increased uptake of existing nutrition, physical education, and gardening curriculums.

**3.3** Physical education is a valuable component of the National Curriculum Framework, therefore students and staff shall be encouraged to implement the activities as prescribed by the curriculum.

- a. The development of play structures to promote physical activity, safe, age appropriate, and accessible to every child, is encouraged for every school.
- b. Special accommodations should be made for students with physical disabilities to ensure all are included in physical education.

c. Programs to increase movement throughout the day shall be encouraged, including clubs, sports, and utilizing break time for physical activity. Inclusion of more non-competitive sports shall be encouraged.

d. Designated PE teachers shall be supported for primary and secondary schools.

e. Partnership with the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Transport through local sports councils will be encouraged for schools to partake in organized sporting activities by locality, zone, district and national levels.

#### **Policy Objective 4:**

##### **Incorporate the community to foster healthy behaviours**

**4.1** Healthy eating begins at home, therefore activities for community acceptance and behavioral change towards healthier choices shall be promoted.

- a. Social and behavior change programs targeting school communities shall be implemented.
- b. Marketing and publicity to promote the School Food and Nutrition Policy, highlight nutrition, and promote healthy eating awareness shall be implemented.
- c. Sensitization sessions for parents, PTA, communities, and vendors shall be implemented.

**4.2** The MAFSE shall partner with the MoECST to connect community farmers with schools to increase the supply of diverse locally produced nutritious foods available in schools. Initiatives will include capacity-building programs for farmers, and support for schools to incorporate locally grown products into their meal plans.

**4.3** The Government of Belize, civil society, private sector, and international donors shall partner to identify or create safe spaces for students to exercise and play, adapting to the changing climate.

#### **Policy Objective 5:**

##### **Create and sustain support systems for healthy schools**

**5.1** The MoECST shall work with all other GoB Ministries, supported by BPAHM, to ensure the national expansion and sustainability of universal free school meals through the development of a legislative framework and identification and implementation of continual financial support for the National Healthy Start Feeding Program.

- 5.2** The MoECST shall promote intersectoral coordination utilizing the existing National School Feeding Technical Committee and Belize Parliamentary Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition through biannual sensitization sessions.
- 5.3** Public Private Partnerships providing resources to support healthy school environments shall be encouraged, respecting the developed guidelines pertaining to conflict of interest.
- 5.4** Monitoring and data collection procedures shall be implemented to provide information for improvement of student health and school environments, and to better tailor programs to the needs of the children.
- MoECST will develop and implement indicators and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of school meal programs.
  - MoECST in collaboration with MOHW and partners will collect relevant data in school aged children, including nutritional indicators, food consumption, and physical activity data, at baseline and every 5 years thereafter.
  - GoB (MOHW, Rural Development) will monitor water access and quality in all schools.
  - MAFSE will monitor the participation of small farmers in school feeding programs.
- 5.5** MoECST supports complementary school health services by the MOHW including deworming, folic acid, vaccinations, and micronutrient supplementation.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The MoECST will lead the development of an Implementation Plan for the School Food and Nutrition Policy. The National School Feeding Technical Committee will provide input and facilitate multi stakeholder support. Additionally, the Belize Parliamentary Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition will act as policy champions.

## ANNEX 1.

### Permitted drinks

- water
- unsweetened natural juices (no sugar added)
- unsweetened tea
- unsweetened coconut water
- unsweetened milk
- unsweetened dairy alternatives

## ANNEX 2.

### Examples of Ultra Processed foods to minimize or remove from school environments<sup>25</sup>

- packaged chips
- packaged biscuits (cookies) and cakes
- candy
- soda
- energy drink
- any other sugar sweetened drinks
- drinks with artificial sweeteners
- sweetened yogurt or milk drinks
- ideals (frozen popsicles) and cold cup made from sugar sweetened liquids
- cakes from box mixes
- ramen noodle
- hot dogs
- sausage (canned, or not)

<sup>23</sup> PAHO. "Pan American Health Organization Nutrient Profile Model." Washington D.C. , 2016. <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/18621>.



ANNEX 3.

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