



World Food
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KHANDALYAK

Sweet taste of summer

Khandalyak (also spelled handalak) is an early-season aromatic melon that is especially popular in Tajikistan. Naturally sweet, juicy, and refreshing, it makes a wonderful addition to the family menu during the summer months.

KHANDALYAK = JUICINESS + FIBER + VITAMINS + NATURAL SWEETNESS

DID YOU KNOW?

Khandalyak – is an early melon variety. In Tajikistan, it typically appears as early as late spring and early summer.

A relative of cucumber and pumpkin

Khandalyak belongs to the melon family, which is part of the cucurbit family. Its relatives include cucumbers, pumpkins, marrows, and watermelons. From a botanical perspective, khandalyak is actually more closely related to a cucumber than to an apple or a peach.

Best enjoyed fresh

Early melon varieties, such as khandalyak, generally have a shorter shelf life than many late-season melons. They are best enjoyed fresh, at their peak juiciness and flavor.

WHAT PAIRS WELL WITH KHANDALYAK

- **Churgot or plain yogurt.** For a light and refreshing summer snack.
- **Cottage cheese.** For a more filling option.
- **Oatmeal or wheat porridge.** To add a fresh, fruity flavour to breakfast.
- **Nuts or seeds.** If there are no allergy concerns.
- **Other seasonal fruits.** Such as apples, apricots, peaches, or berries.
- **Mint or fresh herbs.** For extra freshness in a summer fruit bowl.

FUN ACTIVITY FOR CHILDREN

Create your own summer snack with khandalyak

1. **Choose a base:** Churgot, Yogurt, Cottage cheese, Porridge
2. **Add several pieces of khandalyak**
3. **Choose a topping:** Oats, Apple, Apricot, Mint
4. **Give your creation a name!**

For example: Sunshine Bowl, Summer Breakfast or Sweet Khandalyak Delight

WHAT MAKES KHANDALYAK SPECIAL?

Refreshing on hot days

Khandalyak contains plenty of juicy flesh, making it a light and refreshing snack during the summer heat.

Supports healthy digestion

It provides dietary fiber, which helps support normal digestive function and adds variety to a child's diet.

Helps support immunity

Khandalyak contains vitamin C, an important nutrient that contributes to the normal functioning of the immune system.

Great for active children

Potassium helps support healthy muscle and heart function, which is especially important for children who are physically active.

A naturally sweet alternative

With its rich aroma and natural sweetness, ripe khandalyak can be a delicious alternative to sweets, pastries, and sugary soft drinks.

HOW TO ENJOY IT

1. **Wash the melon thoroughly before cutting.**
2. **Remove the seeds and cut into bite-sized pieces.**
3. **Avoid leaving sliced khandalyak at room temperature for extended periods.**

Once cut, store it in a covered container in the refrigerator.

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CLOSER LOOK AT SCHOOL CANTEENS:

key takeaways from School Feeding Coordination Council field meetings

How can school meals be made more nutritious, safe, and accessible? Which reforms are already producing results, and where is further work still needed?

These questions were at the focus of a series of meetings held by the Interdepartmental School Feeding Coordination Council across Tajikistan over the past six months.

Some sessions took place in Dushanbe, while others were held in the provinces and included visits to local schools. Participants reviewed practical aspects of the National School Feeding Programme implementation, including the condition of school canteens, funding mechanisms, kitchen equipment, sanitation standards, menu quality, and the continued development of the Programme.

The discussions brought together not only national-level specialists involved in the Programme, but also representatives of relevant ministries and government agencies, local authorities, development partners, school administrations, and those directly involved in school feeding on a daily basis.



Sughd province: what school visits revealed

One of the Council's field meetings took place in the Sughd province, where participants visited schools in the Ayni, Bobojon Ghafurov, and Devashtich districts.

The findings were encouraging. In many schools, visible improvements have already taken place. Schools are increasingly benefiting from modern kitchen equipment, better-organized food service facilities, and more varied menus. Equally important, school cooks are focused not only on meeting nutritional standards but also on preparing meals that children genuinely enjoy. After all, healthy food is most effective when children are eager to eat it.

The Council also reviewed government funding allocated for school meals. In 2025, Secondary School No. 14 in Bobojon Ghafurov District received 430,100 somoni for organizing meals, while Secondary School No. 8 in Ayni District was allocated 145,800 somoni.

These investments demonstrate that the Programme is increasingly supported not only by the commitment of individual schools and development partners, but also by substantial government funding.

Dushanbe: reviewing progress and planning ahead

On January 28, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan hosted a final meeting to assess the results achieved in 2025.

Participants discussed the progress of the National School Feeding Programme, which has now been operating for four years, and outlined priorities for its further development.

The Programme has already expanded considerably. In 2025, more than 36,000 children in 94 schools across Khatlon and Sughd provinces, Dushanbe, and Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) received daily hot meals funded by the government. In 2026, this support is expected to scale further, with funding for school feeding projected to nearly double.

For schools, increased funding creates new opportunities to improve canteens and kitchen



facilities. For children, it means greater access to nutritious and appealing hot meals every day.

New initiatives: School Feeding Center and National Programme identity

Another Council meeting took place in Dushanbe on April 10. One of the key topics was the proposed establishment of a School Feeding Center based within the School Feeding Unit of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan.

The idea is to create a dedicated institution that will do more than coordinate activities. The Center would serve as a practical resource for schools by gathering and sharing experience, developing methodological approaches, and supporting the introduction of modern solutions across the school feeding system.



The meeting also included discussions on a national logo for Tajikistan's School Feeding Programme. Participants reviewed several design options and emphasized that the symbol should be simple, recognizable, closely associated with child nutrition, and reflective of the country's national identity.

While the logo has yet to receive official approval, the discussion itself reflects an important stage in the Programme's development. Alongside strengthening its institutional framework, the Programme is gradually building a clear and recognizable public identity of its own.

Rasht: seeing progress firsthand

From April 14–17, the School Feeding Coordination Council held a field meeting in the Rasht district, visiting schools in Nurabad, Rasht, Tajikabad and Lakhsh.

As during previous visits, the focus was firmly on practical realities: the condition of school canteens, the availability of equipment, food preparation facilities, and the overall organization of hot school meals. Council members also reviewed schools participating in the UN World Food Programme's micro-grant initiative, as well as those receiving government funding.

Several schools in the Rasht district received state support, including:

- School No.1 in Nurabad District — TJS 195.6 thousand;

- School No.2 in Nurabad District — TJS 80.6 thousand;
- School No.1 in Tajikabad District — TJS 151.5 thousand;
- School No.1 in Rasht District — TJS 171.9 thousand.

These investments help provide the essentials behind every school meal: reliable equipment, safe and functional kitchen facilities, and the day-to-day operation of school canteens.

What the meetings revealed

Taken together, all four meetings demonstrated that Tajikistan's National School Feeding Programme is steadily evolving from a series of individual initiatives into a more coordinated and structured system.

In some schools, the results are already visible. In others, additional support is still needed. Certain issues require closer coordination among ministries, local authorities, schools, and development partners. Most importantly, however, these discussions are not confined to meeting rooms. Council members visit schools, assess conditions on the ground, and speak directly with the people responsible for feeding children every day.

The purpose of these meetings is simple: what matters is not the discussion itself, but whether decisions translate into real improvements at school level: modern and well-functioning equipment, clean and welcoming dining facilities, qualified kitchen staff, and a nutritious hot meal served to children every day.



February in Nurabad District was cold and snowy. The thermometer outside School No. 28 showed a steady subzero temperature. The children made their way to school through snowdrifts, but they did it so eagerly. Inside, the school was warm and welcoming, buzzing with laughter, joy, and new discoveries about healthy eating.

From February 9 to 13, the school hosted Healthy Nutrition Week under the motto Eat. Move. Live., marking International School Meals Day. Each day brought something new and meaningful to the school routine: discoveries, experiments, games, creative activities, special dishes in the canteen, and lively conversations about how nutrition is connected to energy, well-being, and a child's development.

HEALTHY HABITS LAB: RASHT VALLEY CELEBRATES HEALTHY NUTRITION WEEK

Day One: Hamburger's Challenge

On the first day, the assembly hall turned into a stage for an interactive performance. A character named Hamburger — the embodiment of unhealthy habits — appeared and tried to replace the week's motto with the "Eat. Lie Down. Snore" slogan, challenging the participants. The children immediately reacted, filling the hall with noise and laughter.

Soon after, Doctor Energy and an Athlete joined him on stage. Through games and interactive tasks, they worked together with the schoolchildren to show why Hamburger was wrong. By contrasting laziness with activity and fast food with a balanced diet, the children began to understand how to make choices that support their health.

