

THE UNIVERSALISM MULTIPLIER

**The Impact of Universal Free School Meal
Entitlement on Families, Schools and Children**



ABOUT CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. Registered charity numbers: 294841 and SC039339

ABOUT THE NATIONAL EDUCATION UNION

The National Education Union (NEU) brings together the voices of more than 450,000 teachers, lecturers, support staff and leaders working in maintained and independent schools and colleges across the UK, to form the largest education union in Europe.

*"It makes
my son feel
everyone
is equal"*

CONTENTS

6	Introduction
8	Executive Summary
12	Context
14	Methodology
16	Financial and psychological security
20	Improved nutrition and school engagement
24	Reduction in stigma and social exclusion
28	Improved home/school relationships
32	Changed eating habits
34	A richer school life
38	Conclusion and next steps
40	Further reading
42	Sources





INTRODUCTION

School food is an important part of children’s educational experience. School lunches can be the fuel that helps children to learn, and much resource has been devoted to researching the impact of food and nutrition on children’s education.¹ More than that, lunchtimes are an important social event in the school day. For all children, time with their peers is a formative part of the school experience. Lunchtimes can be valuable times for children to socialise and build friendships, but they can also exacerbate the anxieties and tensions children feel through stigma and social exclusion.^{2,3}

School food is also an important point of contact between schools and parents. Whether preparing packed lunches, paying for school dinners or receiving Free School Meals (FSM), parents recognise the important role food plays in their child’s day at school or college. In this context, it is important to ensure that the school food system is equitable and works for pupils and supports families. Getting school food right should be seen as a crucial element of education policy that seeks to close educational inequalities and secure good outcomes for all children.

While much research time has been devoted to understanding the impacts of various models of school food delivery, there is comparatively little that aims to understand the experiences and perceptions of universal FSM entitlement of those who it affects most immediately; parents, school staff and children. This report aims to contribute to this body of knowledge by understanding the impacts of universal free school meal entitlement from the perspective of parents and school staff who respectively receive and administer it.



The Universalism Multiplier

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and the National Education Union (NEU) have conducted surveys and interviews across two London boroughs which offered FSM to all children during the 2022/2023 academic year. The interviews were conducted in six primary schools and 70 parents were surveyed or interviewed in those two boroughs.

Through analysis of interviews and qualitative survey responses, this document outlines how universal FSM entitlement impacts on parents' experiences of school and home life, and on school staff experiences of educating children. The interviews and survey responses conducted demonstrate six impacts of universal FSM entitlement:

1. Financial and psychological security
2. Improved nutrition and school engagement
3. Reduction in stigma and social exclusion
4. Improved home/school relationships
5. Changed eating habits
6. A richer school life.

1. FINANCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SECURITY

Free School Meals a lifeline for families

Parents from London boroughs where primary Free School Meals are universally available, who took part in our interviews and survey, are overwhelmingly in support of the policy. Those who are struggling to get by in the current climate outlined that the financial and psychological security that universal FSM entitlement gives them reduces both their and their children's worries about the cost of food at school.

2. IMPROVED NUTRITION AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

A virtuous cycle: sustenance, nutrition, attendance and attainment

Universal entitlement to FSM may mean more children receive nutritious meals throughout the day which enable them to engage in their education. While it is difficult to identify a causal relationship, some school staff also feel that this has contributed to changing attendance patterns in school, and to improved concentration and engagement in lessons.

3. REDUCTION IN STIGMA AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Stigma, anxiety and school engagement: means-testing as a dividing line

Universal entitlement reduces the stigma faced by children who would ordinarily receive means-tested FSM. Parents and school staff consistently highlighted the ways in which means-testing stigmatises pupils and can leave them feeling excluded. Parents and school staff highlighted that many children in a means-tested system are aware of the financial difficulties they face and experience additional stress and worry as a consequence.

