

Test of free school meals for all

Ed Balls: "The key thing is children like eating healthy food."

All primary school pupils are going to be offered free school meals in a pilot scheme in two areas of England.

In a third area - all as yet unchosen - means testing for free meals will be altered so that more pupils qualify.

The government, education authorities and primary care trusts will share the £40m cost.

A number of areas have already tried a variety of similar ideas. Unions have pushed for universal entitlement, with a cost estimated at £1bn a year.

The Scottish government is about to decide whether to give free meals to infant pupils, after a year-long pilot in five areas.

England's national trial scheme would start in a year's time and run for two years, with what ministers say would be a rigorous evaluation.

This would look at the benefits in terms of increased uptake of healthy meals and children's behaviour, obesity and general health and well-being.

It is not yet known which areas would be involved but the trial would be funded to the tune of £10m apiece by the health and schools departments, who want to see matched funding from local authorities and primary care trusts.

Feeling the pinch

In July, union delegates at Labour's National Policy Forum in Warwick are believed to have tabled an amendment calling for free meals for all.

The biggest experiment so far in England was in Hull, which offered a free breakfast, lunch and afternoon snack for every primary school child for several years.

The Labour council's scheme was stopped by the incoming Liberal Democrat administration, although it is now reported to be having a re-think.

SCHOOL MEAL PROVISION,
ENGLAND (2006-07)

69% of primary schools have a full
production kitchen

8% have mini kitchens

19% have food transported from
elsewhere

4% serve cold food only

Source: School Food Trust

Officials at the Department for Children, Schools and Families say there was little formal evaluation of the scheme although teachers claimed that children concentrated better in class and were more engaged with lessons.

It saw about 65% of children taking school meals, compared with the current national average of 43.6% - which includes some 20 areas where no school meals are provided at all.

Health Secretary Alan Johnson said: "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. But we need solid evidence from a nationally-assessed pilot."

Schools Secretary Ed Balls said: "We want a healthy lunch at school not just for some, but for every child. And 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."

He said there had been "a revolution" in school lunches.

"Hundreds of schools are leading the way in creating high quality food in a proper dining culture, with high-quality canteens; stay-on-site policies where possible; good lunchtime organisation, including cutting queues by staggering lunch times; effective diet and nutrition education; and actively involving young people in drawing up menus.

"These trials will show us whether making the lunches free in primary schools does, in fact, improve behaviour, school and results and healthy eating at home."

Evaluation

Shadow children's secretary Michael Gove said: "Parents everywhere are feeling the pinch and we do need to improve school meal provision.

"But Ed Balls's promise on free school meals is just spin - he refuses to commit the money to pay for it and all he's really talking about is a pilot scheme."

Liverpool City Council is studying the feasibility of providing a free school meal to every primary school child, in collaboration with the local primary care trust.

Across England's primary schools, 15.9% of children come from homes poor enough to qualify them for free meals at present.

Scotland's trial - which began a year ago in Glasgow, West Dunbartonshire, Fife, East Ayrshire and the Borders - is being independently evaluated, with a report expected soon.

If this is positive, the aim would be to provide free school meals to all pupils in classes P1 to P3 from August 2010.

The Scottish Government has also promised to offer free meals to all primary and secondary school pupils with parents or carers in the lowest income brackets.

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