Later that day, during a classroom session, children received personal healthy habits trackers. Throughout the week, they were encouraged to mark the healthy actions they completed each day: drinking enough water,



eating five portions of fruits and vegetables, or doing morning exercises.

The tracker quickly became part of the game. The children examined their sheets with interest, asked questions, and made their first checkmarks that very Monday. The week began not only with enthusiasm but also with practical steps as children became the leaders of their own small health projects.

Day Two: when everyday foods become subject of inquiry

On Tuesday, the conversation about nutrition moved beyond theory. Classrooms turned into spaces for observation and discussion. Through simple but engaging experiments, teachers encouraged children to take a closer look at familiar foods — not from the perspective of “tasty or not,” but in terms of ingredients and nutritional value.

Together, the children reflected on which foods are suitable for daily meals and which should be better reserved for occasional treats. They discussed how much sugar can be hidden in drinks and why it is important to limit salt and fats.

There were no complicated terms — only clear examples, thoughtful questions, and shared conclusions. Children actively joined the discussion, spoke about their own habits, and compared them with what they had learned during the lesson.

By the end of the day, one key idea became clear: healthy eating is not about prohibitions, but about making conscious choices and maintaining balance every day.

Day Three: movement as part of health formula

On Wednesday, the focus shifted to physical activity. The morning began with a school-wide exercise session. Higher-grade students took the lead, demonstrating the movements, setting the pace, and encouraging the children. With music playing, lively exercises, and plenty of laughter, they felt like one team.

Later, during classroom discussions, teachers talked with the children about why regular physical activity is essential for growth, endurance, and concentration.



How much time each day should be devoted to movement? What types of physical activity can you choose if you don't enjoy a particular sport?

The children came to understand that health is built on small, consistent daily actions, and movement is one of its essential components.

Day Four: assembling Healthy Plate

Thursday was dedicated to the theme of mindful eating. Paper circles and illustrated cards featuring vegetables,

fruits, grains, meat, fish, and legumes appeared on children's desks. Teachers reminded them of a simple principle: half the plate should be fruits and vegetables, one quarter grains, and the remaining quarter protein-rich foods.

The class was divided into teams, each assembling its own version of a balanced breakfast or lunch based on the Healthy Plate model. The children debated and revised their choices. Some suggested adding fruit to porridge; others proposed replacing sugary drinks with water.



During short presentations, the children confidently explained why their plates were balanced, which foods support growth, and which help sustain energy throughout the day.

Thursday provided an important skill: not just understanding healthy eating in theory, but applying that knowledge in everyday life, both at school and at home.

Throughout the week, the school canteen offered a variety of hot meals using recipes from a School Meals Recipe Book developed by the World Food Programme (WFP) and Russia's Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI), the event organizers.

The Finals: children take the stage

Friday brought the week to a bright, emotional, and heartfelt close. The assembly hall once again filled with music. However, this time, it was the children themselves who stepped onto the stage. They presented a performance inspired by what they had learned: a "healthy" version of the folk tale **The Gigantic Turnip**, poems about vitamins and balanced plates, and riddles



about fruits and vegetables.

Higher-grade students Soro Davlatbekova and Nasriddin Orzuzoda hosted the program. In the final skit, Hamburger, Doctor Energy, and the Athlete returned to the stage. Hamburger doubted whether the children had truly understood everything and tried to confuse them with tricky questions about nutrition. Nevertheless, the children answered with confidence. In the end, Hamburger admitted defeat: "You're right. I want to be strong and healthy too!"

Zafardjon Hisoriev, Deputy Mayor of the district, who attended the closing event, praised the high level of organization and especially highlighted the children's artistic skills and their genuine enthusiasm for taking part in the Week's activities.

School headmaster Umarbek Kosimov shared an important observation: despite the freezing weather, attendance remained at one hundred percent throughout the entire week. According to him, the children's strong interest and the program's engaging format became a true source of motivation.

When parents and school work together

Parents were closely involved in activities. The school canteen hosted a cooking masterclass where, together with food technologists Zulfiya Faizieva and Maksuda Raufova, they prepared healthy dishes and discussed how to reinforce these new habits at home.

One parent, Behruz Khamidov, shared his impressions: "My son is in the second grade, and all week he



came home with new stories about the experiments, about sugar in drinks, and about the Healthy Plate. Now he does his morning exercises on his own and even reminds us to fill in his tracker. Programs like this truly make a difference. I only wish there were more of them."

Third-grader Omina Kurbonova spoke about the Week with excitement: "I liked the experiments the most, and doing exercises with the older students. Now I know which foods are healthier. I can assemble my own Healthy Plate, and I try to drink more water and choose fruits and vegetables more often."

Final note

The week brought together 280 primary school children, teachers, higher-grade students, and parents. Yet the true measure of its success lies not in numbers, but in the small changes in everyday habits.

Healthy Nutrition Week has come to an end. The banner has been taken down, the stage is empty, and the school corridors have returned to their usual rhythm.

Yet, something has changed. More and more children can be seen carrying bottles of water, holding an apple instead of a packet of crisps. Their trackers remain filled with neat checkmarks — small but tangible proof of personal effort.

Perhaps it is from such simple, practical steps that something much bigger begins: a culture of caring for one's health that grows alongside the child.

Healthy Nutrition Week at School No. 28 in Nurabad District was held as part of the WFP's School Feeding Programme in Tajikistan, with the support of SIFI. All teaching materials have remained at the school, which means the initiative is certain to continue.

The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan and the Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI), the CIS Base Organization for School Feeding, signed a memorandum of cooperation in Dushanbe.

GREATER FOCUS ON CHILDREN'S HEALTH:

Tajikistan Ministry of Education, SIFI sign cooperation memo

The signing ceremony was attended by First Deputy Minister of Education and Science Homid Hoshimzoda, Deputy Minister Badriddin Muzaffarzoda, representatives of the Ministry, and SIFI President Vladimir Chernigov.

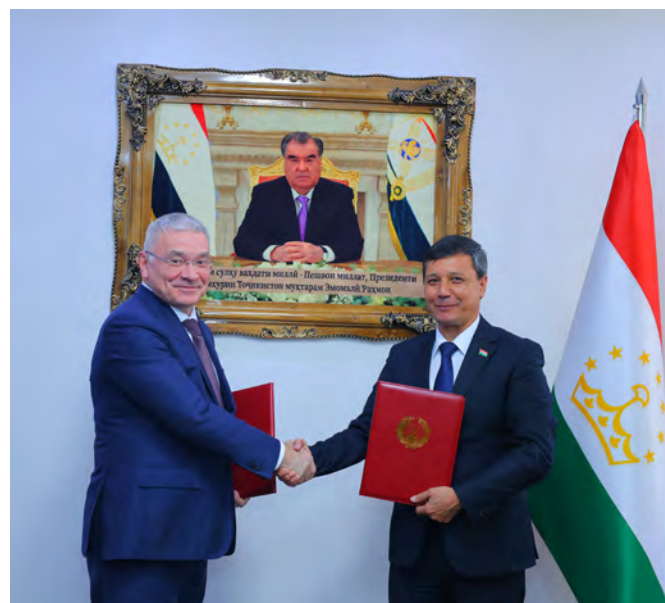
The main objective of the partnership is to support the development of school meals in Tajikistan and help make them safer, better in quality, and more beneficial for children.

In Tajikistan, school feeding is an important part of public policy. It is linked not only to children's health but also to equal access to education. When school meals are well organized, children are more likely to attend classes regularly, perform better academically, and receive the support they need.

The memorandum outlines several areas of cooperation. The parties plan to work on improving the national regulatory and methodological framework for school feeding, training specialists in the education and school nutrition sectors, and supporting the modernization of school kitchens and canteens.

Particular attention will be given to the quality and safety of food provided to schoolchildren. The partners plan to introduce modern approaches to meal preparation and school feeding management to ensure that children receive safe and nutritious meals.

An important part of the cooperation will focus on working with local suppliers and farming households. This



will help schools gain access to fresh, natural products while also supporting local producers and creating new opportunities for them to market their goods.

The memorandum also envisages exchange of expertise among specialists, as well as internships, seminars, conferences, and working meetings. To support joint activities, the parties may establish working groups and expert councils.

The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan and SIFI expressed their readiness to continue cooperation toward a shared goal: improving school meals across the country and creating healthier and more comfortable learning conditions for children.

GREENHOUSES, GARDENS, AND SCHOOL MEALS: TAJIKISTAN EXPLORES ARMENIA'S EXPERIENCE

In May 2026, Yerevan hosted the international conference "Sustainable Nationalization of School Feeding in Global and Regional Contexts." The title may sound technical, but behind it lies a simple and deeply human story.

It is a story about how an ordinary school meal can become something much greater than a plate of hot food served during the school day. It can become part of school life, a way of caring for children, and a catalyst for local economic development.

