

Free school meals a pipe dream in England

The Government recently announced that primary school children in three local authority areas in England will be given free school meals for two years beginning in September 2009. Health Secretary Alan Johnson says it is part of a £20 million project to get, “solid evidence from a nationally-assessed pilot,” about the possible benefits of rolling out such a programme on a national basis.

In launching the programme, the Government admits that poverty could be at heart of low take-up for new, healthier school meals. Around 47% of primary kids eat school meals; the cost of meals varies, but in some schools it has risen to £1.75. Children whose families are on certain benefits get free meals, but working people on low incomes do not.

According to Alan Johnson, “For many children from poorer backgrounds, a school lunch is their only hot and healthy meal of the day,” and according to Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, “we want to make sure that children, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds who need it most, are getting a free hot meal every school day.”

If they do indeed have such laudable aims, why the paltry offering of three pilots? Why don't they just get on with solving the problem – there is plenty of evidence already available about the wide range of benefits from healthier school meals, and about the extent of child poverty in the UK – including in families in work, but earning low incomes.

The eminent ministers say the pilots will investigate whether free school meals: reduce obesity / have an impact on a child's Body Mass Index; change eating habits at home; impact on behaviour and academic performance at school; improve school standards; and improve general health and well being.

They have set high hurdles indeed for the pilots to prove their worth. I for one think we could find the evidence right now to show that children not going hungry would contribute to most of these

outcomes. And let's remember that it never was an aim of the recent revolution in school meals to tackle obesity. But why should they need any of this so-called proof from the pilots? Do children in England not have the right to not go hungry without it proving anything at all?

But if the ministers want evidence... We report in this issue (pages 17-18) about research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that shows low earning families with children able to spend much less than they need to in order to access a healthy diet. In FM79 we reported on the fantastic successes of the three year 'Eat well, do well' programme in Hull which offered free school meals to all children – sadly it was scrapped when there was a local change of political administration, despite being very positively evaluated. In Scotland free school meals are now to be rolled out to all children in the first three years of primary school after a successful pilot.

Even Alan Johnson says, “Local initiatives such as that in Hull seem to show that children who eat a healthy lunch are more likely to be better behaved, better able to learn and more likely to see their general health improve.” Well, enough said really.

Evidence must be one of the most used and abused words in public health and policy making – you could drown in the millions the Department of Health is spending on various aspects of their anti-obesity initiative – and where is rock solid proof that awarding millions of that budget to advertising agencies such as M&C Saatchi will make us all thinner? The need for evidence just sounds a more convincing reason for policy making decisions than other excuses which eminent ministers might offer.



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The Food Magazine is published quarterly by The Food Commission, a national, not-for-profit organisation campaigning for the right to safe, wholesome food. The magazine is totally funded by subscriptions and donations, allowing us to be completely independent, taking no subsidy from the food industry or advertising. We aim to provide independently researched information on the food we eat to ensure good quality food for all.

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■ Issue 83 of *The Food Magazine* October/December 2008. ISSN 0953-5047

■ Typesetting and design by Ian Tokelove of The Food Commission. Printed on recycled paper by RapSpiderweb, www.rapspiderweb.com

■ Retail distribution (sale or return) by Central Books, 99 Wallis Road, London E9 5LN. 0845 458 9911. www.centralbooks.com

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