4. IMPROVED HOME/SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Parental engagement and supportive relationships between parents, schools and pupils

For schools, universal entitlement allows them to divert time and resources spent managing a complex and bureaucratic means-tested system into offering enrichment activities to a wider range of pupils and fostering better relationships with parents. Not having to process lunch money collection and administer school lunch debt was seen as having a significantly positive impact on home/school relationships'. There was also some evidence of an improvement in the quality and quantity of food provided by schools due to the raised profile of school food as a result of universal entitlement.

5. CHANGED EATING HABITS

Developing eating habits and positive practices

Universal entitlement is a crucial part of an equitable educational experience for pupils. The communal experience of eating together was seen to have helped children to develop a taste for new foods that they may not have tried before and to learn new social skills. Some parents we spoke to highlighted that this has helped them with meal times at home.

6. A RICHER SCHOOL LIFE

The universalism multiplier: universal Free School Meals for a rich educational experience

Families on different points on the socio-economic spectrum reported that the financial security afforded by universal FSM entitlement allowed them to invest in additional opportunities for their children. Many parent respondents to our survey highlighted that universal FSM entitlement frees up money and allows them to invest in hobbies, learning and extra-curricular activities for their children such as joining sports teams, purchasing devices for learning or to arrange family activities such as meals out. This feedback from parents was consistent across those who are eligible for Free School Meals via the current national means-tested system, and those that fall outside of the eligibility criteria. As such, universal FSM entitlement can play an important role in supporting all families to build and live full family lives and to provide enriched childhoods for their children.

Taken together – the positive impact on family finances, improved home/school relationships and an overall more inclusive experience – universal entitlement can be seen as producing a multiplier effect on the support that children and families receive at school. Beyond the cash value of the meals provided, universal entitlement allows families to invest more in their home life, improves relationships between parents and schools, and affords children the psychological security they need to learn.

Universal FSM entitlement can be seen as a key lever in ensuring that all children have access to a diverse, inclusive and rich education. The social dividends of implementing universal FSM entitlement in this context are likely to be great.



GE PRIMA
SCHOOL

CONTEXT

In England, all children in reception, year 1 and year 2 currently receive a free meal each day (this is referred to as Universal Infant Free School Meals or UIFSM). From year 3 onwards, provision of Free School Meals (FSM) is means-tested. Children in households in England in receipt of universal credit (UC) and assessed as earning less than £7,400 excluding benefit payments are eligible for FSM. Households above that threshold are expected to pay for their children's school meal or provide a packed lunch.

In 2021, the Scottish Government announced that it would roll out universal FSM entitlement to all children in primary school, and in 2022, the Welsh Government followed suit. Both Governments are in the process of rolling out FSM to all children in primary schools.

In addition to these nationwide programmes, the London boroughs of Southwark, Newham, Islington, Westminster and Tower Hamlets offer universal FSM for children in primary schools, with Tower Hamlets recently announcing the rollout of universal FSM in secondary schools also. York Council has recently announced a pilot scheme offering universal FSM, signalling growing support for the policy across the country. Despite this, school meal entitlement remains variable across the UK, with children receiving different levels of support depending on where they live.

In 2023, the mayor of London announced a one-year programme funding FSM entitlement for all primary school pupils in London. This programme is now being delivered and plans are in place to evaluate the outcomes of the programme. Ahead of the evaluation of this programme, CPAG and the NEU have sought to understand the likely impacts of universal FSM entitlement. The main objectives of this report are:

- 1.** to understand how the universal entitlement is experienced by teachers, school leaders and parents to understand the likely impacts of universal entitlement across London in the 2023/24 academic year
- 2.** to achieve a deeper understanding of the effects on children, families and schools of universal FSM entitlement
- 3.** to identify the important areas for further research once the programme is implemented across London.

With an increasing range of approaches to Free School Meals and growing regional differences, we also seek to highlight aspects of school food policy which warrant further investigation.