The conference brought together representatives from Armenia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, alongside experts from the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the WFP Centre of Excellence Against Hunger in Brazil, and Russia's Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI). During panel discussions, participants explored the key components of a strong national school feeding system, including effective governance, sustainable financing, high-quality meals, modern standards, and partnerships with local producers.





TAJIKISTAN SHARES ITS EXPERIENCE

Tajikistan presented its own journey in developing school feeding initiatives. Deputy Minister of Education Badriddin Muzaffarzoda spoke about the country's progress, from a pilot initiative launched in 1999 to the gradual development of a sustainable national system.

Today, government investment in school feeding continues to grow. More than USD 8 million is allocated annually for food procurement alone. Around 200 schools are already financed directly through the state budget, while successful practices developed under the National Programme are gradually being expanded to schools across the country.

Yet gatherings like this are about more than sharing achievements. They are also an opportunity to learn from others: to see how neighbouring countries address similar challenges, what has worked well, what lessons have been learned, and which ideas might be adapted to local realities.

In this regard, Armenia offered a particularly valuable example. Rather than serving as a model to be copied wholesale, since every country has its own schools, budgets, traditions, and food systems, it provided a source of practical ideas and experience.

To see Armenia's National School Feeding Programme in action, conference participants visited several schools where intensive orchards, greenhouses, and other school-based initiatives are being developed.

These projects help make school meals not only more nutritious and diverse, but truly sustainable.

NEW SCHOOL, NEW CANTEEN, NEW CULTURE

The first stop on the tour was School No. 2 in the town of Abovyan.

The school's modern building, spacious corridors, well-equipped canteen, and thoughtfully designed facilities immediately caught visitors' attention. Every day, 780



students receive hot meals at the school.

School headmaster Arthur Tashchyan shared an important insight with the guests: children did not embrace the new menu right away. This is a familiar challenge for many schools. Children become accustomed to certain flavors at home and are often cautious about trying unfamiliar foods, even when those foods are healthy and nutritious.

Over time, however, attitudes began to change. Students started tasting new dishes, discussing them with friends, and gradually expanding their preferences. Little by little, the school canteen ceased to be merely a place where classes gathered according to a schedule and became part of a broader culture of trust in school meals. And that trust matters.

A strong school feeding system cannot be built on menus and equipment alone. It also requires cooks who prepare meals with care, schools that help children understand the value of healthy eating, and parents who feel confident that their children are receiving safe, nutritious food.

School No. 2 demonstrates how these elements can come together. A modern kitchen facility, strict food quality controls, dedicated storage areas for fruits and vegetables, and well-organized food service operations all contribute to the Programme's success.

Since January, an additional group of primary school children — between 80 and 130 children each month — have been attending after-school activities and receiving hot meals as part of their daily routine.

GREENHOUSE, STRAWBERRIES, AND THE POWER OF THE SUN

The next stop on the tour was V. Hambardzumyan Basic School No. 10 in Abovyan.

Guests were welcomed with music, songs, and traditional dances. The atmosphere was anything but formal. It felt more like a school celebration welcoming long-awaited visitors.

The school serves around 2,000 students, 900 of whom receive hot meals every day. Yet the feature that attracted the greatest interest from the delegation was the school's 500-square-meter greenhouse, established five years ago with the support of the United Nations World Food Programme. It serves as a living classroom



where children learn firsthand how modern technologies can be used to grow high-quality, organic, and nutritious produce.

One section operates using conventional cultivation methods, while another uses hydroponic systems. Strawberries are grown in special bags filled with coconut fiber substrate.

The visitors learned about the greenhouse directly from children who attend the school's Innovative Greenhouse club. With confidence and enthusiasm, they explained how hydroponics works, showcased the plants they cultivate, and answered questions from the guests.



It was clearly evident that the children were not just passive observers. They were actively involved, understood the processes they were describing, and spoke about their work with genuine interest.

School headmaster Anahit Stepanyan noted that since the greenhouse was established, many students have begun considering careers in innovative agriculture. The school offers a powerful example of how meals can create connections between classroom learning, future professions, agriculture, technology, and children's aspirations.

The school has also embraced another practical innovation: a 60-kW solar power station. Generating renewable energy, it helps reduce operating costs associated with both the greenhouse and the preparation of school meals.

GANDZAK: ORCHARD THAT FEEDS AND TEACHES

One of the warmest and most memorable visits took place at Secondary School No. 2 in the village of Gandzak.

Guests were greeted with bread and salt, the rhythmic sounds of the dhol drum, traditional dances, and a song promoting healthy living. Here, school feeding has long become part of a much broader story.

Children have been receiving hot meals since 2020. Over time, the Programme has inspired a variety of initiatives, including a school garden, student clubs, and projects involving parents and women from the local community.

The school was selected as the hub for the School Feeding Transformation Programme. It was here that an intensive orchard was established, an initiative that today serves as a source of produce and also an important educational resource.

The orchard was created through the joint efforts of the Gegharkunik marz administration, WFP, and the parent community. Six hundred trees were planted on a 2,000-square-meter site. The orchard was planted in spring and produced its first harvest by autumn.

Yet the harvest is only part of the story. More importantly,



the orchard has become an integral part of the learning process. Students explore modern cultivation techniques through the Innovative Orchard club, while the Healthy Lifestyle club helps promote the principles of balanced nutrition and well-being. Children also grow vegetables and herbs in a mini garden, with the harvest used in school meals.

As a result, children can follow the entire journey of food from seed to plate: planting, caring, harvesting, and ultimately seeing the produce served in the school canteen.

PARENTS AND COMMUNITY AS PARTNERS, NOT OBSERVERS

Gandzak demonstrates particularly well how school feeding becomes stronger when it is supported by an engaged community. Not only are the school headmaster, teachers, and cooks involved, but also parents, local residents, community women, and the children themselves.

The school hosts a women's group that processes part of the harvest into dried fruits and vegetables, including blackberries, raspberries, pears, apples, and carrots. Revenue from these products is reinvested in school life, helping support the Feeding Programme, assist socially vulnerable families, and meet classroom needs.

Another initiative, called **Our Herbs**, encourages students to collect herbs, prepare herbal teas, and sell them. The proceeds help fund educational excursions. It is a simple idea with far-reaching benefits: children learn to work, plan, calculate costs, cooperate with others, and see the results of their efforts.



During the visit, guests became part of this school community themselves. Together with students and parents, they prepared salads, sliced fruit, loaded produce into drying equipment, and later shared a joint school lunch.

Moments like these often communicate more than presentations or reports ever could.

LESSONS FOR TAJIKISTAN

For Tajikistan, the Armenian experience is valuable above all because of its practicality.

It demonstrates that school feeding can evolve beyond food procurement and canteen upgrades. Around it, schools can build vibrant learning environments: greenhouses that function as educational laboratories, gardens that provide both produce and project-based learning opportunities, and partnerships that actively involve parents and local communities.

Naturally, every solution must be adapted to local conditions, including climate, school infrastructure, budgets, and cultural traditions. Yet one principle remains universal: a programme becomes truly sustainable when it is supported not only by policies and external assistance, but also by people who are actively engaged in the school life.

The Armenian schools visited during the conference showed that a school meal can be part of a broader culture of care for children. It is not only about food. It is also about health, trust, practical learning, and meaningful family and community engagement.

On June 1, Khorog Central Park was filled with children's laughter, lively music, and a festive atmosphere. Children sang, played games, took part in competitions, and enthusiastically proved that healthy food is anything but boring.

This is how Khorog marked International Children's Day. Around 500 people attended the celebration, including children, parents, teachers, members of the local community, and invited guests.

APPLE CRUNCH, SONGS, AND CHILDREN'S DAY CELEBRATION IN KHOROG

For many families, the day was more than just entertainment in the park. It was a reminder of something fundamental: children need attention, safety, joy, and opportunities to develop and grow in good health.

The event was organized by the Khorog Field Office of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), in cooperation with SIFI and the Office of the Human Rights Commissioner in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). The Deputy Chairperson of GBAO, Muslima Afzalshoeva, also attended the event. She congratulated the children and presented special prizes to those who excelled in the competitions.

Developing healthy habits through play

Children usually find it difficult to listen to long explanations about healthy eating. However, everything changes when learning is turned into play.

During the celebration, children took part in the

Fruit Challenge, themed games, and the Apple Crunch campaign. They answered questions, competed, laughed, supported one another, and at the same time learned why fruits, vegetables, and other nutritious foods are essential for growth, energy, and overall well-being.

Such activities are especially effective for younger schoolchildren. They do not simply hear "eat healthy food" instructions; they participate, experience, and learn through movement and emotion. Later, they carry this experience home into conversations with parents and friends and into their daily habits.

