



C/2023/1063

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School's scheme for fruit, vegetables, milk and dairy products

European Parliament resolution of 9 May 2023 on the implementation of the school scheme for fruit, vegetables, milk and dairy products under the Common Market Organisation Regulation (2021/2205(INI))

(C/2023/1063)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 establishing a common organisation of the markets in agricultural products⁽¹⁾ (Common Market Organisation Regulation), which provides the legal basis for the EU school scheme for fruit, vegetables, milk and dairy products,
- having regard to the European Parliamentary Research Service European implementation assessment of 14 July 2022 entitled 'Implementation of the EU school scheme for fruit, vegetables and milk products: a mid-term review',
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 December 2021 establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plans) and financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1305/2013 and (EU) No 1307/2013⁽²⁾,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2020/2220 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 December 2020 laying down certain transitional provisions for support from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and from the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) in the years 2021 and 2022 and amending Regulations (EU) No 1305/2013, (EU) No 1306/2013 and (EU) No 1307/2013 as regards resources and application in the years 2021 and 2022 and Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 as regards resources and the distribution of such support in respect of the years 2021 and 2022⁽³⁾,
- having regard to Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2017/39 of 3 November 2016 on rules for the application of Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council with regard to Union aid for the supply of fruit and vegetables, bananas and milk in educational establishments⁽⁴⁾,
- having regard to Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2017/40 of 3 November 2016 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council with regard to Union aid for the supply of fruit and vegetables, bananas and milk in educational establishments and amending Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 907/2014⁽⁵⁾,
- having regard to Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/1187 of 7 July 2022 amending Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/493 as regards the definitive allocation of Union aid to Member States for school fruit and vegetables and for school milk for the period from 1 August 2022 to 31 July 2023⁽⁶⁾, which aims to fully maximise the potential of the funds available and address the difficulties in implementing the school scheme as a result of the displacement of children from Ukraine following the military aggression by Russia,

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 671.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 435, 6.12.2021, p. 1.

⁽³⁾ OJ L 437, 28.12.2020, p. 1.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ L 5, 10.1.2017, p. 1.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ L 5, 10.1.2017, p. 11.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ L 184, 11.7.2022, p. 56.

- having regard to the Commission communication of 20 May 2020 entitled ‘A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system’ (COM(2020)0381),
 - having regard to its resolution of 20 October 2021 on a farm to fork strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system ⁽⁷⁾,
 - having regard to Regulation (EU) 2018/848 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2018 on organic production and labelling of organic products ⁽⁸⁾,
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 19 April 2021 on an action plan for the development of organic production (COM(2021)0141),
 - having regard to the Commission communication of 3 February 2021 entitled ‘Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan’ (COM(2021)0044),
 - having regard to the Court of Auditors Special Report No 10/2011 of 24 October 2011 entitled ‘Are the school milk and school fruit schemes effective?’,
 - having regard to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals,
 - having regard to Decision 5.COM 6.41 of 16 November 2010 of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage approving the inscription of the Mediterranean diet on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity,
 - having regard to its resolution of 29 April 2021 on the European Child Guarantee ⁽⁹⁾,
 - having regard to Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee ⁽¹⁰⁾,
 - having regard to the 2019 European health interview survey (EHIS wave 3),
 - having regard to the World Health Organization European Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (WHO COSI) and its first five surveys carried out between 2007 and 2020,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure, as well as Article 1(1)(e) of, and Annex 3 to, the decision of the Conference of Presidents of 12 December 2002 on the procedure for granting authorisation to draw up own-initiative reports,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (A9-0096/2023),
- A. whereas the promotion of healthy, varied and balanced diets, together with a healthy lifestyle, including regular physical activity, is an increasingly important issue and should become a priority for our society; whereas an integrated and comprehensive approach between nutrition and lifestyle is needed; whereas one in three children in the EU between 6 and 9 years old is overweight or obese ⁽¹¹⁾; whereas healthy diets can reduce the risk of certain chronic diseases; whereas the promotion of healthy diets constitutes a preventive measure against disease and an investment in public health;
- B. whereas 53 % of Europeans are considered overweight ⁽¹²⁾; whereas there is a clear pattern related to education levels, in which the proportion of overweight people falls as the education level rises;
- C. whereas schools lay the foundation for a sustainable and healthy society;

⁽⁷⁾ OJ C 184, 5.5.2022, p. 2.

⁽⁸⁾ OJ L 150, 14.6.2018, p. 1.

⁽⁹⁾ OJ C 506, 15.12.2021, p. 94.