METHODOLOGY

CPAG and the NEU conducted surveys and interviews during the 2022/2023 academic year across two London boroughs which offer FSM to all children regardless of income or circumstances. We worked with six primary schools, and spoke to a range of staff in these schools including school business managers, support staff or members of the schools' senior leadership teams. In addition, we heard from 70 parents through an online survey and telephone interviews. The below findings represent the views expressed in the interviews along with the views expressed by parents in qualitative responses to the surveys.

This report contributes to existing quantitative analyses of universal FSM entitlement by highlighting some of the ways in which parents and school staff perceive the benefits of the programmes offered. It is not intended to offer an exhaustive summary of the benefits and drawbacks of the policy, nor a definitive rationale for its introduction; rather to bring to the fore potential impacts of the policy that have been difficult to capture in previous research methodologies and suggest ways to conceive of the effects of universal FSM entitlement.

The universal FSM entitlement in the boroughs in which the interviews and survey took place is well established, meaning most implementation and logistical issues have been resolved and do not affect how the policy is perceived by participants. In many cases, interviewees highlighted that they felt the programmes their schools were offering were well run and that implementation had been refined over a period of time.

While some of the impacts of the London-wide universal primary FSM roll-out will be felt by families, schools and children immediately, the full effects of universal entitlement of FSM are unlikely to be realised in the first year of the programme. The findings below therefore demonstrate the potential that this kind of programme can offer, with appropriate time for implementation.





1 *Financial and psychological security*

FREE SCHOOL MEALS A LIFELINE FOR FAMILIES

Parents and guardians strongly conveyed that they saw universal free school meal entitlement as offering the financial and psychological security they needed to provide a better experience for their children at school. Parents reported that, recently in particular, universal Free School Meals have helped them to cope with the rising pressures of food prices, enabling them to spend more money on nutritious food, children's clothing and other essentials.

The people we spoke to who would be ineligible for Free School Meals through the means-tested system felt that the entitlement removed a great deal of stress from their lives, and that the financial security afforded by universal entitlement gave them breathing room to invest in other aspects of their family life. This included freeing up finances to fund enrichment activities such as joining sports clubs or family days out for their children. One parent told us:

"I am very grateful that my child's school does this. It really helps with us stressing less about my child's school lunch expense. Also it's so good to know that all children are entitled to this universal Free School Meals."

Echoing this sentiment, another said:

“Free meals provided takes a lot of burden off parents.”

The feeling of greater financial security was echoed by other parents who provided their views. A survey respondent reflected on how their finances would be impacted should they not have universal entitlement to FSM:

“It would put a huge financial strain on our family and I would constantly worry that my child will not have a hot meal as I would need to give a packed lunch. I would not be able to afford school lunches.”

This was a common sentiment echoed by other survey respondents:

“With the money we don’t have to spend on school lunches I am able to buy lots more things that my child needs including clothes, food at home and meeting household bills.”

Other parents highlighted that without universal entitlement, their own food intake or the quality of food their family eat at home, would be affected:

“I would have to cut back on meals that I eat and cut back on shopping.”

“I would have to cut down on fruits and veg at home.”

Where FSM entitlement is universal, it supports families on different points of the income spectrum to provide additional opportunities for their children. The impact on families was illustrated by a middle-income household who felt universal entitlement enabled them to do more activities with their children:

“In the current crisis families are affected across the board. We’re middle income but not having them would impact on weekend or after school activities.”

This view was echoed by another parent:

“This measure helps all families at a time we are all impacted by the cost-of-living crisis and rising bills, whether we are poor or middle class, Free School Meals massively help reduce stress of spending.”

As well as easing financial pressures, the parents also detailed the ways in which universal FSM has reduced other household stresses. For some parents, the entitlement has freed up money and time to spend with their children. One parent said:

“As a parent, my children having access to universal primary Free School Meals just made it easy. We’re both working parent(s), it saved us an absolute fortune. It saved us a lot of time and some family angst around making and agreeing on packed lunches.”

