



Briefing 09-28 June 2009

Free school meals – Pilot evaluations

This briefing provides an update on the current wave of Free School Meal pilots and looks at previous pilots in Scotland and England to determine what conclusions can be drawn to date. It is provided to inform Council Leaders, Chief Executives and Catering service contacts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Key finding from the initial pilots

- Free school meals boost meal uptake, although there appears to be a natural maximum of 75% of pupils who will take them
- The pilots reduced stigma and increased interest in diet in both pupils and parents
- Food behaviour out of school is at least as important as meals at school
- Changes in pupil concentration and behaviour, due to nutrition, are only apparent over the longer term and are inconclusive.

Introduction

There have been several pilots of free school meals in the last few years. Hull led the way with an ambitious 3 year programme for primary school children. The Scottish Parliament commissioned a pilot within 5 local authorities between October 2007 and June 2008 and Bolton have self funded a trial for reception classes. The Government in England has very recently implemented a further pilot study with 3 authorities; Durham and Newham will provide every child with a free school meal and Wolverhampton will expand the proportion who qualify for a free meal on a means-tested basis. The pilots are scheduled to commence in September 2009.

This paper summarises the evaluations from both Hull and Scotland and attempts to determine the key findings so far.

Hull

Hull introduced their 'Eat Well Do Well' initiative in 2004. The initiative covered free healthy breakfasts, dinner, after school snacks and fruit for children up to Key Stage 2.

Main findings

The Hull study was wide ranging monitoring attitudes to taking meals, frequency of meals outside school, dental health, energy levels and behaviour. Much of the research was qualitative and based on surveys of teaching staff.

Over the 3 year period 43% of teachers felt that the children had more energy and 31% felt the children less tired. These figures were 22% and 18% in year 2 and 16% and 20% in year 1. Improvements in punctuality, behaviour and performance were less marked although all had improved slightly by year 3.

41% of teachers ate school meals of whom 20% ate in the dining room

86% of respondents agreed that children knew more about healthy eating and 67% more about the social aspects of eating

27% of respondents thought that there were fewer behavioural problems over the lunchtime period as a result of the scheme. The majority of teachers however felt that there was no difference in the behaviour of children eating the free school meals and those who do not.

71% of staff felt that there was less stigma attached to children on free school meals than before. Whilst universal free school meals reduces the stigma attached to those eligible, it may not help those or other children reach their daily nutrient intake. The importance of diet both at school and home is noted

The report concluded that *'when we look at a children's total daily intake (including food eaten at school and home), it is clear that some families can't/don't provide healthy food at home'*. Over 500 children (7.6%) have a fizzy drink for breakfast of whom 2/3 are boys. Those having an evening meal also increased from 42% to 58% over the 3 year period.

Children choosing to bring a packed lunch consume more calories, but with more fat, saturated fat, sodium and sugar than those taking hot school dinners.

Significantly fewer pupils reported visiting the dentist from 10.7% to 23.4% over the trial.

An interesting finding was the difference between fresh and frozen vegetables. Many children said they did not like vegetables because they were watery or of a funny texture (frozen). Fresh vegetables would remove these characteristics.

Scotland

Scotland trialled free school meals for children in P1 to P3 at East Ayrshire, Fife, Glasgow, Scottish Borders and West Dunbartonshire. The trials objectives were to measure changes in uptake, potential health benefits, costs of provision and capture any unintended consequences.

Main findings

Uptake increased in all five trial areas. In total, uptake among all P1-P3 pupils increased from 53% to 75%. Uptake increased from 41% to 69% among pupils not already free school meal (FSM) registered and among pupils who were previously FSM registered, uptake increased from 89.2% to 93.6%.

Uptake of school meals after the trial began by children who were not previously FSM registered and who did not take a school meal before the trial, was not influenced by the level of local deprivation in the area in which they lived. Pupils from deprived areas and from less deprived areas were equally likely to take up the free school meal.

Uptake increased more in schools with lower levels of FSM registration, where pre-trial uptake had tended to be lower. As the five trial areas have a higher proportion of FSM registered pupils than Scotland as a whole, should it be rolled out, uptake across the rest of Scotland is likely to be higher.

Parents of the pupils taking part in the trial indicated that if school meals were no longer free, their child would still take a school meal more frequently than they did pre-trial. This suggests that if charges were reintroduced, overall uptake will decrease but remain higher than pre-trial.

Even with FSM, 25% of pupils did not take a school meal due mainly to some children being 'fussy-eaters'. Generally parents of such children want them to have school meals and would welcome help to encourage their children to eat a broader range of foods however it would appear that a maximum ceiling exists.

The main challenges faced were physical size and time pressures on the dining area.

Possible solutions were suggested including:

- staggering the times pupils arrive at the dining area
- setting tables in advance
- operating different queuing systems or service areas
- allowing slightly lengthened lunchtimes (e.g. letting P1 pupils out five or ten minutes earlier)
- using alternative accommodation (especially for packed lunches)

Practical issues emerged showing that sufficient lead-in time for staff training and disclosure issues is required. Commencement on the first day of term is beneficial for setting new routines. The greatest impact was upon catering staff whose workload increased however, the employment of extra staff eliminated this issue.

It was recognised that the trials period was unlikely to be of sufficient length to note changes in pupil's health, wellbeing and educational performance. However conclusions were drawn that:

- Pupils exposed to a greater range of new foods, some healthier
- Pupils pick what they like the taste of, not through awareness of healthy foods (Soups and vegetables frequently left untouched)
- Some evidence of parents taking more interest in food/diet at home
- Teachers did not report any behavioural changes in pupils at lunchtime or afternoon classes

The 5 Authorities were originally selected to reflect varying levels of deprivation and urban/rural mix. This was reflected in costs from £1.79 per additional meal in Fife to £4.65 in Scottish Borders. Costs were higher where the increase in uptake was most marked although economies of scale also reduced costs

Conclusions and APSE comment

The two trials were both successful in increasing the number of pupils taking meals and reducing the stigma attached to the traditional free school meal system. The emphasis on food, as a consequence of the initiatives, does appear to have encouraged children to try a greater range of foods and to push their parents to change meals at home as well.

Free school meal entitlement for all increases the proportion of children taking school meals and therefore the number obtaining a more balanced nutritional diet. However, even when the meals are free there appears to be a natural maximum of 75% take-up.

Changes in pupil behaviour are long term (minimum of three years) and although improvements were noted, the trial duration would have had to be longer to provide conclusive proof.

Both trials concluded that food behaviour outside school was at least as important as meals at school. Initiatives to involve the parents are called for to improve diet of children.

Free school meals are unlikely to become universally available as the costs involved are prohibitive, however targeted changes to increase eligibility should be explored. APSE supports higher nutritional standards for school meals although favours a phased implementation to avoid large fluctuations in meal numbers and hence operating costs.

Nutrition is only part of a 'healthy lifestyle' and equal attention and support must be given to increased physical activity and reduced calorie intake to make significant inroads into tackling obesity.

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