

# IMPROVING SECONDARY SCHOOL FOOD PROVISION: BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS

May 2023

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## Key findings

“Free school meal children are treated differently. She is told she can’t buy certain foods on free school meals. It’s like wearing a big badge saying I’m poor. It’s heart breaking to watch her come home hungry as she would rather not go into the lunch hall than have peers laugh at her” (Parent)

The Mayor’s announcement of universal free school meals (FSM) for all children at primary school from September will make a significant difference to low income families, and remove the stigma faced by thousands of primary pupils currently receiving FSM. However, many secondary school pupils in poverty in London will continue to miss out on FSM next year and those who do qualify will continue to face stigma. CPAG estimates that 120,000 pupils in secondary schools in London are living in poverty but are not eligible for a free school meal.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, secondary schools can make small changes in their approach to food which can make a big difference to pupils. Helping to improve young people’s lunchtime experience will help them to learn, socialise and thrive.

**This briefing draws on our research with schools and families in London and makes suggestions for how schools can remove some of the barriers faced by secondary pupils in receipt of FSM, and those in low-income families who do not currently qualify.**

Many of the recommendations in this briefing are small changes that can make a big difference to how young people experience school food. We encourage local authorities, schools and trusts to work with their catering provider to review practices that can inadvertently discriminate against and marginalise pupils from low income households.

Please contact Dr Claudia Sumner at Child Poverty Action Group ([csumner@cpag.org.uk](mailto:csumner@cpag.org.uk)) for further information.

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<sup>1</sup> In the academic year 2022-2023 an estimated 210,000 children in poverty in London primary and secondary schools did not qualify for FSM. [cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/why-universal-free-school-meals-right-move](https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/why-universal-free-school-meals-right-move)

## Reducing FSM stigma

Issue	Impact	Solution
<p>The way money is credited to the lunch accounts of FSM pupils can prevent them from accessing their full entitlement, since the FSM allowance is deducted from their account daily even if they are absent.</p>	<p>“If you’re free school meals, you get £2.40 a day... you can’t carry it over... it’s not right. You should be able to carry it over” <i>Year 8 pupil</i></p>	<p>If paying pupils do not have money deducted from their account when they miss lunch (for example, due to absence), implement the same policy for FSM pupils.</p> <p>Allow pupils to ‘roll-over’ FSM funds if they miss lunch or do not spend the whole allowance</p>
<p>Some schools do not allow pupils to access their FSM at breaktime even if this when they would prefer to eat. Young people report feeling stigmatised when they cannot use their FSM allowance at a breaktime tuckshop.</p>	<p>“I can’t eat food at breaktime, only lunch. I wish I could... I feel out of place as I can’t. I’m just sitting there” <i>Year 7 pupil</i></p>	<p>Allow FSM funds to be used at any time during the school day.</p>
<p>Older year groups are sometimes allowed to leave school premises during lunchtime or eat outside or in a common room. This option is not available to FSM pupils if they must eat in the dining hall.</p>	<p>“I have to sit on my own in the dining room with all the year sevens, while all my friends are sat outside.” <i>Sixth form pupil</i></p>	<p>Ensure that flexible options are available to FSM pupils, for example by offering a take away option at lunch.</p>
<p>Pupils told us that it is easy to identify which pupils receive FSM on school trips because food is distributed differently.</p>	<p>“The teachers shout, ‘Free school meals people, come and collect your lunch’, then you go and collect your paper bag.” <i>Year 8 pupil</i></p>	<p>Allow all pupils to collect a free packed lunch discretely before leaving school and carry it with them.</p>
<p>Food options for those eligible for FSM are sometimes more limited. This leaves FSM pupils with fewer choices than their peers, producing stigma and shame, and makes their eligibility for FSM more visible.</p>	<p>“School meal food items are too pricey, when you’re on free school meals if you don’t have a meal deal then most of the time the children can only afford one item. Which is not good enough.” <i>Parent</i></p>	<p>Ensure food choices are organised and priced so that the full range of meal options is accessible for pupils in receipt of FSM (for example, a ‘meal deal’ is flexible enough to include a range of combinations within the amount of the FSM allowance)</p>

