



Whetting children's appetite for free school meals.

Free school meals can boost uptake, reduce stigma and increase interest in healthy eating, according to analysis of the latest wave of pilot schemes by the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE).

APSE's briefing, *Free school meals – pilot evaluations*, draws upon the Scottish Government's report on the Evaluation of Free School Meals Trial in five councils and a University of Hull report on the local authority's 'Eat Well, Do Well' Initiative.

Trials in East Ayrshire, Fife, Glasgow, Scottish Borders and West Dunbartonshire resulted in uptake among Primary 1-3 pupils rising from 53% to 75%. Pupils from deprived and less deprived areas were equally likely to eat free school meals.

Pupils' visits to dentists more than halved, 86% of staff thought children were more aware of healthy eating and 71% reported less stigma associated with free school meals as a result of Kingston-upon-Hull City Council's pilot over a three year period. There was some evidence that children had more energy and fewer behavioural problems. The study found that children bringing packed lunches were consuming more calories, fat, sugar and salt than those eating school lunches.

There are however, resourcing and practical implications, such as increased staff workload, to consider in making free school meals available to all. There also appears to be a natural maximum of 75% children taking school meals, due mainly to being 'fussy eaters'

APSE's principal advisor for education catering Rob Bailey said: 'These trials reflect positive advantages of free school meals, particularly in encouraging children to eat healthily and try a wider range of foods. There is also evidence of parents taking more interest in diet at home as a result.'

More children across the UK will be taking part in trials. Durham and Newham will provide every child with a free meal from September and Wolverhampton will expand the proportion of children who qualify. APSE's chief executive, Paul O'Brien, commented: 'While free school meals are unlikely to become universally available, such results would suggest targeted changes to increase eligibility should be explored. We welcome the expansion of pilot schemes demonstrating the advantages of healthy school food.'

Ends

Notes to editor

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) has some 260 members from councils across the UK providing front-line services, including education catering.

APSE's briefing 09-28 Free school meals – Pilot evaluations examines pilots in Kingston-upon-Hull and five authorities in Scotland in detail.

APSE will monitor further free school meals pilots across the UK.

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