Gaining better understanding of healthy food

For children at School No. 9 in Khorog, the topic of healthy nutrition is already familiar. The school participates in the National School Feeding Programme, and children receive a daily hot meal.

Teacher Jamila Abdurakhimova says this is gradually changing children's attitudes toward food:



"Thanks to the School Feeding Programme, our students receive nutritious and healthy meals every day. Over time, they have come to understand why it is important and increasingly choose healthy food instead of unhealthy snacks.

When we learned that this year's Children's Day celebration would focus on healthy nutrition, our students were eager to take part. They especially enjoyed preparing for the Apple Crunch campaign.

The children drew colourful pictures of fruits, proudly presented them at the event, sang songs, and talked about the benefits of healthy eating. For them, it was not just a fun activity, but also an opportunity to reflect on their habits once again.

After the event, many students said they would like to organize a similar campaign at our school so that more children can learn about healthy lifestyles."

According to the teacher, it was especially valuable to see how confidently and enthusiastically the children participated. For them, the day was both an entertainment and a meaningful lesson that stays in memory far longer than a regular classroom session.

"I learned why eating fruit is important"

Fourth-grade student of School No. 9 in Khorog, Angelina Muborakalieva, shared her impressions:

“My favourite activity was the Apple Crunch campaign. I learned a lot about why it is important to eat fruits and other healthy foods. The celebration was fun, interesting, and educational. I was happy to take part with my friends, and I hope such events will be organized more often.”

Celebration worth repeating

The main outcome of such events is not only smiles and photographs. What truly matters is that children take away a simple idea: taking care of your health is a daily choice, and healthy food can be tasty, colourful, and engaging.

When children learn this through games, songs, competitions, and shared celebration, the message stays with them for a long time. In this way, a single day in the park can become the beginning of small but meaningful changes — at school, at home, and in the habits of entire families.



A new competition season has kicked off in Tajikistan. This year, schools and school canteens will once again have the opportunity to demonstrate that feeding children is not only about menus, ingredients, and flowcharts. It is also about the people who prepare meals for schoolchildren every day, as well as entire school teams that grow vegetables and herbs with their own hands.

MORE TASTE, BENEFITS, AND CARE FOR CHILDREN:

Tajikistan again selects best school cooks and gardens

This spring, two competitions were launched simultaneously: the fifth anniversary edition of the Best School Cook of Tajikistan 2026 and the fourth Best School Mini Garden competition. Both initiatives have long been part of the School Feeding Programme, yet each highlights a different dimension of it.

One competition focuses on professionalism, responsibility, and the daily work of school cooks. The other highlights school gardens, greenhouses, children, teachers, parents, and how a simple land plot can become a powerful lesson on healthy nutrition.

BEST SCHOOL COOK OF TAJIKISTAN COMPETITION

The competition began on April 17 and is being held for the fifth time, serving as a national professional platform for school cooks across the country.

The 2026 theme is **Tradition. Safety. Innovation.** These three words reflect the essence of a modern school canteen. On the one hand, it is important to preserve respect for national cuisine and familiar tastes. On the other hand, school meals must be safe, balanced, and comply with strict standards. At the same time, school meals require continuous improvement through modern approaches, upgraded equipment, well-designed menus, and appealing presentation.

Participation is open to school cooks and kitchen staff from schools participating in the School Feeding Programme, with a minimum of three years of professional experience required. Applicants were asked to complete a registration form, submit a copy or photo of a valid medical record book, and provide a short motivational essay or a video introduction of up to two minutes.



After the selection round, participants took part in online training sessions, where they reviewed key topics such as sanitation standards, use of flowcharts, workplace organization, and other practical aspects of their daily work.

The competition consists of several stages: selection of applications, province-level semi-finals, and the final round in Dushanbe. In the semi-finals, participants will prepare a full meal set including a starter, main course, salad, drink, and baked product. In the final stage, the country's five best school cooks will present a signature dish, complete a practical task, and take part in a professional rapid-fire quiz.

This year, special emphasis is placed on mentorship. Finalists and previous winners will support new participants by sharing experience, conducting training sessions, and assisting colleagues in the provinces. This reflects an important principle: school cooks are not isolated professionals but part of a strong professional community, where knowledge-sharing strengthens the entire school feeding system.

The final round will feature five cooks representing different parts of Tajikistan: the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), Sughd, Kulob, Bokhtar, and

the Districts of Republican Subordination.

Winners and runners-up will receive diplomas, commemorative awards, certificates for household appliances, sets of tableware, and professional kitchen equipment for school canteens. The main prize of the competition is the perpetual award, **the Golden Spoon**.

BEST SCHOOL MINI GARDEN COMPETITION

The competition is being held for the fourth time. It invites schools participating in the World Food Programme's School Feeding Programme that have a garden or greenhouse for growing vegetables and herbs.

The 2026 theme is **A Dish from Our School Garden**. Schools are expected not only to present a well-maintained garden or a good harvest, but to demonstrate the full cycle: selecting crops, preparing the soil, planting, caring for plants, harvesting produce, and showing how these ingredients can be integrated into school meals.

This is a simple and relatable story for children. When a child sees how a tiny seed grows into herbs, vegetables, or other crops, their perception of food changes. They



begin to understand how much effort goes into an ordinary school lunch. They see the connection between soil, water, labor, health, and the food on their plate.

The competition brings together students, teachers, parents, and local communities. Working side by side, they care for gardens or greenhouses, keep observations, harvest crops, conduct tasting sessions, prepare dishes, and organize themed school events.

Registration is open until June 30. Throughout the summer, participating schools will be busy planting, caring for their crops, protecting them, and submitting progress reports. In September and October, they will harvest their produce, prepare dishes, host tasting sessions, organize themed school lunches, and hold other final activities. In November, the jury will evaluate the projects, select the finalists, and announce the winners.

This year, participating schools will also receive comprehensive methodological support. Three training webinars led by agronomy experts will help participants strengthen their practical skills. Topics will include planning, preparing planting sites, caring for crops while using water efficiently, harvesting and storing produce, and making the best use of the ingredients in school meals.

Each school will also document its garden or greenhouse journey, sharing the story of its project: how the plot was chosen, which crops were grown, how the work progressed, who took part, what challenges arose, and how they were overcome.

Primary school children will complete a creative assignment titled **A Dish from Our School Garden**, producing either an individual drawing or a collaborative artwork accompanied by a short description. Students in Grades 5–11 will write essays reflecting on the crops they selected, their teamwork, and the dish they prepared using the produce they have grown.

Winners will be selected in two categories: Best School Mini Garden and Best School Greenhouse. The winning schools in each category will receive grants of TJS 10,000 to further develop their school agricultural initiatives. Schools finishing second and third will receive technical equipment worth TJS 5,000 and TJS 2,500, respectively.

ONE SHARED VISION

At first glance, the two competitions seem very different. One celebrates the skills of school cooks, while the other brings together entire school communities working in gardens and greenhouses. In fact, however, they are built around the same idea: school feeding is a living system that depends on many people working together. It requires the professionalism of cooks, the enthusiasm of children, and the support of schools, families, and local communities.

The competitions are organised by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Republic of Tajikistan, and Russia's Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI), which acts as the CIS Base Organization for School Feeding.

The months ahead will bring hard work, preparation, anticipation, tastings, and many new stories from schools across the country. Stories about cooks who put their heart into every meal, children harvesting crops they have grown with their own hands for the very first time, and schools where healthy nutrition has become part of a broader culture of caring for children's health and well-being.

WORKING WITH HEART:

the story of Alibek and school garden



Seventh-grader Alibek Turdiev from School No. 12 in the Ayni District has a dream. He wants the school plot to become green, lively, and well-maintained again, a place where students enjoy spending their breaks, where trees, vegetables, and herbs grow, and where children can see how a real harvest emerges from the soil.

Alibek's school is located in the village of Iskodar of the Dardara jamoat, in the mountainous part of the Sughd Province. The landscape here is extraordinary: mountains, rivers, and clean air. However, in the mountains, nature is not only generously beautiful. It can also be quite harsh. Heavy rains, combined with mud and stones, can destroy what people have built over the years in just a few hours.

This is exactly what happened to the school garden. It was once the pride of School No. 12: the trees bore fruit, the courtyard looked green and welcoming, and children and teachers considered it an integral part of school life. The garden delighted not only the school but also the residents of the village. Then a powerful mudflow covered the area with mud and stones, damaging the trees, and the once-lively plot became almost empty.

HOW SCHOOL PLOT WAS BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE

For the school, this was a major loss, but the story did not end there. Teachers, school employees, students, and villagers gradually began restoring the plot: they cleared the land of mud, removed stones, and planted new saplings. Nearby, a separate area was allocated for a garden to grow vegetables and herbs for the school canteen.

