

# VIEWPOINT

Linda Cregan

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## School meals: the need to evaluate the impact of the investment in universal free school meals for infants

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Recent months have seen much frenzied speculation about the future of universal free school meals for infants. Only by evaluating both this scheme, and the wider school meals work, can government make the right choices for children's public health.

"A subject of contentious political debate; an issue not resolved by succeeding governments." That's the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of the phrase 'a political football'. And it's hard to find one as well-kicked as school meals.

There are many examples including: the axing of free school milk for children over seven and the race to the bottom with compulsory competitive tendering in the eighties and nineties; Jamie Oliver's exposition of how far school food had sunk for many; the introduction of national school food standards, which created some of the healthiest menus in the world, and a two-tier system allowing some schools to opt out; taking the hugely progressive step for children's health of introducing free school lunches for all in their first three years of school, and then considering an end to the scheme less than two years after it began.

Political footballs are, by their very nature, issues on which it's hard to find consensus. For school meals in particular, different governments have had very different approaches to and views on the role of good food (or otherwise) in a child's day at school. That's why we must never stop urging governments to take a step back: to consider the bigger picture.

### **Because school food isn't an ideological debate**

Our children need to eat well if they're going to reach their potential, pure and simple. We hear governments talk every day of the need to reduce

inequalities for children in every aspect of their lives: in their health, in their attainment, in their life chances. So using school – as the place with the most intensive contact with children away from home – to get kids eating good food is just a no-brainer. For all governments, in all countries, trying to tackle the global threat of all forms of malnutrition in children – from child obesity to vitamin deficiency – school feeding programmes are an essential part of the policy mix. And amid the noise of the rumour mill suggesting that free school meals for infants might be scrapped, listen carefully and you'll hear scientists, doctors and teaching leaders steadily repeating again and again their expert opinion that giving every child the chance for a healthy, free meal at school in their first three years has enormous potential for children's health and education.

In a country where our child obesity problem has grown so serious that a national strategy is being drawn up; a country where the attainment of children in poverty remains stubbornly below that of their more affluent peers, removing one of their access points to good food would be a bizarre paradox.

### **We've never had a scheme like this before**

As yet, we don't have longitudinal evidence of the impact of a national, universal free meals scheme in the UK: we've never had a scheme like this before. Previous pilot schemes have shown encouraging signs of the potential power of free meals for all. Less than two years into the national scheme, teachers are reporting better focus and behaviour from children all over the country and 95% of parents say they value their children trying different foods and eating a proper lunch. This national scheme is a not-to-be-

missed opportunity to properly measure the difference good food can make to a whole generation of children, as they grow up in a nation where eating well – whatever your family's income – is not a guaranteed right.

And after such hard work and commitment from schools to introduce the scheme, not measuring its impact does a disservice to the thousands of school cooks, caterers, lunchtime supervisors and teachers and heads who made this happen. Free meals for all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 was always a huge ask. Add in a launch date which gave schools less than a year to prepare and capital funding which – while hugely welcome – was never going to stretch quite as far as it needed to, and you had a recipe which felt nigh-on impossible for some of England's school kitchens and dining rooms.

But what an incredible feat they pulled off. With take up now running at more than 85%, the packed dining rooms speak for themselves.

### **Specialist advice and support**

At our helpline desk – part of the government-funded support service launched with the Lead Association for CAtering in Education [LACA] and a whole range of delivery partners to get specialist advice and support to schools delivering the scheme – we had contact with more than 6,000 schools, more than 2,700 of which were helped by some part of the support package. That's hundreds of thousands of pupils whose experience we've all helped to shape – in small ways and large.

We talked to the schools who didn't have any meal service at all, and those who didn't have a kitchen. Those who needed to complete funding bids quickly, and those who had to play with their lunchtime logistics to get everyone fed on time without disrupting the day. Some rang us about their menus, others wanted help with marketing their free meals to parents. We talked to headteachers struggling to get families to continue registering for free school meals so they'd get their Pupil Premium funding, to schools working out how to cater for special diets, navigate legislation on milk and what to do for lunch on school trips.

And not all of this was done by phone: experts from the pool of specialist partners carried out around 1,500 visits to schools to go through issues face to face – brilliant for working out

options for a cramped dining space or a servery that didn't lend itself to the bigger numbers in the queue.

Some areas had it tougher than others, and support for schools from local authorities varied. Some of the rural schools we worked with really have had to go above and beyond to make this happen; others got off to a challenging start through circumstances they couldn't control.

One bad experience of school lunch can put parents off for good, and there were some disappointed families while some schools worked through teething problems. We took a lot of calls from parents, even though the helpline was designed for schools. Their feedback was invaluable in helping schools get this right.

Most schools were very positive about the impact on children themselves. They saw how it helps families with costs and how it impacts children's behaviour to have a good lunch in the middle of the day. Any negativity we came across is nearly always directed at the speed with which the policy was introduced, and the need for even more funding to make school meals work even harder for children.

### **Biggest success**

What was the biggest success of universal infant free school meals [UIFSM]? Above and beyond the day-to-day challenges we worked with schools on, UIFSM forced schools to confront their school meals issues. We all know that with so many competing pressures on school funding, food and lunchtimes are often pushed to the back of the queue; UIFSM changed that. The flip side is that as schools have looked much more closely into their issues, they realised that they need to invest much more time and money into resolving them for the long-term. This is where continuing capital funding for improving school kitchens and dining spaces in all schools is essential, and where the incredible force of industry partners working together is invaluable. We've campaigned for many years about this: if we want more and more children to choose the school meal experience, we need decent infrastructure and systems to make it happen.

### **Commitment to evaluate**

When it comes to children's health, and the power of good food in education, I believe school food can be a fount of evidence to inform and

support effective policy-making on children's nutrition. That's why, in the government's forthcoming child obesity strategy, I want to see that the potential of good school food as a children's public health intervention is maximised. Without commitment to evaluate the impact of the investment in universal free school meals for infants for children's health, education and in reducing inequalities, the many benefits being reported by children, parents and teachers could be lost - never scrutinised, never measured,

and never used to help government make effective decisions on the scheme's current value and future potential. Every contact with children counts when it comes to improving their nutrition, and school has the most intensive contact with children after home. So, national, regular evaluation of how well schools are doing at providing good food for children, and the impact of that work, has never been more important.

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