⁽¹⁰⁾ OJ L 223, 22.6.2021, p. 14.

⁽¹¹⁾ World Health Organization, ‘WHO European Regional Obesity Report 2022’, Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2022.

⁽¹²⁾ Eurostat, ‘Over half of adults in the EU are overweight’, 21 June 2021.

- D. whereas nutrition education, which promotes a varied, balanced and healthy diet, is crucial in stimulating healthy consumption habits and should therefore be improved across the EU;
- E. whereas all schoolchildren should have equal and fair access to healthy, nutritious and sustainable food products;
- F. whereas it is hugely important to raise awareness and educate children across the EU on matters such as local food chains, seasonality, organic and integrated farming, healthy, varied and balanced diets, food security, climate change, animal welfare and sustainability in food production and food waste;
- G. whereas children can play a key role in informing and raising the awareness of their parents, relatives and peers about a mindful, varied, balanced and sustainable diet and a healthy lifestyle;
- H. whereas studies have shown that consuming fresh fruit and vegetables, as part of a balanced diet, reduces the risk of life-threatening diseases and helps to mitigate the environmental impact of food systems; whereas the level of fruit and vegetable consumption among children and young people is not satisfactory; whereas there is a remarkably large difference in the amount of fruit and vegetables consumed in the various EU Member States;
- I. whereas a 2002 WHO report stated that low fruit and vegetable intake is among the top 10 risk factors contributing to mortality from known causes;
- J. whereas measures designed to educate children and adolescents on the importance of a healthy, varied and balanced diet can have positive repercussions on society as a whole, especially in the long term;
- K. whereas in the EU, an estimated 20 % of the total food produced is lost or wasted, with households generating more than half of total food waste, which has negative social, economic and environmental impacts; whereas age-appropriate educational measures encouraging the introduction of good practices could contribute significantly to reducing food waste in the EU in the long term;
- L. whereas the Mediterranean diet is a way of eating that is based on healthy habits with a dietary pattern that has great health benefits, and is recognised by the scientific community;
- M. whereas measures designed to provide free access to healthy food products to all schoolchildren, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, can have cumulative positive effects on their physical and mental health, as well as their development and social well-being; whereas these measures can lay the foundation for sustainable consumption later in life, and can also have an indirect positive effect on the development of local communities, in particular small and family farms;
- N. whereas food production standards in the EU are the highest and most rigorous in the world, especially in terms of sustainability;
- O. whereas the outermost regions, particularly archipelagos with remote islands, have greater difficulty in ensuring the regular supply of these food products;
- P. whereas the profile of the EU school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme should be raised and the programme better communicated in order for it to reach more participants;
- Q. whereas poorer diets and underlying health issues, such as obesity, are more prevalent among children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds;
- R. whereas monitoring and evaluation are crucial in ensuring the proper functioning of the EU school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme;

Conclusions and recommendations

Budget

1. Regrets the fact that in many cases, the amount of EU funding that the Member States receive is insufficient to reach all target groups in all regions, to motivate all schools to get involved and to generate the desired impact, while successfully and fairly impacting schools at both EU and national level; stresses that, in order to guarantee the continuation of well-functioning programmes, the current distribution of aid should also be taken as a minimal basis for distribution in the future;
2. Deplores the fact that some Member States are not making full use of the budget available, mainly due to the high number of administrative and bureaucratic procedures; calls on the Commission and the Member States to cooperate ahead of the next school scheme revision in order to assess national performances, produce a sound analysis of the causes behind Member States displaying different absorption rates of the budget available and provide more guidance based on best practices from the Member States;
3. Calls on the Commission to increase the total budget for the school scheme for fruit, vegetables, milk and dairy products and to consider a fair redistribution among the participants of the scheme, so as to reallocate amounts not used by some Member States to others that demonstrate their willingness and capability to use more than their indicative allocations; emphasises that increasing the budget for the scheme would make it possible to increase the frequency of distribution each week and the duration of distribution throughout the school year;
4. Calls on the Commission to take account of the situation of children with severe food allergies, intolerances and other dietary restrictions and to allocate additional funding for the procurement of alternative diversified products, within the scope of the scheme in order to ensure its inclusivity;
5. Calls on the Commission to assess the possibility of synergies between the school scheme and existing healthy breakfast initiatives and programmes for the distribution of regular school meals, as well as other sources of funding, in order to reach a higher number of children, in line with the European Child Guarantee objectives;
6. Recommends that, while aid provided for distribution should continue to be variable, other costs associated with accompanying measures and the monitoring and evaluation of the scheme should be fixed in order to improve consistency and planning by the Member States;
7. Urges the Commission to take steps to ensure that the Member States guarantee a minimum quality level of the products covered by the scheme, which could factor into the take-up of the budget and the achievement of national participation targets;
8. Calls on the Commission to periodically assess the possibility of gradually increasing the scheme's budget, given its benefits to society as a whole;
9. Underlines that products that do not meet quality requirements have a negative impact on the implementation of the scheme by leading to a lack of interest in consuming the products and thus contributing to food waste; considers that surpluses of fruit and vegetables, including the 'ugly' ones that are in perfect condition, should also be deemed eligible; calls further on the Commission and the Member States to evaluate the amount of food waste generated by the school scheme and to identify potential causes, clarify the issue of unused products and provide guidance on curbing food waste associated with the scheme, in line with EU food loss and waste reduction targets, while avoiding placing administrative burdens on the Member States, schools and suppliers;

