

## Summary

Dietary habits are one of the most important determinants of our health. Schools are extremely important arenas for potentially establishing good dietary habits in all children, and thus reducing inequalities in health. Since 2012, primary schools and municipalities can, with the help of the free, web-based instrument SkolmatSverige [School Food Sweden], evaluate their school meal quality from a holistic perspective. One of the aims of this system is to support schools and municipalities in their efforts to reach and maintain a high standard of quality.

The instrument covers six areas that each affect overall meal quality: the *choice* that the school offers, the *nutritional quality* of the food, how the school ensures that food is *safe* and hygienic, how the school works to improve meal *service* and to take advantage of the school meal as a *pedagogic* resource, how much the school considers the *environmental impact* of the food, and issues regarding the *organization and management* of the school meal service. The instrument also includes questionnaires for the diners – pupils and staff. This is the third report on school meal quality that SkolmatSverige has published since the instrument became available in 2012.

Similar to the previous academic years, the 530 schools that used the instrument during 2014/15 were not fully representative of all primary schools in Sweden. The schools were more likely to be bigger, municipally-run and from the eastern region of Sweden than expected. However, as schools that use the instrument tend to be similar in these respects from year to year, we can begin to study trends over time. All data is however self-reported and we cannot rule out the possibility that any improvements seen are due to a tendency for schools to report more positive results than what is actually the case.

### **Schools that used the instrument improved their results**

In the previous report, we demonstrated how schools that used the instrument improved their results in the category *nutritional quality*. In this report we present a similar result for other categories – the more often a school used the instrument since 2012, the better the school's results in the categories *service and pedagogy* and *environmental impact*.

### **Many more schools could benefit from this instrument**

During the academic year of 2014/15, eleven percent of primary schools nationally used the instrument. To date, 35 percent of all primary schools have created an account with School Food Sweden and 25 percent have evaluated at least one aspect of school meal quality. There is currently no other comparable way to evaluate school meal quality from a holistic perspective. We do not yet know much about how other schools and municipalities monitor overall quality, nor why they do not use this instrument.

### **A greater proportion of schools evaluated the meal situation as a whole**

One positive development seen during 2014/15 was that a larger proportion of schools chose to evaluate *more* of the aspects of school meal quality that are included in the tool than in previous years. A “good” meal requires more than just nutritious food, and for the students to actually eat the lunch the school must take a holistic approach and consider the meal environment, the students' possibilities to voice their opinion, the educational potential and other factors that can influence the students' eating habits. It is therefore a positive sign that more schools chose to evaluate the category *service and pedagogy*. In addition, the average score for this category was higher than in the previous academic year.

### **The different quality areas together create a complete picture**

Two aspects of choice have improved significantly in recent years: the proportion of schools where students can choose between at least two lunch options, and the proportion of

schools offering a vegetarian option to all students four to five days a week. Sweet foods like pastries, sugary drinks or sweets are very rarely served as part of lunch, which is very positive. However, few schools chose to evaluate the choice available in the cafeteria, where present, and of those that did, a majority had sweet or salty foods for sale.

Regarding nutritional quality, the improvement in quality seen during the academic year 2013/14 was maintained during 2014/15. Good prerequisites for providing nutritious school lunches were found in almost all schools, for example, nine out of ten schools offered a large salad bar daily. However, the tool also assesses whether the school lunch contains the right amount of some essential nutrients. As before, a large majority of the schools met the criteria for fiber / whole grain and iron but fewer met the criteria for vitamin D and good fat quality.

The average result for the category *safe food* was, as before, generally high. Almost all schools reported that they had students requiring special diets due to medical and/or ethical reasons.

Within the category of *service and pedagogy*, the average result, expressed as a percentage, improved significantly. However, not everything had improved similarly. For example, as before, barely half of the schools conducted annual surveys to find out what students think about school meals.

How the schools worked to consider the *environmental impact* also improved significantly. For example, as previously mentioned, more schools offered a vegetarian dish, which is good for the environment. When the schools were asked why they didn't use more organic products, no school indicated that it was due to a lack of interest, but implied it was due to other factors.

When it came to meal *organization and management*, the average result remained unchanged. As in previous years, just over half of the schools reported that they monitored daily the students' presence during lunch or monitored how much was actually consumed.

Unfortunately, too few schools used School Food Sweden's student questionnaire for us to be able to summarise the results here.

Schools and municipalities that already use the tool have taken major steps toward reaching and maintaining a high and even standard of quality. The instrument provides them with a complete picture of their school meal quality, which can form the basis for planning, setting objectives and following progress. In addition, our data shows that schools that repeatedly use the tool improve their performance.

We hope that even more schools and municipalities will begin to use the tool to evaluate their school meal quality, and, via the associated questionnaires, how diners experience the meal and meal environment.