Scientists and health experts worldwide agree that children who are well-nourished are much more easily able to develop the cognitive and behavioural skills they need to reach their full learning potential. Good nutrition also enables longer attention spans and better school attendance, allowing children to stay in school and learn. Policy- and decision-makers need to address nutrition as an educational issue that threatens the future success of our young people. By supporting and investing in nutrition-sensitive education programmes, we can give all children the opportunity to excel in school and life.

Success in school depends on good nutrition from the start

Poor nutrition prevents children from reaching their full cognitive and behavioural potential, impacting success in school and lifetime learning. Some children never even enroll in school because of disabilities resulting from poor nutrition. It is estimated that more than 200 million children worldwide fail to reach their potential in cognitive development because of early poor nutrition, health care, and poverty. Evidence shows that success in school depends on good nutrition:

- Good nutrition is essential for full development of cognitive and motor skills, behavioural abilities, IQ, and physical growth. Early childhood undernutrition, including poor nutrition in the womb, often results in stunting and can have permanent developmental effects on a child.

- Stunted children are also less likely to complete school. Studies from 79 countries show that every 10 percent increase in stunting corresponds to an 8 percent drop in the proportion of children completing primary school.

- Micronutrient deficiencies, particularly iodine and iron, can lead to significant and irreversible cognitive damage. This is often because children are not fed micronutrient-rich food in adequate quantity and frequency.

Educating future mothers is the single most important determinant of children’s nutritional status

Education and nutrition have a cyclical relationship. Well-nourished children are better able to reach their academic potential, and girls with more formal education later give birth, and care for healthier and better-nourished children. Educated girls can better understand and act on information, including use of health services, and are more empowered to make decisions—such as contraception use, delaying marriage and first pregnancies, and longer birth intervals.
Interventions in early childhood development can decrease negative learning effects from poor nutrition, closing the achievement gap between undernourished children and their peers.

The 2013 Lancet Series on Maternal and Child Nutrition found that when early childhood development programmes are combined with nutrition interventions, children can achieve better nutrition and development outcomes.5

- The preschool years are the most effective and cost-efficient time to offset the impacts of undernutrition on learning and school performance.2 When care, stimulation, and nutrition are combined in a formal education environment, stunted children can catch up to their peers in IQ level, and in analytical, communication, and social skills.6,7,8,9

- Conditional cash transfer programmes (CCTs) provide families with small stipends or material support to offset the financial costs associated with sending their children to school. When children in CCT programmes receive early stimulation, more nutrient-rich food, and more preventive health care, there are positive effects on cognitive, linguistic, fine-motor, and socio-emotional development.8

The fact that disadvantaged children are in greater need and benefit more from such programmes calls for prioritising the poor and integrating health and nutrition interventions in early childhood education programmes.

When education programmes invest in nutrition, it improves academic achievement

Additional successful programmes and policy tools that can help school-age children excel in school include:

- Deworming is a cost-effective intervention to increase school participation and boost learning capabilities compared to other programmes.10 It’s estimated that infection leads to a 3.75 IQ point loss per child infected, and that 200 million years of schooling are lost annually.11 Treatment for worms is simple, safe, and inexpensive—it costs less than $0.50 per child per year.6

- Food fortification and micronutrient supplementation programmes help address the problem of “hidden hunger” by ensuring that kids get the right quantities of essential nutrients like iodine and iron. Iron supplementation, especially if combined with deworming, has been shown to improve cognitive performance of school children and reduce anaemia among adolescent girls, offering subsequent benefits in better academic performance and eventual birth outcomes.

- School feeding programmes can improve learning and academic performance. Students participating in school feeding and take-home ration programmes have improved cognition, school achievement, and participation rates.12 These programmes yield the greatest impact when coupled with other programmes like deworming, micronutrient supplements, and fortified foods.13

- Ensuring adequate facilities, such as safe water and sanitation (including ones that are girl-friendly) where needed, also contributes to improved attendance and health of students.14

Integrating nutrition programmes into school curriculum starts life-long healthy behaviours. Children connect what they learn in school to the broader community.
by bringing messages home to their families and promoting good nutrition and healthy habits in the household.

We know what works: Nutrition-sensitive education programmes demonstrate success

When children receive skill-based health education, it enables them to make healthier choices and adopt healthier lifestyles. The following initiatives are currently demonstrating success throughout Asia:

- **Early childhood education**: India’s Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is one of the world’s largest early childhood development programmes. Communities establish a community-wide daycare and maternal care centre serving pregnant and lactating women and children under age 6 with integrated health, nutrition, and preschool education for children 3 to 6 years old. Supplemental food is provided during preschool sessions. A survey of 16,000 children found that ICDS children were less likely to be severely malnourished and more likely to attend school.8

- **CCT to increase girls’ enrolment in school**: The Bangladesh Female Secondary School Assistance Programme (FSSAP) supports improving secondary education for girls through tuition stipends, teacher training, performance incentives to schools and students, and funding water and sanitation facilities. Girls’ enrolment in secondary schools in Bangladesh jumped from 1.1 million in 1991 to 3.9 million in 2005, including an increasing number of girls from poor and remote areas.14

- **School-based health and nutrition**: Using existing educational infrastructure, a programme in Bangladesh reached 17,600 children with education about how to prevent worm-related infections through school-based health and nutrition programmes. Teachers were trained to administer vision screenings, use first aid kits, and provide deworming tablets and vitamin supplements. The programme lead to a 9 percent decrease in annual worm-related diseases, reduced high worm loads in children from 66 percent to 0.1 percent, lowered anaemia rates from 40 percent to 35 percent, and boosted school attendance from 66 percent to 75 percent.15

- **School feeding programmes that provide fortified biscuits**: In Bangladesh, a school feeding programme provided a daily snack of fortified high-energy biscuits to 400,000 students in primary schools in prioritised vulnerable and food-insecure areas. A programme evaluation found a 10 percent increase in net enrolment rates, an increase in attendance of 1.3 days per month, and a reduction in the probability of dropping out of school by 7.5 percent.

Education policy- and decision-makers can take immediate action to create nutrition-sensitive programmes

Improving educational outcomes requires policies and programmes that improve nutrition for all families:

- **Start early**: Expand early childhood education programmes that stimulate cognitive development and address nutrition. This can help offset developmental delays caused by undernutrition.

- **Invest in girls**: Provide young girls with educational opportunities so they have the knowledge and ability to make informed and healthy choices, reducing the risk for undernutrition in future generations. Keeping adolescent girls in school helps delay the age of first pregnancy and contributes to their empowerment and access to better future earnings.
Collaborate across ministries: Forge linkages between health and social welfare to coordinate policy, advocacy, planning, and programming. A collaborative approach will ensure that cash transfer and other safety net programmes are designed to maximise nutrition, health, and development outcomes for children; especially for infants and young children.

Support integrated approaches to education, health, and nutrition: Advocate for early health and nutrition interventions, like fortified food supplements, CCT programmes, and deworming within education initiatives. Integrate health and nutrition into teacher training and school curricula. Together, they will maximise physical and cognitive development and health among children.

WE MUST ACT NOW
Good nutrition is the foundation for success in both school and life. By prioritising nutrition in an informed and effective way, education programmes can help all children achieve the healthiest and most productive life. Policy- and decision-makers must take action now to make it a reality.

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