That universal entitlement was helpful for families was something that was echoed by school staff. In all of the interviews we conducted, school leaders and school business managers noticed the benefits of universal entitlement on parents in their communities, in particular those who miss out under the national means-tested Free School Meal threshold. A head teacher of a Southwark primary school pointed to the benefits of the programme:

“The impact of universal FSM is so big. Our parents couldn’t cope without it. You can’t underestimate how big an impact for parents who could be, for example, first generation immigrants, or people just above the eligibility criteria, how big having meals provided is for them.”

A school business manager in a Southwark primary school told us:

“The universal provision has made it a lot easier for parents because there is no identifying who you are having to chase for dinner money and who you are not. It takes a weight of their minds in terms of preparing food – particularly those who would not have been eligible but were struggling to make ends meet. In terms of inequality, it helps close the gap.

“The universal provision has certainly benefitted that group who would have fallen just short, or quite a way short, of the threshold.

“I think the programme being in place means that parents don’t suddenly having to find the money every week and don’t have to take money out of the family budget. It means they have more that they can spend on other things. If you have three children in school, that can be quite a lot of money. This could then impact what they get to eat at home. Parents may have to sacrifice what they are eating at home.”

A member of support staff at a Southwark primary school echoed this sentiment:

“If we didn’t have universal Free School Meals families wouldn’t be able to buy lunches, especially those that are working but in receipt of low income and so not eligible for means-tested Free School Meals. It would be catastrophic. Universal Free School Meals are one of the best things that could have happened to parents. Parents don’t have the stress of thinking about the cost of lunch, so children don’t have that stress. Paying for lunches would be too much extra stress on already stressed families.”

It’s clear that for many parents and guardians, universal school meal entitlement is an invaluable source of support that has also offered financial and psychological security through recent economic turbulence. This is true for parents on different points of the income distribution, including those not eligible for FSM previously. The wide level of support for introducing such a policy is clear.



2 *Improved nutrition and school engagement*

A VIRTUOUS CYCLE

**Sustenance, nutrition,
attendance and attainment**

Rising poverty in recent years has left many families struggling to afford the essentials in life.⁴ This means decisions about food and nutrition are being compromised.⁵

Meanwhile, the cost-of-living crisis has sharpened the impact of this need and left many more families unable to meet the costs of food, making cutbacks on the kind of food they eat, or sacrificing their own food for the sake of their children.⁶ Food inflation has been much higher than the general level of inflation in the economy, and it is well documented that inflation is higher for those on lower incomes.⁷

It is in this context that our interviews in London boroughs suggest that universal FSM have had an impact on reducing the number of children going hungry at school and on potentially improving the nutrition that they receive. Food is essential to learning, and the interviews we conducted outline how universal entitlement has enabled more children to eat at lunchtime, removing any means-testing and reducing inequalities during the school day.

A Tower Hamlets head teacher said:

“If Free School Meals were not universal more families would send in packed lunches which would be inadequate for pupils. We have pupils at risk of both obesity and malnutrition.”

A school business manager at an average-sized school in Southwark told us:

“Before universal provision was introduced, we saw children not eating since the previous day’s lunch, or bringing in inadequate packed lunches such as a slice of bread and a packet of crisps, or food leftover from an evening meal the night before. Afternoons used to be really bad. Pupils used to be hungry and fill up on milk. It’s worth noting that this was due to the quality of the lunches as well as the eligibility. The school has done lots in the last 15 years to increase the range of lunch items as well as quality and freshness. If we said parents had to start paying for lunches the number of children on packed lunches would go up drastically, the food would be poorer quality and there would be less of it. The other thing that I have noticed is that there are more children now that have a school meal than bring something from home.”

Parents who completed our survey also told us of the worries they felt for their children’s nutrition should they not have access to this universal entitlement. When asked how they would fare if they didn’t have access to universal FSM, parents worried for their children’s meals:

“If the provision were removed, my son would need to start on packed lunches which would limit his choice for lunch. And he can’t have hot food for packed lunch.”