Educational measures

10. Acknowledges the importance of educational measures in raising awareness about the nutritional value of fruit and vegetables, especially fresh, seasonal, local and regional products, as well as milk and dairy products, in the context of achieving the scheme's objectives; notes the need to align the educational measures with the objectives of the Farm to Fork strategy and Europe's Beating Cancer Plan; points out that farm visits are a critical tool to enable children and adolescents to reconnect with agriculture, to familiarise themselves with sustainable farming practices and to get to know and experience first-hand the vital role that EU agriculture plays in ensuring access to safe and nutritious food and the contribution it makes to the protection of the environment, the landscape and biodiversity; calls on the Commission and the Member States to increase the uptake of digital tools and digital learning materials, building on the learnings following the COVID-19 pandemic, with the purpose of complementing, when necessary, in-person educational activities;

11. Calls on the Member States to ensure that at least 10 % of the funding allocated to the school scheme every year from EU and national aid combined is earmarked for educational measures in order to increase their frequency and expand their reach, as the mere distribution of products is not sufficient to instil healthy lifestyle habits;

12. Calls on the Commission to provide more guidance on the content of the educational measures, drawing on best practices from the Member States and easing the administrative and financial burden on schools; stresses that educational measures should focus on aspects such as healthy, sustainable, varied and balanced eating habits, nutrition and culinary skills, food allergens and alternatives, agriculture in general and sustainable agriculture in particular, including organic farming, integrated production methods, animal welfare, food security, climate change and the prevention and reduction of food waste; calls on the Commission and the Member States to ensure the appropriate involvement of national authorities responsible for health and nutrition, the environment, agriculture and education in developing appropriate and interactive accompanying measures, taking into account age groups and local specificities in terms of diet, cultural habits and farming practices;

13. Underlines the need to better involve teachers and other school staff, relevant competent authorities in the educational measures and to promote the participation of other stakeholders in the educational measures, better including parents, local producers, and civil society organisations; emphasises that the programme shall be implemented by qualified personnel, with adequate training for teachers, canteen operators, chefs and dieticians involved; underlines that selecting local producers close to the school would facilitate the implementation of educational measures;

Scope

14. Stresses that the products for distribution should originate in the EU and essentially be unprocessed, where applicable organic, locally produced and, if possible, with European quality indications; notes that the market for European quality indication and organic products is unevenly distributed among the Member States and that these products have higher costs; calls on the Commission to introduce requirements to ensure that the products comply with objective criteria, including health, environmental, quality and ethical considerations, animal welfare, seasonality, variety, the availability of local produce, giving priority to short supply chains; stresses that in the case of bananas and other tropical fruits priority should be given to products originating in the EU and its outermost regions; emphasises that products should be diversified, reflect seasonal availability, local healthy eating habits and crop types as far as possible;

15. Encourages the distribution of at least 25 % of organic products within the EU school scheme, through, inter alia, the uptake of green public procurement criteria, which would play a role in boosting public procurement of organic food, as part of the EU organic action plan, and thereby contributing to the achievement of and the alignment to the Farm to Fork objectives;

16. Insists that products containing added sugars, fats, salt or sweeteners should not be permitted within the scheme; calls on the Commission, in cooperation with the Member States and health and nutrition authorities, to closely analyse the exceptions that allow for the distribution of certain types of products with limited sugar and fat content, in view of their strict limitation or removal, in order to ensure that the scheme remains aligned with its objectives and wider EU policy goals; calls on the Member States to enable close and effective cooperation between health and nutrition, agricultural, environmental and educational authorities in drawing the list of eligible products and educational activities, in full compliance with the school scheme's objectives;