Alibek was among those who did not stay aside. He was actively involved in cultivating the plot together with other children: helping, observing how plants took root, how the soil changed, and how a small sprout gradually became part of a shared effort. Work like this does not bring immediate results, but there is something important: the sense that you have done something yourself, and it exists not on paper but in the schoolyard.

Today, the school grows pumpkins, tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, carrots, legumes, and herbs. Part of the harvest is used in the school canteen: herbs are added to soups, salads, and hot meals. For children, this creates a very clear connection between labor and food. First, they care for the garden beds near the school; then they help chop fresh herbs; and later they enjoy the aroma in their own meals. In this way, school meals become more meaningful and tangible: not just a scheduled lunch, but the result of care and shared effort.

AWARD-WINNING ESSAY

Alibek wrote about all this in his essay for the Best School Mini Garden 2025 competition. He spoke not only about the school plot but also about his dream — a green area at the foot of a mountain where trees and flowers grow, a clear stream flows nearby, birds sing, and where people find peace and joy. His writing carries childlike imagination, but also a mature idea: change starts small, with a school, its plot, and its garden.

Alibek writes about the land he knows, about the garden that was destroyed, about the people who did not leave it empty, about the work that made the plot green again.

In 2025, School No. 12 in the Ayni District won first place in the Best School Mini Garden category. Alibek himself received special recognition for the best essay. For the school, this victory was not just pleasant news, but an opportunity to do what had long been needed for the children.

The school headmaster explained that the funds received were used for partial renovation of the school canteen, installation of a water supply system for it, and construction of a handwashing area. Part of the funds was also used to purchase and install irrigation pipes for the school garden.

INSPIRATION FOR OTHERS

The story of Alibek and his school proves that a school garden is a place where children learn patience, responsibility, and respect for labor. Everyone plays a role: parents and villagers who support the school; teachers who turn the space behind the building into a living educational experience; and school cooks who prepare tasty and healthy meals from fresh produce grown right in the garden.

Other schools can find inspiration in this story as well: one can start with what is already available — with a small plot of land, a few garden beds, seedlings, parental support, proper irrigation, and a willingness not to leave the soil empty. You don't need to have an ideal garden right from the very beginning. What matters is that the school has a shared goal that children find meaningful.

Alibek wrote that any piece of land can be turned into paradise if you work with love and care. School No. 12 confirms these words through its actions. After the mudflow, trees are being planted again, vegetables are being grown, water is being supplied, the canteen is being improved, and a green space is being restored for the children.

Thus, the dream of a seventh-grader becomes part of a larger school story, which is quiet, authentic, and deeply important.



“I WON’T STOP”:

the journey of Tajikistan’s Best School Cook



The story of Shokhrukh Inomzoda, the cook at School No. 18 in Jabbor Rasulov District and winner of the 2025 Best School Cook competition

It is five o’clock in the morning. It is still dark outside. The school is just beginning to wake up. The corridors are quiet, and the children will not arrive for another few hours. However, in the kitchen, it is already warm, and the air is filled with the comforting aroma of fresh dough, flour, and homemade cooking.

This is Shokhrukh’s mother, Mayram Abdurakhmanovna, who is preparing a hot breakfast for the children. Years ago, she was the one who first introduced young

Shokhrukh to the world behind the doors of a school kitchen. That little boy would grow up to become the winner of the Best School Cook 2025 competition among rural schools participating in the WFP’s School Feeding Programme.

Mayram Abdurakhmanovna began working as a cook at School No. 23 in Jabbor Rasulov District long before Shokhrukh started school himself, and she still works there today. Every morning, she arrived before dawn to knead dough, bake bread, prepare soups and hot dishes, and serve children simple, wholesome meals made with care.

Shokhrukh was always nearby. Sometimes he carried

ingredients, sometimes he helped with the dough, and sometimes he simply watched as ordinary grains, vegetables, and flour were transformed into a school lunch.

At the time, he was not thinking about his future career. He was simply spending time with his mother, surrounded by the sights and smells of the school kitchen, where the aroma of freshly baked bread, soup, and warm pastries gradually became part of his childhood.

Where it all began

Shokhrukh was born on January 8, 1998, into an ordinary family. His father is a teacher, and his mother is a school cook. As the eldest child, he has a younger brother and sister.

Like many boys, he dreamed of becoming a soldier, a driver, or a doctor. Looking back now, he smiles and says that he realised quite early that none of those paths truly suited him. The kitchen was different. It was the one place that genuinely fascinated him and kept drawing him back.

After finishing school, Shokhrukh completed his military service. Even in the army, his interest in cooking quickly became apparent. Before long, he found himself spending more and more time in the kitchen, working with a confidence that made it seem as though he had already discovered his calling.

Later, he moved to Moscow, where he worked in a restaurant specialising in Tajik and Uzbek cuisine. He started as a kitchen assistant, taking on the most basic tasks, but quickly immersed himself in the profession. He learned from seasoned chefs, practised constantly, and steadily developed his skills. Within just two years, he had worked his way up to the position of chef.

Returning home

After gaining that experience, Shokhrukh could easily have stayed in the restaurant industry. Instead, in 2024, he chose to return home and take a very different path by becoming a school cook, preparing meals for children every day.

Today, he works at School No. 18 in Jabbor Rasulov District, where he cooks for 96 children each day. Every child has different tastes, habits, and moods.

One happily finishes a bowl of soup, another reaches first for the freshly baked bread, a third cautiously studies an unfamiliar dish before taking a bite, while someone else says honestly, “I don’t want it.”

A good school cook learns to recognize these things almost immediately, sometimes even before a child says a word.

Shokhrukh has noticed that children are choosing sweets and fast food more often than ever before. He sees it not only at school but at home as well, where he is raising two young children of his own, aged six and five.

That is why, for him, a school meal should be more than simply nutritious and well-balanced. It should also be delicious, carefully prepared, and visually appealing. There should be color on the plate. The vegetables should retain their shape. The meal should make children want to take the first bite. After all, serving a portion is only half the job. The real goal is to make children want to eat it.

More than winning

From the very beginning, the Best School Cook 2025 competition was far more than just a trip or a chance for Shokhrukh to test his skills. He entered with a clear goal: to perform at his best and show that a school cook can be talented, creative, and inspiring.

He wanted to prove that school cooks are true professionals who combine creativity with expertise, carefully balancing flavor, benefits, and the needs of children. Even if their workplace is a school kitchen rather than a fine-dining restaurant, their work



deserves the same respect.

Shokhrukh admits that the moment he heard about the competition, he could already picture himself standing on stage, holding the winner's trophy as the audience applauded.

The competition also gave him something he rarely had the opportunity to do: step outside his own kitchen and learn from colleagues. He watched how others approached familiar ingredients, discovered new presentation ideas, and exchanged practical experience with school cooks from across the country.

Signature dish

For the final, Shokhrukh prepared lagman, a noodle dish enjoyed by families across Central Asia. He gave the traditional recipe his own interpretation, making it lighter, richer in vegetables, and more nutritionally balanced while preserving the authentic flavors that make the dish so popular. His goal was to adapt a familiar favorite into a meal that would be both appealing and suitable for school menus.

It is also one of his family's favorite dishes. His children often ask him to cook it, although, as he says with a smile, both his mother and his wife are excellent cooks themselves.

Shokhrukh rarely shares his recipes, joking that they are professional secrets. However, for the competition, he made an exception, and it paid off. His signature lagman became one of the dishes that helped secure his victory.

Winning the competition was the first truly major achievement of his career, the very dream he had imagined before the contest even began.

His mother, Mayram Abdurakhmanovna, welcomed him home with tears in her eyes. "I always believed being a cook is a very demanding profession," she says. "I never wanted my children to follow in my footsteps. Waking up before dawn, carrying responsibility for children's health, trying to prepare delicious meals even when the choice of ingredients is limited — I thought that life wasn't for them. But today, thanks to my son's achievement, I feel proud of my profession."

His father, Inomjon Khodjaevich, sums it up simply:



"I am proud of my son and have never regretted his choice of profession. He is on the right path."

What changed after the competition

For Shokhrukh, the competition was never just about receiving a diploma or collecting happy memories. When he returned to School No. 18, he immediately began putting new ideas into practice. He started reviewing menus more carefully, experimenting with presentation, and introducing greater variety into the meals he prepares.

His award-winning lagman has already appeared on the school menu several times and has been warmly received by the children. He has also adapted ideas he discovered from fellow competitors, testing new recipes, refining familiar dishes, and observing which meals children enjoy the most and which presentations encourage them to try something new.

Shokhrukh especially enjoys giving traditional national dishes a fresh interpretation, keeping their familiar flavors while presenting them in ways that spark children's curiosity and make them eager to taste them.