“They would lose interest in eating at lunch. I wouldn’t be able to provide a hot lunch and I would struggle to provide a nourishing, varied cold lunch. Right now, they are exposed to different foods than we have at home and it’s good for their personal and social development as well.”

Universal entitlement reaches students who are not eligible for means-tested FSM but whose families are struggling with the cost of living to eat a nutritious meal each day. School staff noted that it allowed children who would otherwise eat packed lunches a more nutritious meal, and to prevent some children from going hungry. Existing evidence suggests that this could have a positive impact on pupil attainment and attendance.^{8,9} This was echoed in our interviews with school staff.

A longstanding assistant head teacher at a Southwark primary school told us:

“It definitely has impacted on learning and attainment. There would always have been some who may have been eligible but didn’t apply and that would have affected their families. We now know that the families are less affected and the outcomes in school are better. It’s hard to do a comparison on the impact on attendance but if the parents know that the children are going to get well fed in the middle of the day, they are more likely to send their children. It helps for sure. I’m sure it’s not the only reason, but it does help.”

School leaders and school business managers highlighted changing attendance patterns and increased buy-in for school activities when compared with a means-tested approach. A school business manager at a Southwark primary school told us:

“There’s a lot of parents who now plan any appointments they may be taking children out of school for so that they have had lunch at the school because they know they get it free.”

This sentiment was echoed by a support staff member at a Southwark primary school who told us:

“Free School Meals are important to our families, and we know that they are appreciated by parents. We see this when parents organise medical appointment but bring their children back to school for lunchtime.”

A head teacher at a Southwark primary school, told us:

“I never could have imagined the impact universal FSM would have. I think it has a massive impact. From inspection activities I have been involved with for many years I have been able to see around about 100 schools’ provision. I know that if we didn’t have FSM here, our children would be eating a poorer version of what they eat at other schools. Packed lunches are not of the quality that we can provide. It’s not even about deprivation, it’s just much harder to ensure a nutritious meal when packing a cold lunch. That is true even in less disadvantaged areas.

“At my school we have 99 per cent of our children eating school dinners and you see all of our children eating broccoli, cauliflower, salmon and all sorts of nutritious foods.

“The national attendance rate is 92.7 per cent this year. Ours is 95.4 per cent. That is a significant increase, it’s like running a hundred metres a second quicker than everyone else. We have to get our children into school, and communities like ours struggle with that and the main reason is health I think. There has to be a correlation between the fact they are eating a nutritious lunch and the fact that they are attending school more. I recently became the head teacher at another school which until now hadn’t chosen to invest in school meals, and attendance is much poorer.”

3 *Reduction in stigma and social exclusion*

STIGMA, ANXIETY AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Means-testing as a dividing line

Previous research suggests means-testing of Free School Meals leads to children feeling singled out and labelled as ‘poor’.¹⁰ This in turn impacts on their enjoyment of and engagement with school.

While many see means-testing as a way of targeting resources to those most in need, our report suggests that this practice in reality leads to poor children feeling excluded, distinguishable and anxious. As such, means-testing risks driving even greater divisions between families who are struggling and more affluent families, reproducing societal inequalities within schools.

Our report also provides some insight into the impact of universal entitlement on those children and families who would be eligible for means-tested FSM through the existing national policy in England.

A school business manager in an average-sized primary school in Southwark told us:

“Before the universal provision was introduced, we did struggle with parents completing registration forms for FSM. People didn’t want to be highlighted, there was a stigma and parents found it difficult to say that they wanted to have help. Parents did not want to apply for the meals, and we knew they were eligible; when it went universal, it just changed.”

A Tower Hamlets head teacher also commented that the absence of universal FSM:

“It would also take time for us as a school to get families registered for Free School Meals. It would be particularly problematic for families with English as an additional language and those without digital access. If we had an application form families would be entitled and wouldn’t get it.”

