



CÓRDOBA, ARGENTINA

A lesson in good nutrition: Creating healthy school food environments

— The importance of healthy food in schools

Everyone has an equal right to adequate food. But in reality, not everyone has equal access to it. Whilst food system policies have long sought to guarantee equitable access to food, challenges persist regarding the nutritional quality of what food is available. In many places around the world, unhealthy and ultra-processed products with low nutritional value often dominate menus in public and private settings alike.^{1,2} This has a negative impact on the health of populations, contributing to increasing rates of major health issues including obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension and micronutrient deficiencies.

Children are particularly vulnerable to the negative health effects of poor diets. Access to healthy, safe and nutritious food is essential for child and adolescent growth, neurocognitive development, disease prevention and lifelong health.³ Early eating habits also have a decisive influence on health throughout life.⁴ There is consequently a clear need to ensure a healthy diet from the early stages of childhood.⁵

Schools play an essential role in creating an enabling environment for good nutrition. Not only can they provide access to healthy foods, but they can also teach children appropriate eating practices, which can be used in many other settings and help establish healthy eating habits.⁶ However, the school food environment is not automatically conducive to a healthy diet.⁷ The frequently high availability of unhealthy foods and beverages in schools fosters unhealthy consumption practices, compounded by issues such as limited availability of fresh drinking water and constant exposure to aggressive advertising.^{8,9}

To change this, strong school nutrition and food procurement policies must promote healthy options and limit children's exposure to items that are high in salt, sugars and fats, or are ultra-processed. Local authorities in Córdoba, Argentina have been demonstrating how this can be turned into a reality.

¹ FAO. (2019). El estado de la seguridad alimentaria y la nutrición en el mundo 2019. Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Alimentación y la Agricultura. [<https://www.fao.org/3/ca5162es/ca5162es.pdf>]

² Monteiro, C. A., Cannon, G., Moubarac, J. C., Levy, R. B., Louzada, M. L. C., & Jaime, P. C. (2019). The UN Decade of Nutrition, the NOVA food classification and the trouble with ultra-processing. *Public Health Nutrition*, 22(1), 4-7. [<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980018002361>]

³ WHO (2023) "How school systems can improve health and wellbeing: Topic brief – nutrition" [<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240064713>]

⁴ Romero Asís M., Grande MC, Román MD. (2019). Consumo de bebidas azucaradas en la alimentación de escolares de la Ciudad de Córdoba, 2016-2017. *Rev. Argentina Salud Pública*; 10 (39); 7-12.

⁵ UNICEF (2022). La nutrición infantil y el derecho a la alimentación saludable. Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia.

⁶ WHO (2021) "Action framework for developing and implementing public food procurement and service policies for a healthy diet" [<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240018341>]

⁷ WHO (2021) "Implementing school food and nutrition policies: A review of contextual factors" [<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240035072>]

⁸ Ministerio de Salud y Desarrollo social. Encuesta Mundial de Salud Escolar (EMSE). 2018. [<https://bancos.salud.gob.ar/sites/default/files/2020-01/encuesta-mundial-salud-escolar-2018.pdf>]

⁹ CESNI. (2010). Chamorro, y col. Estudio Hidratar- Perfil de ingesta de agua y bebidas no alcohólicas en Argentina.

Context

In Latin America and the Caribbean, access to adequate, healthy food varies according to social class and territory and often reinforces existing inequalities. Across the region, 33.6% of children and adolescents between 5-19 years old have overweight or obesity.¹⁰ In Argentina, the rate is slightly higher: 39.2% of children and adolescents suffered from overweight in 2022, and 18.2% from obesity. Moreover, this represents a noticeable increase over time and is consequently a priority issue for national policy.

In 2021, Argentina enacted Law No. 27,642 on the Promotion of Healthy Eating. This establishes national measures such as front-of-package warning labelling, regulation of food and beverage advertising, and transformation of school environments.¹¹ However, effective implementation of these measures for school environments depends on regulation at the provincial and municipal levels, which inevitably leads to their uneven application.

Since 2022, the city of Córdoba has been working to apply these national measures within its public schools through an initiative called “Córdoba Elige Agua” (Córdoba Chooses Water). This initiative, developed within the framework of local public policies on healthy eating, aims to transform school food environments by promoting water consumption and regulating the supply of ultra-processed foods in school kiosks and canteens. As one of the first cities in the country to apply the national law via local regulations, the city has positioned itself as a leader in the school food space.