Today, he says he has no intention to stop. He hopes to continue developing new recipes, bring forgotten traditional dishes back to life with modern ideas, and one day publish his own cookbook.

Every day, he prepares meals for the students of School No. 18. Perhaps, among those children, there is someone who now simply peeks into the school kitchen, watches the adults at work, and has no idea that one day the aroma of freshly baked bread, warm soup, and home-cooked meals may become the beginning of a remarkable journey of their own.

HOT MEALS THAT HELP CHILDREN STAY IN SCHOOL: INDIA'S SCHOOL FEEDING EXPERIENCE

Behind every large-scale School Feeding Programme is a vast system of millions of meals, thousands of schools, hundreds of kitchens, and complex logistics. At the center of this system is a child for whom a school lunch can become the reason to attend classes, stay in school, and believe in the possibility of a better future. This is precisely how India's Akshaya Patra Foundation operates: transforming school meals into a basis for education and child development.

In India, the impact of school feeding on education is often illustrated through a story associated with K. Kamaraj, who served as Chief Minister of Madras State (present-day Tamil Nadu) from 1954 to 1963. According to one version of the story, during a visit to a rural area, he met a boy tending cattle instead of attending school. When asked why he was not in class, the child replied: "If I go to school, will you give me food? I cannot study on an empty stomach."

Whether historical fact or parable, the story captures the essence of school feeding initiatives: for a child from a low-income family, a meal at school does not simply support health but can make education possible. This understanding later became the foundation of one of the world's largest school feeding systems, which today helps millions of children receive nutritious meals, remain in school, continue learning, and build hopes for the future.

When hunger hinders learning

Ending hunger and ensuring access to quality education are among the key Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations for 2030. At first glance, the connection is obvious: no child should have to attend lessons hungry. Yet for millions of families around

the world, adequate nutrition remains out of reach.

According to UN estimates, around 673 million people suffer from chronic undernourishment. Among them are millions of children for whom hunger becomes a daily barrier to learning.

The scale of this challenge is especially visible in India — a country of approximately 1.5 billion people, nearly one-third of whom are children and adolescents. In such circumstances, school feeding is no longer merely a social support measure. It becomes a strategic investment in national development.

This is precisely the role fulfilled by India's National School Feeding Programme. Today, it operates under the name PM POSHAN (Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman). Prior to its restructuring in 2021, it was known as the National Programme for Mid-Day Meal in Schools, more commonly referred to as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. Its mission extends beyond providing food: the programme is designed to help children stay in school. For many families, a free hot school meal becomes the decisive factor, since children go to school knowing that, alongside lessons, they are guaranteed a nutritious meal.

Today, this programme reaches approximately 100 million children.

Akshaya Patra: the inexhaustible source

One of the largest non-profit partners supporting India's school feeding system is the Akshaya Patra Foundation, established in 2000. Its name, derived from Sanskrit, translates as "the inexhaustible source," a definition that perfectly reflects the organization's mission.

The Foundation began by serving meals to 1,500 children in Bangalore. Today, it has grown into a large-scale organization working in partnership with the Government of India, state and local authorities, providing daily meals to 2.35 million schoolchildren across more than 23,000 schools in 16 states and 2 union territories.

Yet the most remarkable aspect of this story is not the scale itself, but the approach behind it.

Akshaya Patra operates not as a traditional charity initiative, but as a highly structured system in which



Akshaya Patra provides assistance to flood-affected communities in Uttarakhand. Source: <https://www.akshayapatra.org/photo-gallery/uttarakhand-flood-relief-efforts>

every detail is carefully planned, from food procurement and meal preparation to packaging, delivery routes, and quality control. Its social mission is combined with operational precision and professional management.

This is precisely what makes the Foundation relevant and valuable for other countries, including Tajikistan. It demonstrates that school feeding is not merely a way to provide children with meals. It is also a tool for supporting education, assisting families, creating jobs for local communities, and contributing to national development.

Kitchens that run like clockwork

Akshaya Patra's centralized kitchens have become a model studied by many countries around the world. They operate using modern technologies and sustainable solutions. The Foundation uses solar energy, environmentally friendly LNG-powered transport, and is gradually introducing electric vehicles. Waste is processed through biogas systems, while water is managed efficiently and reused wherever possible.

One of the Foundation's key strengths is its ability to apply business principles for social impact. Akshaya Patra incorporates private-sector management practices into its non-profit operations: it carefully manages resources, optimizes processes, analyzes delivery routes, and oversees supply chains with high efficiency. At the same time, it never loses sight of its core social mission.



Opening of Akshaya Patra's 58th kitchen in Jalahalli, Karnataka. Source: <https://www.akshayapatra.org/photo-gallery/inauguration-of-58th-kitchen-in-jalahalli-karnataka>



Akshaya Patra opens its 67th kitchen in Barsana, Uttar Pradesh. Source: <https://www.akshayapatra.org/photo-gallery/67th-kitchen-inauguration-in-barsana-uttar-pradesh>

A striking example is the automated roti-making machine used to prepare traditional Indian flatbread. In 2002, the Foundation introduced its first such machine in northern India, where wheat-based foods are a staple of the daily diet, and schools needed to provide fresh rotis to children every day.

The first machine produced around 10,000 rotis per hour. Today, production capacity exceeds 50,000 rotis per hour. What began as a relatively small engineering solution ultimately became a tool that dramatically expanded the programme's reach.

Quality control: no margin for error

When it comes to feeding children, large-scale operations are impossible without rigorous quality control. At every stage of Akshaya Patra's work, from raw material procurement to cooking, packaging, and meal delivery, strict food safety and hygiene standards are maintained.

There is no room for compromise. Any mistake comes at too high a cost, because the health of children and the trust of families are at stake.

The Foundation continuously optimizes all operational processes, including logistics and supply chains. For example, it uses specialized software to design the most efficient delivery routes from centralized kitchens to schools.

One model doesn't work everywhere

At first glance, centralized kitchens may seem like the ideal solution. They make it possible to cook at a lower cost through economies of scale, simplify process control, and make it easier to maintain consistent standards.

In many cases, this is indeed true. However, there is one important nuance.

In remote areas with difficult terrain, weak infrastructure, and poor road conditions, a centralized model may simply not work. In such cases, decentralized kitchens — smaller facilities located close to schools — become the more practical solution.

Although they operate on a smaller scale, the quality standards remain just as strict.

This is one of the key principles of the Akshaya Patra model: adaptation does not mean lowering standards. A strong system can adjust to real-world conditions while maintaining consistency and quality.

Working with communities

Behind every meal provided by Akshaya Patra are people who turn a large-scale system into daily care: selecting ingredients, preparing food, ensuring quality control, and delivering meals to schools where children are waiting for their lunch.



Inside one of Akshaya Patra's centralized kitchens. Source: <https://www.akshayapatra.org/photo-gallery/dignitary-visit-to-bhiwandi-kitchen>

This work creates employment opportunities, along with stable income, decent working conditions, and a sense of security. But its impact goes deeper: people feel that their work truly matters.

Most kitchen staff are women, often mothers of the very children who receive school meals. For them, this is not just a source of income, but an opportunity to take part in their children's education and their community's daily life.

They are no longer on the "other side" of the system. They become part of it.

When public and private efforts come together

Today, the foundation is no longer just a charitable organisation, but a full-fledged partner in the school feeding system and an example of sustainable public-private partnership. It operates within a clear legal framework and adheres to principles of transparency and accountability.

This offers an important lesson for any country: school feeding requires coordination. Governments define the rules, standards, and long-term framework. Partners contribute technology, expertise, flexibility, management capacity, additional resources, and innovation. Schools and communities translate all of this into daily practice.

Beyond the school canteen

The original objective was simple — to feed children. However, over time, it became clear that the impact is much broader.

School feeding has increased attendance, particularly among girls. It has improved learning outcomes and created new opportunities for families.

Over time, the foundation's work expanded beyond schools. Through the Anganwadi programme, nutrition and support are provided to pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, and children under the age of six.

This reflects a long-term vision: care for schoolchildren begins long before they enter the classroom for the first time. Early childhood nutrition directly influences a child's development, health, and future ability to learn.

Breakfast programmes were also introduced. At first glance, this may seem like a small addition. However, when a child arrives at school hungry, even lunch is not always enough. Breakfast helps close this gap and allows children to engage in learning from the very start of the day.



Another initiative focuses on supporting homeless mothers in the city of Vrindavan. While this is a local intervention, it reflects the same principle: the system must be able to see and respond to those in greatest need.

System tested by crisis

The true test of any system comes during a crisis.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Akshaya Patra's infrastructure did not stop operating. On the contrary, it became the foundation for large-scale humanitarian assistance. Kitchens that normally prepared meals for schools quickly shifted to providing food for people in the most vulnerable situations.