17. Suggests that, in order to promote the consumption of oranges (and therefore increase vitamin C uptake), self-service citrus juicing machines should be made available in schools, so that natural orange juice can be made (without adding water);

18. Suggests that, while the future implementation of the scheme should focus on nurseries, kindergartens and primary schools, as children should acquire healthy and sustainable habits and an inclination for a healthy lifestyle from an early age, attention should also be given to secondary schools;

19. Recalls that access to healthy and sustainable food and proper nutrition education is influenced by one's socioeconomic environment; invites the Commission to consider reviewing the target groups in order to ensure that children at risk of poverty or social exclusion have priority access to healthy and nutritional food and educational measures, in line with the objectives of the Farm to Fork strategy and the European Child Guarantee; calls on the Commission and the Member States to allow for flexible formulas between products and educational measures, based on the actual needs of the target groups;

20. Stresses that, in some Member States, especially in rural schools, the products may not be appealing to the children to consume, since they already have access to them in their own households;

Streamlining the administrative process

21. Urges the Commission and the Member States to reduce the administrative burden of implementing the scheme, particularly in the context of distribution measures to increase participation rates and the use of national budgets; considers that one way of streamlining the scheme could be to simplify the procurement procedures, to extend running times of the contracts and in doing so to reduce the administrative burden associated with inspections so that schools wishing to participate do not have to shoulder the administrative burden;

22. Recalls that procurement procedures, even simplified ones, should comply with the most economically advantageous tender (MEAT) criteria for award; highlights that the pursuit of the lowest price as the sole criterion in the procurement procedure is detrimental to the goals of the school scheme, as well as to the participation of small-scale farmers; insists that procurement procedures shall ensure that equal access and fair competition are in place so that large suppliers are not unfairly advantaged to the detriment of farmers participating in the scheme; stresses that priority should be given to local products and short supply chains, as well as to products supplied by producer organisations, agricultural cooperatives and farmer's markets; highlights that the use of adequate minimal packaging in the transport and distribution of school scheme products should also be a criterion in purchasing decisions, taking into account the schools' storage and cooling capacities and the need to preserve the quality and safety of products;

23. Calls on the Commission to explore the option for schools to have longer-lasting contracts, with the possibility to renegotiate prices, as this would reduce the need for extensive documentation; highlights that this could incentivise more farmers to participate in the scheme, in particular small-scale farmers;

24. Urges the Member States to reduce and simplify the level of documentation required of the beneficiaries of the scheme in order to alleviate the administrative burden they face; calls on the Commission and the Member States to increase the use of digital tools in the management of documentation;

25. Highlights the importance of teachers and other educational/supervisory staff as role models in the consumption of healthy produce and calls for the required budgetary and administrative flexibility to enable such individuals to participate in school schemes and demonstrate healthy eating habits to the children under their care;

26. Proposes streamlining the management, control, monitoring and evaluation requirements, both for the competent authorities of the Member States and the scheme's beneficiaries;

27. Proposes establishing a forum to encourage the Member States to share best practices in order to identify successful ways to streamline the implementation of the scheme; recalls the existence of the civil dialogue group meetings, held by the Commission, which already include regular discussions on the school scheme and recommends building on this forum; calls on the Commission to explore the possibility of the candidate countries participating, as observers, in the forum dedicated to the school scheme;

28. Calls on the Commission to explore the possibility of launching a school scheme for candidate countries, financed through existing instruments such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument — Global Europe;

Monitoring and evaluation

29. Calls on the Commission to establish a method for collecting complete, harmonised and comparable data, so as to provide the aggregated data necessary to carry out adequate *ex ante* and *ex post* impact assessments of the scheme across Europe;

30. Asks the Commission to explore the possibility of introducing common indicators to serve as a basis for evaluating the implementation of the scheme beyond 2023; points out that the databases that could be used to develop these indicators are already available through national strategies and should be incorporated into the scheme in the future; invites the Commission to play a more active role and provide feedback and guidance to the Member States, building on existing best practices, in order to better assist them in implementing and monitoring the scheme;

Communication

31. Calls on the Commission to develop an enhanced communication and publicity strategy in order to boost the take-up of the scheme by schools in the Member States, especially those with low participation rates, and to make its financial contribution and the scheme more recognisable; stresses that EU publicity materials could also be used as a means of further encouraging schools to participate in the scheme;

32. Calls on the Commission to place greater focus on communicating how the products under the scheme are produced and distributed, including particular emphasis on the promotion of regional and local products, by developing and providing more uniform material to the Member States to increase awareness and information relating to the scheme;

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33. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.
