

Necessity of student nutrition legislation in China

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Abstract: Student nutrition affects not only the healthy growth of children and adolescents, but also long-term economic and social development, national quality, and the realization of the Chinese Dream. Although the nutritional status of Chinese students has improved, problems persist. Enacting student-nutrition legislation will raise public awareness, establish a sound working system and procedures, and provide a legal basis for student-nutrition initiatives, making it an imperative task. This paper analyzes the necessity of such legislation to advance its progress.

Keywords: student nutrition, legislation, challenges, development

1. Introduction

Based on China's development realities, this article systematically examines the intrinsic connections between student nutrition and the country's long-term development. It comprehensively analyzes the multiple challenges currently facing student nutrition in China, including malnutrition, overweight and obesity, hidden hunger, and the early onset of chronic diseases. The article also delves into institutional dilemmas such as the fragmentation of existing policy systems and insufficient legal hierarchy. By comparing legislative experiences from developed countries like the United States and Japan, the article demonstrates the critical role of enacting specialized student nutrition legislation in clarifying responsibilities among stakeholders, ensuring funding investment, and establishing long-term mechanisms. It proposes policy recommendations for advancing student nutrition work through legal pathways, thereby contributing to the improvement of national population quality and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. This study provides an important reference for understanding legislative needs in China's education and health policy sectors and holds positive significance for promoting legal construction in related fields.

The nutrition of school-aged children shapes not only their immediate physical development but also their future productivity, with long-term consequences for economic growth and national quality. Although China has made notable progress in student nutrition over recent decades, significant problems persist. Without a legislative framework, nutrition initiatives face scattered responsibilities, unstable funding and inconsistent standards, slowing overall improvement. This paper examines why student-nutrition legislation is now essential, analyses current obstacles and outlines future directions.

2. Nutrition's impact on social development

Under-nutrition during primary and secondary school years can stunt growth, lower immunity and raise short-term medical and social costs [1,2]. More importantly, it reduces adult physical capacity and cognitive performance [3-5], cutting individual earnings and labour productivity and imposing heavy economic losses on society. China is now at a critical juncture: the socialist market economy is basically formed, yet the country remains economically disadvantaged, especially in rural areas and the central-western regions. China supplies 26 % of the world's labour force, but average educational attainment and technical skills are still low and manual labour dominates [6]. Although average physique has improved since 1949, health resources are limited, access to health education is uneven and national physical-fitness indices are declining [7]. Because population quality is tightly linked to sustainable economic development, any continued deterioration will reverberate for decades or even centuries.

3. Nutritional status and remaining problems among Chinese students

Over the past two decades the physical growth of primary and secondary pupils has improved markedly. From 1985 to 2010 mean height of urban boys rose 5.9 cm and mean weight 8.8 kg; urban girls gained 4.3 cm and 5.3 kg. Rural students progressed even faster—boys +7.2 cm / +6.8 kg, girls +5.5 cm / +4.3 kg [8]. Yet major challenges persist.

Under-nutrition is still common. In 2010 the prevalence of mild malnutrition among 7–22-year-olds was 2.9 % (urban boys), 5.8 % (urban girls), 2.7 % (rural boys) and 5.5 % (rural girls); low-weight rates were 17 %, 26 %, 20 % and 27 % respectively—lower than in 2005 but still unacceptably high [8].

Overweight & obesity are rising steeply. In 2010 obesity was found in 13.3 % of urban boys, 5.6 % of urban girls, 7.8 % of rural boys and 3.8 % of rural girls—up 1.9, 0.6, 2.8 and 1.1 percentage points versus 2005. Overweight prevalence reached 15 %, 10 %, 11 % and 8 %, climbing 1.6–3.4 points. Compared with 1985, 2010 overweight and obesity rates among 7–18-year-olds had multiplied 8.6- and 38-fold, with the highest figures in affluent east-coast and north-coast cities [8,9].

Hidden hunger (mineral/vitamin deficits) is widespread. Anaemia affects 15.8 % of 0–17-year-olds; vitamin-A deficiency is found in 9.3 % of 3–12-year-olds (urban 3 %, poor rural 13 %), and up to 60 % in some villages. Goitre (iodine) remains 9.6 % among 8–10-year-olds; rickets 16.9 % in 0–3-year-olds [10].

Chronic diseases are emerging earlier. Hypertension is already present in 7 % of 15–17-year-olds (higher in rural and male students). Among school children 19.8 % show at least two metabolic-syndrome risk factors and 64.1 % at least one [10].

4. China's student-nutrition policies and current challenges

4.1. Policies launched—but fragmented

Since 1990 China has issued a series of nutrition initiatives (see Annex). Three successive National Food & Nutrition Development Outlines (1993, 2001, 2014) all single out student nutrition, and the 2011 State Council Opinion on the Rural Compulsory Education Student Nutrition Improvement Plan (Guo Ban Fa [2011] No. 54) committed large central funds to school meals. Yet without a dedicated law, implementation problems persist: Unclear mandates: responsibilities of government, schools, parents and society are undefined, leading to buck-passing. Staffing gaps: no full-time nutrition officers at any level; few trained teachers for nutrition education; canteen staff lack formal posts or fair pay. Funding risks: capital and recurrent costs for kitchens, equipment, wages and utilities are huge; allocation and oversight rules are weak. Education & environment: nutrition curricula are patchy, parents' awareness is low, and junk-food ads around campuses undermine healthy eating.