This transition happened smoothly and rapidly because the system had already been built to function effectively under challenging conditions.

From nutrition to education

A school meal is only the beginning of a much broader effort: once a child's basic need for food is met, education, environment, and opportunities for development come to the forefront.

Akshaya Patra gradually expanded into educational initiatives as well, supporting school infrastructure, introducing digital learning tools, and helping children gain access to scholarships. At first glance, the Foundation's activities may appear more diverse, but the underlying logic has remained the same: supporting children where they need it most.

Step by step, school feeding becomes part of a much larger story about a child's future. A well-fed child is able to listen, understand, and ask questions. Instead of counting the minutes until the end of the lesson, the student becomes actively engaged in learning.

Students at a school in Bangalore, where the Akshaya Patra Foundation operates its school feeding programme. Source: <https://www.thehansindia.com/hans/education-careers/akshaya-patra-foundation-resumes-mid-day-meal-scheme-in-bengaluru-800233>

Perspective for professionals

India's experience demonstrates how an entire system can be built around what may initially seem like a simple task — providing meals for children at school. Behind it stand food procurement systems, menu planning, kitchen operations, logistics, staff training, quality control, and coordinated partner engagement.

For Tajikistan, where school feeding has already become an important part of educational and social policy, this experience strongly resonates with its own development path. It highlights once again the importance of sustainable processes, strong partnerships, and flexible approaches: in some contexts, centralized models work best, while in others, school-based kitchens and local formats are more effective. Yet quality and safety standards must remain universal.

In this sense, the story of Akshaya Patra serves as a reminder that school feeding becomes a truly powerful tool only when it is supported not merely by kitchens,

but by coordinated efforts among governments, schools, partners, parents, and local communities. It is precisely this kind of system that transforms daily care for children into a long-term investment in health, education, and trust in schools.

One scene worth more than a thousand numbers

A schoolyard. An ordinary day. A truck carrying meals arrives at the school. The children immediately perk up. Some wave excitedly, others run closer. Their faces light up with smiles.

"Our food is here!" voices can be heard from every direction.

At first glance, it is a simple moment, but within it lies joy, anticipation, and trust in a system that does not fail them.

This is not just lunch. It is an opportunity to learn, grow, dream, and move forward.



Akshaya Patra volunteers conduct activities at a school in Jhabua Vikas Khand. Source: <https://www.akshayapatra.org/photo-gallery/delhi-is-united-to-serve>

FLAXSEED: A TINY SEED FOR A BIG DAY

Many parents try to make their child's diet healthier, yet doing so consistently in everyday life can be challenging. Children can be reluctant to try new foods, quickly become attached to sweet snacks, and often rely on one favorite meal for every occasion — pasta, porridge, bread, yogurt, or pastries.

Flaxseed is a simple way to make a child's diet more varied without introducing drastic changes. It can easily be added to foods children already know and enjoy. The flavor changes slightly, while the meal becomes more filling and nutritious.

Flaxseed is not a substitute for a balanced diet, but it can be an easy addition that makes everyday breakfasts and snacks more varied and wholesome.

FLAXSEED IN FAMILY MENU:

SIMPLE ADDITION TO EVERYDAY MEALS

A child's eating habits are shaped largely at home, around the family table. This is where children become familiar with certain foods, flavors, and daily eating routines.

That is why even small changes to home meals can make a difference. When familiar dishes gradually become more balanced, satisfying, and nutritious, children are more likely to accept healthy eating as a natural part of everyday life.

One of the greatest advantages of flaxseed is how easily it fits into daily meals. It requires no special preparation and pairs naturally with foods that are already part of the family menu.

WHY FLAXSEED WORKS WELL

- Easy to add to familiar dishes
- Does not dramatically change the flavor of food
- Pairs well with porridge, fermented dairy products, fruit, and baked goods
- Helps make snacks more nutritious
- Allows children to gradually become familiar with new foods

IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER that flaxseed does not replace a balanced diet. However, it can be a valuable addition to a varied and nutritious school-age diet.



WHAT MAKES FLAXSEED NUTRITIOUS?

Despite its tiny size, flaxseed contains a rich combination of nutrients.

FIBER



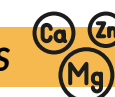
Supports healthy digestion and helps meals feel more satisfying.

PLANT-BASED OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS



Flaxseed contains alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), a plant-based form of Omega-3 that is important for brain function, the nervous system, and heart health.

MAGNESIUM AND OTHER MINERALS



These nutrients are involved in many essential processes in the body and support healthy metabolism.

LIGNANS



Lignans are natural plant compounds with antioxidant properties. They help protect cells from damage and support overall health. Flaxseed is considered one of the richest dietary sources of lignans.

THE GOLDEN RULE:

GROUND FLAXSEED WORKS BEST

If you look closely at flaxseeds, you will notice that they are covered by a dense outer shell. Because of this, whole flaxseeds are more difficult for the body to digest, and some may pass through the digestive system almost unchanged.

For home meals, it is generally better to use:

- **ground flaxseed** for porridge, chakka, yogurt, cottage cheese, and smoothies;
- **flaxseed flour** for flatbreads, pancakes, fritters, and other baked goods;
- **whole flaxseeds** as a topping or garnish.

It is important to remember that ground flaxseed has a shorter shelf life than whole seeds. It should be stored in a tightly sealed container away from heat and direct light.



ADDING FLAXSEED TO SCHOOLCHILDREN'S DIET THE EASY WAY

1. ADD IT TO PORRIDGE

Porridge is one of the easiest ways to introduce a child to a new ingredient. A small amount of ground flaxseed pairs well with apples, bananas, apricots, raisins, or pumpkin.

A SIMPLE BREAKFAST FORMULA:
porridge + fruit + flaxseed

2. ADD IT TO CHAKKA, YOGURT, OR COTTAGE CHEESE

After school, children often want something tasty. Instead of sweets, try offering chakka or yogurt with fruit and a sprinkle of ground flaxseed.

A SIMPLE SNACK FORMULA:
chakka + fruit + flaxseed

3. ADD IT TO HOMEMADE PASTRIES

Flaxseed works especially well in dough. It can be added to flatbreads, pancakes, fritters, buns, or homemade muffins, making meals more nutritious without dramatically changing the flavor.

4. ADD IT TO SALADS AND VEGETABLE DISHES

Ground flaxseed can be mixed with yogurt or chakka to make a light dressing for vegetables. This is a simple option for a healthy family dinner.

5. ADD IT TO SMOOTHIES AND HEALTHY SNACKS

If your child enjoys smoothies, try adding a small amount of ground flaxseed. Banana, apple, yogurt, and flaxseed make an easy and filling after-school snack.

Flaxseed is one of those simple foods that can easily become part of the family diet. It does not require complicated recipes, major expenses, or dramatic changes to everyday meals.



HOW MUCH TO USE?

When introducing new foods, it is best to start gradually.

A small pinch or half a teaspoon of ground flaxseed is enough to begin with. If the child enjoys the taste and tolerates it well, it can become a regular addition to meals.

There is no need to include flaxseed every day. Overall dietary variety is far more important.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

1. START WITH ONE MEAL

There is no need to change the entire menu at once. Start with just one breakfast or snack.

2. AVOID PRESSURE

Children are more open to trying new foods when they feel they have a choice.

3. USE FOODS YOUR CHILD ALREADY LOVES

Fruit, yogurt, pancakes, or porridge can make flaxseed feel familiar and enjoyable.

4. LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Children often pick up eating habits from adults much faster than we realize.

Sometimes healthy habits begin with very small steps, and one tiny flaxseed is a good example of that.

WHO GLOBAL GUIDANCE ON SCHOOL MEALS:

diet quality as strategic priority

The World Health Organization (WHO) has released its first-ever global guidelines on healthy and balanced nutrition in schools. This marks an important shift: school meals are now formally recognized not merely as a form of social assistance, but as a practical and effective tool for protecting and promoting children's health.

WHO emphasizes that what children eat at school and how their meals are organized directly shape their long-term eating habits. The new guidance brings together evidence-based recommendations and practical solutions to help schools establish clear, consistent, and health-oriented feeding systems.

WHY SCHOOLS?

Today, the world faces two parallel challenges related to poor nutrition. In some countries, children continue to suffer from undernutrition and deficiencies in essential macro- and micronutrients critical for growth and development. In others, rates of overweight and obesity among children are rising rapidly.

According to WHO, by 2025, an estimated 188 million school-aged children and adolescents worldwide are living with obesity, which is roughly one in ten children. For the first time in history, the number of children who are overweight exceeds those who are underweight.

This is why schools have become a central focus. They provide a unique opportunity to influence children's diets every day, systematically and equitably, regardless of household income or social background.

