

Better School Lunches – No, Really

Bat-Ulzii, Mongolia - Throughout much of Mongolia, school meals are the only nutrition that students receive. Because of the vast distances that nomadic families live from the town centers where schools are located, the majority of students live in school dormitories and only reside with their families during breaks.

But at the only school in Bat-Ulzii, a small town set amid the verdant river valleys and forests of central Mongolia, the school lunch program was providing mere sustenance instead of nutritious meals: more than 1,300 students were subsisting on a diet of flour and boiled mutton that cost the government less than 50 cents a day. Students took their concerns to teachers, who spoke to the school's headmistress, Ms. Dolgormaa. She contacted a friend who runs a nearby business that has received assistance from Mercy Corps.

Within days, representatives from Mercy Corps' Training, Advocacy and Networking (TAN) program, which supports civic action to strengthen community participation in local government decisions, met with Dolgormaa and others from the school to formulate an action plan.

They acted quickly. School officials, Mercy Corps representatives and a local women's association set out to better the quality of school meals in Batulzi. First, a study was begun to find out how the government's school meals funding was used: ingredients, preparation, hygiene and student satisfaction were all investigated. The group calculated the exact nutritional value of the meals offered and found it lagging far behind national standards.

The study was presented to local officials, who nearly doubled the funding of the meal program.



Photo by Mercy Corps/Thatcher Cook

Mercy Corps then helped train the school's five cooks, kitchen manager and accountant in how to better select ingredients, manage costs and prepare more nutritious meals. The cooks also received training in health and hygiene.

Today, there are more than ten different kinds of meals that are offered on a rotating basis at the school. The school's accountant has made contracts with farmers and herders to ensure a continuous supply of high-quality vegetables, fruits, meat and dairy products. That contributes not only to the well-being of schoolchildren, but also energizes the local economy.

The school has even started an organic vegetable garden, which students help plant, maintain and harvest.

A quick look through the comment books that sit in each dormitory reveal that the students are much happier about what they're eating; many entries about the meals simply say "thank you." And happier, healthier children are able to concentrate and participate better in class, leading to a better future for all.