

BRIEFING

The case for Free School Meals for all children in primary school



Currently 3.9 million children in the UK – or 8 pupils in every class of 30 – are growing up trapped in poverty.

Millions of children are going hungry every day.

Restrictive eligibility, complicated registration procedures and the stigma in-built into a means-testing system that cannot keep up with the number of families being pushed into poverty this winter mean that children are missing out on vital support such as Free School Meals (FSM).

Policy choices are locking people in poverty and undermining efforts to equalise educational opportunities between the richest and poorest in society.

Millions more families will be pulled into poverty as a result of the worst cost of living crisis in a generation. All households are going to be affected by spiralling energy costs, increasing food prices and rising interest rates. For some this will mean having to make difficult decisions as to whether they heat their homes or put food on the table. **It doesn't have to be this way.**

Free School Meals are a way of ensuring that all children receive a nutritious, hot meal every day. Reliable, nutritious food at school helps children to focus on their learning and their attainment improves. **We need Free School Meals for All to ensure no child is left behind.**

ABOUT NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

No Child Left Behind is a campaign by the National Education Union, powered by parents and educators, to ensure every child has the basics to learn, thrive and go on to a bright future. Find out more at: nochildleftbehind.org.uk

The impact of child poverty

Teachers see first-hand the impact that poverty has on a child's educational experience and outcomes in school. When children come to school hungry they find it hard to concentrate and focus on their learning. Over eight in ten of respondents to a recent National Education Union survey told us that their students demonstrated fatigue (87%) and an inability to concentrate (81%) as a result of poverty. Almost three-quarters said their students were unable to complete homework and more than half said students had experienced hunger (57%) or ill health (55%).¹

The evidence shows that poverty has a profound impact on students' attainment and educational outcomes. By age 11, only around three quarters of children from the poorest fifth of families reach the government's expected level at Key Stage 2, compared to 97% of children from the richest fifth.²

Food poverty impacts on all aspects of a child's life and health. Poverty and deprivation are linked to higher levels of childhood obesity, a problem which is only getting worse.³ Food poverty can also impact a child's home environment and social life. Parents have to go to even greater lengths to support their children – for many this means skipping their own meals and allowing their own physical and mental health to suffer.

It's only getting tougher: cost of living crisis

We are living through the worst cost of living crisis in a generation.

Families - even those that have not faced financial difficulties in the past - will be worse off in the coming years. **For many, including those not eligible for government support, this will mean a devastating fall in living standards.**

Less affluent families face an even higher inflation rate than better-off families, meaning the coming crisis will likely exacerbate inequality. Without urgent and immediate action, an additional 1.3 million adults and 500,000 children will be pushed into poverty next year.⁴

Every family living in poverty in 2023 will be a victim of political inaction.

At the current levels of government support, typical working-age household income will fall by £1,100 in 2022-23.⁵ With energy price estimates being revised upwards still, this figure could get much worse in the coming months.

Around 1.2 million of Britain's lowest income families will have to choose between eating and heating.

The cost of living crisis is already having a huge impact on food insecurity.

In April 2022, 7.3 million adults lived in households that said they had gone without food or could not physically get it in the past month, which includes 2.6 million children.⁶ One in five households would have to spend almost half their disposable income on food to achieve the government-recommended healthy diet, leaving little money for energy and other household bills.⁷ The effects of the crisis will not be contained to the next year or two – this is a problem that is here to stay.

The crisis is breaching the school gates too. Decades of underfunding will leave education funding below 2010 levels and the problem is being compounded by the cost of living crisis.⁸ Increased costs will mean school food providers will have to do more with less, sacrificing healthy options for cheaper alternatives, while increased energy costs will mean school leaders are facing impossible choices.

Research from the House of Commons Library shows gas and electricity prices for schools rose by 83% in the first quarter of 2022 compared to last year. The average state primary school paid £38,397 over this period, up from £20,982 in 2020/21, while secondary schools paid £153,258, up from £83,748.⁹ Headteachers are having to invest in woolly jumpers for pupils to keep them warm this term as they face astronomical heating costs they simply cannot afford.

How do Free School Meals work?

Free School Meals have been provided to the poorest families since the turn of the 20th century and currently 22.5% of children, or 1.9 million pupils, are eligible.

Currently, the Universal Infant Free School Meal scheme (UIFSM) means all children receive Free School Meals until the end of year 2. After that, only children who meet certain criteria qualify.