The power of effective policy

A key factor underpinning the city’s work was the availability of local data showing the impact of the school food environment on children’s consumption habits. Previous studies had shown that the high availability of sugary drinks and ultra-processed foods in municipal schools was displacing the consumption of healthier options and therefore contributing to the increase in diseases such as childhood obesity, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. This data was fundamental for justifying the need for a policy intervention to modify the school food environment. The data not only made the problem visible but also provided concrete inputs for the formulation of policy solutions, facilitating their acceptance and sustainability.

The first phase of implementation focused on 38 municipal schools, where hydration points were installed to encourage water consumption and discourage the consumption of sugary drinks. In addition, awareness-raising and food education activities were carried out for students, teachers and families. As part of this strategy, the city developed and disseminated “Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines,” prepared by an Intersectoral Food Policy Commission of the Municipality of Córdoba in collaboration with the [Partnership for Healthy Cities](#). The next step was to introduce legislation that would ensure all schools adhered to this guidance.

At the regulatory level, Córdoba had already sanctioned Municipal Ordinance No. 12,256 in 2013, aimed at establishing criteria for the promotion of healthy eating in school environments. However, the absence of a regulation that operationalized the ordinance, coupled with the lack of adherence by the education system, significantly limited this policy’s implementation and effective scope. In 2021, with the enactment of Law 27.642 on the Promotion of Healthy Eating (known as the PAS Law) and its partial regulation in 2022, a new regulatory framework was created that emphasized the need to strengthen local policies around key issues such as food safety and nutritional education.

However, the practical application of the PAS Law depends on the provinces and local jurisdictions, so Córdoba needed a complementary regulatory framework at the municipal level to ensure its effective implementation in the city. In December 2022, a proposal to adapt Ordinance 12,256 was presented to the city’s Deliberative Council, having been prepared by the Food Policy Commission of the Municipality of Córdoba. The vote was initially postponed due to local elections, but in June 2024 the Mayor of Córdoba issued Decree No.

¹⁰ Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). Obesity Prevention. [<https://www.paho.org/en/topics/obesity-prevention>]

¹¹ Ministerio de Salud de Argentina (2021) *Ley 27.642 de Promoción de la Alimentación Saludable*. Gobierno de Argentina [<https://gifna.who.int/countries/ARG/policies/77537>]

310/2024. This decree establishes the implementation of healthy school kiosks based on the exclusive availability of healthy food (as defined by national front-of-pack labelling) and water as a beverage of excellence, in adherence with the PAS Law. This measure applies to all Córdoba municipal educational institutions and defines a phased implementation plan, with the coordinated participation of the Secretariats of Education and Health to ensure its effective implementation and monitoring. The Directorate of Food Quality of the Secretariat of Health was designated as the enforcement authority of the decree, with the responsibility of defining the regulation, control and monitoring strategies necessary to ensure compliance with the existing food policy.

Within the framework of the policy, the categorization of school kiosks in Córdoba is based on a specific inspection form and guidelines contained in the “Healthy Food and Beverage Guide for Schools.” According to the results of this evaluation, a kiosk is considered healthy when it reaches a score equal to or higher than 75%, evidencing the exclusive sale of food and beverages free of warning labels, access to safe drinking water, the absence of advertising of unhealthy products and compliance with safe infrastructure and handling conditions. In addition, the display of educational messages that reinforce healthy eating practices in the school community is promoted.

Results

One year after the official implementation of Decree 310/2024, 100% of municipal schools had access to safe and free water. As for school kiosks, in 2025 when categorizing according to the parameters established for the second stage of implementation, it was observed that 27% were classified as healthy kiosks, 68% were in the process of transitioning towards healthier environments, and only 4% were categorized as unhealthy. In 2025, the city received a [Partnership for Healthy Cities award](#) in recognition of its policy achievements around school food.

This normative advance, supported by local evidence, highlights the relevance of having intervention and implementation designs adapted to local realities. Córdoba has shown that the transformation of school environments is feasible when there is political commitment and intersectoral articulation and the work is based on clear diagnoses and concrete evidence. The use of local data not only makes it possible to adequately assess the problems, but also to design specific policies, monitor them and improve them. This experience underscores that school food policies should be conceived as a sustainable care strategy, aimed not only at guaranteeing access to healthy food, but also at strengthening values, identity and citizenship, with a sustained impact on health and collective well-being.