

Universal FSM pilot in two⁺ secondary schools



University of Bristol Evaluation findings

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What we know

- Food insecurity and child hunger is a worsening problem in the UK
- In September 2022, one in four households with children in the UK had experienced food insecurity in the last month
- Food insecurity in young people linked to poorer diet quality, early or delayed puberty and subsequent growth, obesity, poor physical health, poor mental health, disordered eating, risky behaviours, peer bullying and poorer academic outcomes
- Free school meals (FSM) can reduce food insecurity and improve dietary quality
- 800,000 children living in poverty are not eligible for the current means tested system and those who are eligible do not always claim
- Universal free school meals (UFSM) are currently offered to all pupils in the first three years (England), all primary school pupils (Wales by 2024), all pupils in first five years (Scotland, with commitment to extend to P6 and P7)
- In January 2020, UFSM were introduced into two secondary schools in one London Borough for the first time in the UK

Our research questions

1. Is UFSM feasible and acceptable in a UK secondary school context?
2. What are the enablers and barriers to effective implementation of UFSM in secondary schools?
3. What are the cost implications of implementing UFSM in secondary schools?
4. What is the perceived impact of UFSM on secondary school students, including hunger, behaviour and food consumption?
5. What is the perceived impact of UFSM on family finance and food security?

Methods....

- Student surveys measuring food insecurity and diet quality in 2 intervention and 2 comparison schools (n=404)
- Interviews with 20 parents / carers, 28 students, 12 school and catering staff
- Student observations over lunch times (24 students took part – tick box template and photos)
- Routine data measuring uptake



Levels of food insecurity are high (but no difference by group)

	Food Secure	Food Insecure
Intervention	144 (70.24%)	61 (29.76%)
Comparator	147 (74.24%)	51 (25.76%)

Q's derived from USDA Children's Food Security Scale

Likely to be underestimate – parents protect children as much as they can

Interview evidence of feasibility and acceptability

- Once set up, easier to administer than means tested FSM
- Staggered lunch times helped
- Funding had to be found from the LA
- Support from the head was important
- Communication with parents important
- Some concern that benefitting families who don't need it, but general feeling that it is worth it: basic resource
- Satisfaction among catering staff that all students looked after

They do get a really good full meal and a full pudding. Yeah it's a big meal. They get a substantial meal so I think that all children go home happy

She (Principal) really wanted it to work. She will pick and choose what she gets really involved in herself, because she's a busy woman and all that, but she was really on this one, nagging people and chasing

Interview evidence of impacts

- Reduce hunger and food insecurity
- Nutritional benefits
- Benefit household finances, reduce parental stress and reduce food insecurity
- Improve behaviour and concentration in lessons
- Reduce stigma associated with claiming free school meals: social leveller
- Create opportunities to socialise and develop good eating habits

He's learning there. He's safe. He's warm. He eats. And it's like he comes home at 3:30 better off than he was in the morning. That's like a big peace of mind for parents

Some people might ask me for money, if I can buy them something...When they changed the lunch to free, everyone had a chance to get food. Everyone had to eat, not go home hungry

Observations evidence that for most students universal free school meals...

- Were considered 'OK' or 'good' for enjoyment
- Did not create too much queuing time
- Had menu options that were 'OK' (suggestions for more seasoning and more culturally varied food)
- Had portion sizes that were too small for 1/3-1/2 of students
- Could be healthy, but depended on choice
- Could still create two tier system, if 'treat' puddings or drinks sold at extra cost



Cost effectiveness?

- Infrastructure: dining room size, kitchen equipment
- Additional staff: cook, serve, supervise
- Administration: set up, pupil premium funding
- Lunchbreaks longer
- Nutritious food is costly, but economies of scale
- Model has to work for caterers (or snacks and drinks will still be sold)
- Cost the LA £93,773.30; £448.50 per non-FSM eligible student
 - Value for money?
 - Opportunity costs?
 - Savings in improved learning and health?

I'm managing because I sell stuff at lunch, I make it on drinks and stuff and I'll make it on break, so that's not really a problem

Basically you're looking at things that cost very little, but can have a very big impact on young people's lives

Routine data showed uptake increased over time....

		Start of pilot (Nov 2019)	Nov-2021
School 1	All students	39%	68%
	FSM eligible	55%	78%
School 2	All students	59%	72%
	FSM eligible	74%	79%

Future research is needed...

- Continue to measure uptake (during non-pandemic times)
- Examine feasibility of other schools / LAs
- Conduct larger scale, longer term study, with before and after measures and a comparison group
- Examine cost-effectiveness, relative to other ways to address food insecurity

Thanks to the study team...

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Further details can be found...

[PolicyBristol_Briefing127_Kidger_universal_free_school_meals.pdf](#)

[A qualitative process evaluation of universal free school meal provision in two London secondary schools | BMC Public Health | Full Text \(biomedcentral.com\)](#)

[IJERPH | Free Full-Text | A Mixed Methods, Quasi-Experimental Evaluation Exploring the Impact of a Secondary School Universal Free School Meals Intervention Pilot \(mdpi.com\)](#)

Thanks for listening!