Means testing means that not all low-income pupils are eligible for Free School Meals, while some who are eligible are not from low-income families. **Divisions inherent in a means-tested system mean that stigma remains a barrier to accessing Free School Meals, even for parents who are eligible and aware of their entitlement.** There is significant regional and ethnic variation in eligibility rates with students from Irish Traveller heritage almost

3 times more likely to be eligible for FSM than white British students.¹⁰ Best available estimates, as of 2020, suggest that 89% of those eligible for Free School Meals claim them. This means that 215,000 eligible children missed out in 2020.¹¹ **Moreover, restrictive eligibility criteria and lack of universal provision mean that too many children are missing out.**

800,000 pupils who are living in poverty are not receiving Free School Meals.¹²

Children are means tested by household, regardless of the number of children in the family, and a child is only eligible if their household received £7,400 per year or less. With 75% of children in poverty growing up in families where at least one adult works, this extremely low eligibility threshold means that too many children are missing out on the lifeline of Free School Meals and the security this could bring to their lives.

As the cost of living crisis deepens, the number of people in need of support but not covered by means testing will increase, and at a faster rate than means-testing will be able to keep up with.

Why we need Free School Meals for All

Free School Meals can be a way of ensuring that all children receive a hot, nutritious meal every day.

While there is a long way to go, school meals contain less ultra-processed foods than packed lunches and are usually a far healthier option.¹³ Proper nutrition means that children can focus on their learning and improve their attainment. School meals are central to any attempts to raise attainment, particularly for the least well-off, and make society fairer.

Last year saw the largest increase in obesity rates in both reception-aged and year 6 schoolchildren in a decade. Obesity rates amongst reception-aged and year 6 children rose by 4.5% to 14.4% and 25.5% respectively.¹⁴ What is more, obesity prevalence among children living in the most deprived areas was more than double that of those living in the least deprived areas. Analyses of the Universal Infant Free School Meal scheme (UIFSM) suggest that its provision has profound effects on levels of obesity, and researchers suggest this alone could justify the costs of the policy.¹⁵

Free School Meals for All in primary school is the best way to ensure that no child goes hungry while at school. All children, regardless of their

background, deserve a hot, nutritious meal every day, and this policy is the best way to make sure this happens. FSM for all is an investment in the education and health of the next generation – no child should be in school too hungry to learn. Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that FSM for all in Primary would reduce stigma and increase uptake amongst already eligible pupils.¹⁶

In an evaluation of a pilot of a universal Free School Meals scheme, children participating were making 4 to 8 weeks more progress over the two years than those who were not part of the pilot.¹⁷ Crucially, the evaluation of the pilot suggests that compared with expanding FSM eligibility, it is only through the universal provision of Free School Meals that outcomes had improved in terms of children's diet and attainment.

Further evidence comes from an analysis of the UIFSM scheme which suggests that universal provision would improve attendance and make school a much more attractive place to be, particularly for the most disadvantaged pupils.¹⁸

The policy is incredibly popular with parents¹⁹ who felt that Free School Meals for All was a lifeline that they couldn't go without. Universal provision of FSM in one London Borough was described as 'life-changing' by a local head teacher²⁰, while 72% of NEU members called for FSM provision to all children in primary school²¹ to tackle child poverty in a 2022 survey.

Rolling out Free School Meals to all children in primary school would represent an £850 million investment in our children's futures. We would reap the rewards for generations to come.

Free School Meals for all pupils in primary school is an opportunity to ensure that all children get the nutritious meals they need to learn. They can also foster socialisation and interaction and encourage lifelong healthy eating habits for children and their families.

Children are guaranteed a Free School Meal in many other countries, yet in England they only get this up to age 7 (Year 2). The Scottish and Welsh Governments are rolling out Free School Meals for all primary school students.

It is time for the rest of the UK to level up to this standard.

We believe that the Government must prioritise extending this policy to all primary age children in the first instance as families with younger children are more likely to experience poverty, and when children are taught healthy eating habits from a young age, the health benefits can last a lifetime.

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HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT THE CAMPAIGN?

If you agree that it's time to extend Free School Meals to all children in primary school, **join us to help make this a reality for families across the country.**

You can show your support by signing our open letter and we will update you on campaign progress and more ways you can be involved. To add your name, please visit: freeschoolmealsforall.org.uk/take-action

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