When we asked parents how not having universal FSM would impact on their family, one respondent starkly highlighted the impact of stigma related to means-tested food provision:

“We qualified for Free School Meals beforehand, so financially it’ll have no impact, but emotionally, it will ostracise my child.”

If children who are receiving Government support are made to feel stigmatised or shamed, the benefits arising from the support are likely to be counteracted.

For parents who would have fallen short of qualifying for FSM under the national policy, universal FSM afforded their child the security of a meal each day, and reduced the financial worries in the household. By their nature, means-tested FSM systems present cliff edges for families and divisions between children, which risk undermining the support intended.

An assistant head teacher at another Southwark primary school reflected:

“We know that every child will get a decent meal at least once a day. That wasn’t the case before. Before the change, most children still received a hot meal every day, but now it’s not obvious who is eligible for the free meals.”

A member of support staff at another Southwark primary highlighted the positive impacts of the removal of such stigma:

“Pupils don’t have to think about the payment of lunches, having lunch at school is just the norm. All children sit down, there’s no stigma and the socialisation when eating a meal is beneficial for all. Some families live in properties that don’t lend themselves to family eating, universal Free School Meals give that space for children to develop social skills.”

It is not just school staff who felt a sense of relief at moving away from a means-tested system. Respondents to our survey of parents reflected similar sentiments. When asked how universal entitlement impacted on their child’s experience of school, respondents were clear:

“It removes any stigma surrounding poverty.”

“It makes them feel they are not being singled out and [they] feel like part of the school.”

“It removes stigma of being poor, which can be hugely damaging for children. It is a hugely positive thing and I strongly hope the government will roll this out nationwide as ultimately it saves society money to have well fed, healthy and nourished children who are able to learn and focus better whilst at school. It also removes barriers between those from poor and wealthier families.”

“It makes my son feel everyone is equal.”

A parent commented:

“Universal provision means every child is treated fairly. There’s not stigma and it means there is a parity of access across the board. It takes away the stress that a child might feel and makes sure they get a hot meal. Not having universal free provision would bring the issue of those who have and those who don’t into sharp focus. Children do discuss life and it makes it obvious. It’s just an extra thing for them to worry about that they should be shielded from. Everyone should be treated equally at school and registering for FSM means that’s not the case.”

The testimonies outlined above suggest that gaps between richer and poorer families are felt not only in their incomes or levels of wealth, but in the ways in which they experience school life. In this case, means-testing can be seen to single out children from poorer backgrounds, and make them experience school in a different way. To remove barriers to learning, we must find ways to ensure that there is free access to all aspects of school life, and work to tackle the root causes of poverty. Our report suggests that universal entitlement for school meals addresses some of the inequalities children and families currently face.

4 *Improved home/school relationships*

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

**Positive relationships
between parents, schools
and pupils**

Parents and school staff we spoke to were unanimous in the view that universal entitlement to school meals reduces money collection and debt enforcement processes which hinder relationships between parents, schools and pupils.

The removal of the administration of school lunch fees has meant that school staff had more time to invest in planning and communicating other programmes that schools offer to enrich children's education.

With universal FSM, issues around school lunch debt are eliminated. Families do not accrue debt, relieving pressures on them, and schools do not have to chase families for this money. School staff reported that this made it easier to engage with parents around their children's learning and improved attendance patterns when children had to attend appointments or take time out of a school day.

School staff felt strongly that universal FSM entitlement allowed them to build better relationships with parents and reduced the anxiety children faced around school-related costs. A school business manager in a Southwark primary school told us:

“Before the universal programme was introduced, some pupils were aware that their parents owed the school money. We did have a register where it was ticked off when pupils had paid for lunches. It was very public. It was unnerving and affected their relationship with school.”

A Tower Hamlets head teacher said:

“Universal free schools meals means that the huge administrative burden of collecting and processing dinner registers has now gone. As a school we don’t have to deal with dinner money debt, which is still the case for pupils and families in nursery where lunches are not provided free.”