## Helping lower income families

Issue	Impact	Solution
<p>Payment procedures for lunch accounts can create difficulties for lower income families leading to stigma and hunger.</p>	<p>“You have to put on £15 for the whole week. What if your mum doesn’t have it? You should be able to top up a pound or two.” <i>Year 10 pupil</i></p>	<p>Allow school food accounts to be topped up weekly or daily.</p> <p>Do not require a minimum payment.</p> <p>Have a designated point of contact in school for pupils and families to discuss cost-related concerns.</p>
<p>If the cost of a pupil’s food exceeds the FSM allowance, or there are insufficient funds in their account, pupils can be asked to return items at the till, which can lead to them being singled out in front of their peers.</p>	<p>“It’s so unfair, if you don’t have enough, they take it back, it’s so embarrassing” <i>Year 8 pupil</i></p>	<p>Work with pupils to draft a clear policy on how dining staff can sensitively and discretely respond when pupils do not have enough money in their lunch account to pay at the till. Ensure all pupils and dining staff are aware of the policy.</p>
<p>Food items are not always clearly priced, so pupils are unsure what they can afford within their FSM allowance or on a limited budget.</p>	<p>“There’s not prices on stuff. You don’t know how much it costs till you get to the till.” <i>Year 9 pupil</i></p>	<p>Ensure all items are clearly labeled with the correct price.</p> <p>Ensure pricing is simple and total amounts are easy to calculate.</p>
<p>Young people tell us they cannot afford the cost of school lunches and some report the food prices in their schools have gone up in the last year.</p>	<p>“My council negotiating for the cost of food is going to be much more successful at getting a good price than I’m going to be in Tesco.” <i>Parent</i></p>	<p>Monitor catering, and review contracts, to ensure lunches are affordable.</p> <p>Water should be freely available to all pupils in the dining hall at all times.</p>
<p>Many children in low-income households are missing out on the benefits of a school lunch due to the restrictive eligibility criteria for free school meals.</p>	<p>“Not everyone is privileged enough to be able to pay £2.30 each day... there’s people who don’t get free school meals who can’t pay that” <i>Sixth form pupil</i></p>	<p>Consider options for extending eligibility criteria for FSM or introduce universal access at secondary school.</p> <p>Ensure all eligible pupils are registered for FSM.</p>

## Accommodating pupils’ dietary needs

Issue	Impact	Solution
The most common hunger-related issue we hear about in schools is insufficient portion size. Secondary schools do not always recognise that older teenagers need more calories.	“The portions are horrendous, it’s tiny, it’s not enough” <i>Sixth form pupil</i>	Discuss portion size <sup>2</sup> and the dietary needs of different groups of pupils with the caterer.  Allow pupils to have a second helping if they are hungry.
The quality of food, lack of options and variety often puts young people off accessing school food.	“The free school meal is very little and mostly not edible” <i>Parent</i>	Encourage schools to offer variety and choice over the term.  Encourage school staff to monitor the quality of food, which has a significant effect on take-up.
Cultural and dietary requirements are not always met by school food options.	“There’s not enough halal options, it’s mostly vegetarian, there’s no meat options” <i>Year 11 pupil</i>	Offer vegetarian, vegan and halal options as appropriate.
Pupils report having limited opportunities to provide meaningful feedback on the types of food and options they would like to see provided.	“This is a diverse school, but the food is not.” <i>Year 10 pupil</i>	Consider ways to consult pupils on lunchtime arrangements and food choices, including providing a forum for pupils to offer menu suggestions.
Pupils identified barriers to dining at school – insufficient space, disorganised queuing, insufficient food so those who go last have no choice, unclean plates and cutlery.	“Most people don’t have enough time to finish because of the queues.” <i>Year 8 pupil</i>	Popular food options should be available to pupils at all sittings.  Lunch queues should be kept short, to avoid pupils giving up and not eating.  Provide adequate dining space, and clean plates and cutlery.

CPAG’s London Calling project gathers evidence from a panel of black and ethnic minority working parents from each of the 32 London boroughs in order to understand more about the concerns, challenges and needs of low-income families in the capital.

CPAG’s Cost of the School Day is a large-scale, three-year research project which works with schools, pupils and families to identify and address the cost-related barriers faced by pupils from low-income families to full participation in all aspects of the school day.

<sup>2</sup> DfE guidance on portion size: [gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools/portion-sizes-and-food-groups#secondary-11-to-18-years-old](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools/portion-sizes-and-food-groups#secondary-11-to-18-years-old)