4.2. Sustainability hinges on legislation

Existing documents are “national policies” or departmental/local rules; they rank below laws or administrative regulations. Because they can be altered or shelved after incidental events, programmes lose continuity and resources are wasted.

4.3. Lessons from abroad

Over 100 countries run school-meal programmes; many enshrine them in law. The U.S. National School Lunch Act of 1946 permanently codified financing, standards, governance and education, and has since been reinforced by ten-plus related statutes such as the Child Nutrition Act and the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.

In 1954 Japan enacted the School Lunch Act, mandating a nationwide school-meal program and setting legal standards for student nutrition. Since then, Japan has passed a series of related laws—the Nutrition Improvement Act (1947), Dietitian Act (1947), School Health Act (1958), Shokuiku Basic Act (2005), and updated versions of the School Lunch Act and School Education Act (2008)—creating a comprehensive legal framework. With strong political commitment and statutory backing, Japan has trained large numbers of nutrition professionals and secured stable funding, enabling school meals to reach more than 90 % of primary and secondary students nationwide.

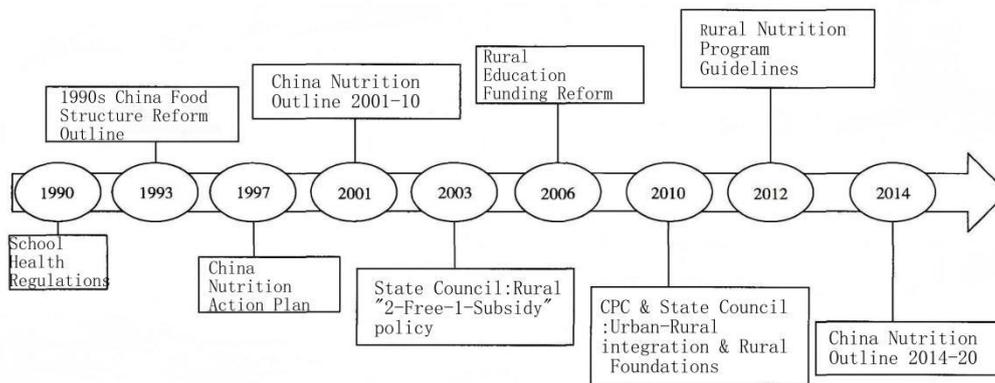


Figure 1 Major student-nutrition policies issued by China

Japan, the United States and other developed countries began passing school-nutrition laws decades ago and have rich experience. China, by contrast, still lacks any dedicated legislation, and its nutrition programmes started late. This legal vacuum leaves student-nutrition work fragmented, keeps Chinese children's nutritional status well behind that of advanced economies, and is increasingly at odds with China's rapid socio-economic development—posing long-term risks to national progress. The Fourth Plenum of the 18th CPC Central Committee called for “governing the country according to law,” and both local governments and the public now demand student-nutrition legislation. Only a sound legal framework can guarantee the implementation of compulsory-education nutrition measures and accelerate the rise of national quality and comprehensive national power.

5. Conclusion

In short, the nutritional status of school-aged children directly affects physical growth and cognitive ability, shapes future labour capacity and disease risk, and thereby exerts a lasting influence on economic and social development. As a populous country in a critical phase of development, China must ease medical burdens, curb energy consumption, boost innovation and build a society ruled by law—all of which require a higher-quality population. Enacting student-nutrition legislation and vigorously improving the diet and fitness of children and adolescents is therefore fundamental to raising population quality, driving future economic growth and strengthening overall national power.

Student nutrition legislation is far more than a mere livelihood issue—it is a strategic imperative that bears directly on national competitiveness and sustainable development. At present, China stands at a critical juncture in its transformation from a populous country to a human resources powerhouse. The nutritional health status of children and adolescents fundamentally determines the quality and innovative capacity of the future workforce. Confronted with the practical dilemma where nutrition improvement efforts remain "without legal basis and with accountability difficult to enforce," drawing upon international experience while grounding measures in local realities, the urgent mission of our era is to expeditiously construct a legal system centered on the "Student Nutrition Law." Only by bringing student nutrition under the rule of law—using the binding force of legislation to ensure policy continuity and institutional innovation to galvanize social synergy—can we fundamentally reverse the passive situation characterized by "volatile policies, interrupted investments, and buck-passing responsibilities." This will erect a legal bulwark for the healthy growth of millions of students and lay a solid demographic foundation for national rejuvenation. It is our hope that the discussions presented in this paper may contribute modestly to advancing the legislative process and propel China's student nutrition cause toward a new stage of standardized, institutionalized, and law-based development at the earliest opportunity.

6. References

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