SCHOOL MEALS SHAPE LIFELONG HABITS

Healthy eating habits are formed early in life. As children spend a significant portion of their day at school, the school environment plays a decisive role in shaping their attitudes toward food and their future choices.

For many children, a school lunch is the most consistent and nutritionally complete meal of the day. This is particularly important for families with limited financial resources.

WHO estimates that 466 million children worldwide currently receive school meals. However, reliable information about the nutritional quality and balance of these meals remains limited.

WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus



underscores the long-term importance of school nutrition:

“The quality of food provided to schoolchildren and the conditions in which their diets are shaped can significantly affect learning outcomes and have lasting consequences for their health and well-being. Well-designed school feeding programs are essential for disease prevention and for building a healthier adult population.”

IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT SCHOOL CANTEEN

One of the key innovations in the WHO recommendations is **a comprehensive, whole-school approach to nutrition.**

WHO encourages schools to consider everything children consume throughout the school day, not only canteen meals, but also:

- food sold at canteens,
- snacks and beverages from vending machines,
- treats provided during school events and extracurricular activities.

The school is viewed as a single, integrated food environment, one in which healthy choices should be easier and more accessible than less nutritious alternatives.

WHAT CHANGES DOES WHO RECOMMEND?

The guidelines place particular emphasis on measures that can be implemented immediately.

First, **schools should introduce standards and policies** that:

- make healthy foods more accessible by increasing the availability of whole grains, fruits, nuts, and legumes;
- limit the availability of products high in sugar, salt, and trans fats.

This is considered the primary and mandatory recommendation.

Second, WHO advises **introducing complementary measures that help children choose healthier options** more frequently. These include practical factors such as:

- how food is displayed and positioned,
- how meals are presented,
- how easy they are to select,
- and how they are priced.



The goal is not to impose strict prohibitions, but to ensure that the healthy choice becomes the easiest and most convenient one.

RULES ALONE ARE NOT ENOUGH

Having policies and standards in place does not automatically guarantee results unless their implementation is properly monitored and enforced.

According to WHO data, as of October 2025:

- healthy school meal policies were implemented in 104 countries;
- nearly three-quarters had introduced mandatory

nutrition standards for school meals;

- however, only 48 countries had restricted the advertising and promotion of foods high in sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats.

These figures demonstrate that a considerable gap still exists between policy adoption and meaningful change in schools.

WHO emphasizes that progress depends not only on national governments, but also on local authorities, municipalities, and individual schools, where many of the decisions that directly shape children’s everyday life are made.

IN CONCLUSION

The new WHO recommendations highlight a simple but important truth: a child’s health is shaped every day, both at home and at school, at the family table and during a hot lunch with classmates.

When healthy eating becomes part of the educational process, schools do more than provide meals. They help children grow, develop, and build the foundation for lifelong well-being.

THE ADVENTURES OF POTATO MASH IN JUNGLESHIRE

CHAPTER TEN

THE PROPHECY OF THE THREE MAGICIANS

These plants seemed to be really friendly.

"Welcome to the Lettuce Family," they repeated warmly. "We are the most numerous tribe of all the Green Tribes. Come along, you can spend the night here. It will rain soon and, if you stay in your tent, you will get wet and cold."

The new friends brought the team to the village consisting of small huts made of twigs, dirt, and leaves. The villagers piled out into the street to look at the guests. The travellers did not know where to look first: there were all

kinds of lettuce — purple, green, curly, straight, big and small. All of them were surprised to see the guests but were very welcoming.

"These are the first jungle inhabitants who do not attack us!" said Captain Mash in astonishment.



LETTUCE

There are a lot of lettuce types: chard, watercress, red lettuce, green lettuce, wood-lettuce, romaine lettuce, iceberg lettuce.



Chard

VITAMINS AND MINERALS:

Vitamin A, B vitamins, C, E, K, potassium, calcium, sulfur, iodine, phosphorus.



Watercress

INTERESTING FACTS:

Lettuce contains a substance called lactucin that gives it a touch of bitterness.

Lactucin has useful properties: it lowers cholesterol in the blood, relieves fatigue, and tones the body up.



Red Lettuce

HEALTH BENEFITS OF LETTUCE:

The food fiber helps to cleanse the bowels and facilitates digestion.

A large amount of vitamin B9 helps to strengthen the immune system, contributes to better growth and development of body cells.

Vitamin K protects your bones and teeth.

Potassium is necessary for the cardiovascular system, it normalizes the muscular tone.



Lettuce



Iceberg Lettuce



Romaine Lettuce

Lettuce contains a lot of phosphorus which is crucial for the functioning of your liver, kidneys, and heart; it also strengthens your teeth and gums, improves memory and brain function.

"We are so happy you came here," big green Romaine Lettuce said at last.

"Don't be surprised: we know and respect your language," said Violetta the Lettuce (she was wearing red-and-purple bouffant skirts).

"We all dream of leaving Jungleshire someday and visiting the city," said a thin lettuce whose name was Greeny. "Our kids want to go to school, to use smartphones, computers, and the Internet. That's why we learn the language of Fruit and Vegetables and teach it to our children – in the hope that they will use it in the future."

"But we cannot leave," said Romaine. "Unfortunately, the belligerent tribes of Coriander and Fragrant Dill have never let us come to Kitchenville. We don't want to fight our brothers and spill their green blood. We trust the Prophecy of the Three Magicians. It says that one day courageous vegetables from Kitchenville will come and stop the hostility and Jungleshire will live in peace."



"We know you are looking for a rare flower," said Violetta. "If you need any help please don't hesitate to tell us. And here is an empty hut — you can have some rest here, wait for the rain to stop and stay overnight."

The travellers thanked the locals for their hospitality, had supper together with them, told their hosts about Kitchenville in brief, and, finally, were left alone.



The campfire was burned in front of the hut, the rain was pattering softly on the leaves of the wicker roof. Cucumbert was leafing through the encyclopedia and reading about various lettuce types. Rosalina was listening to the sound of rain. Tomatini was sad: there was only one day left to find the flower. Honion felt guilty for having drawn Captain Mash into this dangerous affair.

Potato held the watch in his hands wondering why Corianders needed it so much. He also thought that it should be well hidden and never be shown in the woods again.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

"It looks like midnight," Professor said pensively. "Time to go to bed."

Mash sighed and absentmindedly moved the hands of the broken watch, setting them at midnight. He was about to put the watch away and go to bed when something extraordinary happened. Mash might have touched the clock movement, and it suddenly snapped into action. Everyone heard a loud click, and a piece of paper jumped out of the clock landing onto the floor.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SECRET OF THE WATCH

Everyone lost all desire to sleep. With his hands trembling, Captain Mash unfolded the paper and the travellers bent over it.

"It's a map," whispered Rosalina.

"Look", said Cucumbert in excitement. "There is a railway station, on the left there are two villages, and the road on the right... Isn't it..."

"Yes, it is! It's an old map of Jungleshire!" cried Honion Peeling. "But how did it get into grandfather Leopold's watch?"



Mash slapped on his forehead.

"Of course! I should have guessed at once! Many years ago grandfather came here, to Jungleshire. I remember him telling me stories about Green Tribes — instead of bedtime fairy tales. Grandpa told me he had been sent here on a mission — he worked in the police at that time. The Green Tribes used to raid neighbouring villages and Grandpa's task was to discipline them. During his visit, he made friends with a Coriander — he was a doctor who was writing a book about a flower of some sort."

"How exciting!" whispered Rosalina. "Can that flower be rhizanthella?"



"I don't remember anything else — I was too young. And when I grew older he never mentioned Jungleshire again. I even started thinking they were just made-up stories."

In the meantime, Peeling and Cucumbert were studying the map.

"Look," said Seed. "The settlement site of the Fragrant Tribe is marked there. Here is the Coriander Tribe. And here is the cave into which we were thrown."

"And what does this mark mean?" asked Professor Tomatini. "Looks like a flower..."

"Rhizanthella!" guessed Peeling.

"The one the book was about!" exclaimed Rosalina.

"And the place marked with the flower is right here!" screamed Cucumbert.

Without thinking twice, the friends grasped their forks and turned on their flashlights.

"We are close to finding the flower!" said Peeling happily. "I am sure your grandfather marked the spot on the map where rhizanthella was growing. Since his friend was writing a book about the flower he had to know for sure."

Their sleepiness of the team members vanished as if by magic. They studied closely the place marked on the map: it was the ground under a gigantic oak-tree; they searched and dug through every inch within five yards from the oak. But there was no trace of any flowers or flower roots or fragrance.

"I am tired of searching," said Peeling wearily. "Let's go to bed. Your grandpa must have joked about the flower."

"I don't agree." With these words, Professor Tomatini dug deeper with his fork. "Look! There is something here!"





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