A school business manager in a Southwark primary school also told us:

“Some pupils were aware that their parents owed the school money. Some children would come in to school later so they didn’t go through the pressure and shame knowing that their parents owed money. Now with the universal programme, they don’t have an awkward moment in class in front of their peers.”

A school business manager in a different Southwark primary school echoed this sentiment:

“School lunch debt was a very common problem before and we used to have to spend a long time chasing parents for money for school meals. Not having to chase this has helped the relationships we have with parents and it’s a much nicer atmosphere now. It has definitely meant that relationships between parents and the school are stronger. It’s a very difficult thing in a school to be chasing someone for money because relationships are so important. You need to have the best possible relationship with the parents and students at the school and that’s very difficult to do when you are asking people for money who don’t have much.”

School business managers agreed that removing money collection processes improved home/school relationships. In one example, a school business manager detailed that in their school this shift affected children’s education, including accessing a wider range of educational experiences.

“You don’t have to send letters chasing people for money or make that hard decision on Monday morning when the child comes in and you know they have debt – that is really hard. Parents would avoid you, not come into school or go to another door to collect their children when they knew money for lunches was outstanding. We had a parent we were calling and calling about a permission letter for a trip, but they wouldn’t acknowledge us. When we spoke to the mum and told them that we had been calling they said: ‘I didn’t want to have a conversation about the meal money.’ Their child missed out on going on the trip because the parent was avoiding contact with the school because they were worried about the money owed for lunches. This had a real impact on the experience of the child and the family.”

More generally, school staff spoke positively about the importance of food in building relationships with pupils and families. Rather than payment processes and debt collection posing a barrier to parental engagement, when schools build inclusive cultures around food and access to food, relationships are strengthened. Universal entitlement to school meals was also reported to improve children's relationship with school staff, catering and lunchtime staff and with their peers.

Commenting on the benefits of a communal eating culture, the head chef at a Southwark primary school told us:

“Lunchtime and catering staff get to know their children and the children get to know the lunchtime staff. The school has a lot of SEND children with specific issues around food including those who do not eat. The catering staff identify the types of food the children will eat and take time and patience to find ways of encouraging the children to try new foods. This is made easier by the fact that all children are sitting down together and eating the same food. It's not just about the food, it's the social and communal aspect.

“Food brings people together [...] we have worked to increase numbers taking the universal offer through parent taste-testing, inviting parents in for coffee mornings, and to stay for a school lunch. Food has been a gateway to other forms of support including accessing additional funding for families, workshops and training.

“Not having UFSM would make lunchtimes more difficult to organise and have a detrimental impact on relationships between lunchtime and catering staff and pupils.”

Given the importance of parental engagement to attainment and educational outcomes, our report suggests that universal FSM has multiple benefits. The testimonies above suggest that by removing the means test, universal entitlement creates opportunities for home/school relationships to be improved.

5 *Changed eating habits*

DEVELOPING GOOD EATING HABITS AND POSITIVE PRACTICES

Universal FSM entitlement was also seen to help families to develop healthy eating habits and make meal times at home easier. As one parent observed:

“My children were not the best eaters. Even with packed lunches it became repetitive, and they lost interest and most of the time it would come back not eaten. Having the routine of going to the lunch hall and choosing what they eat and sitting and eating with their peers has helped a lot. I would suffer financially to pay for two children to have hot meals and would have to go back to packed lunches if the free meals were scrapped. And to be honest I would struggle to afford to provide a healthy packed lunch every day.”

Another parent who responded to our survey wrote:

“I have a fussy eater, so they are getting exposed and trying much more different meals than they would at home.”

This sentiment that it was good for children to try new foods was also echoed by another survey respondent:

“The food my child gets at school is very different to the food from our culture that we eat at home, she often says that it tastes different but it’s really positive that they are getting to try new foods.”

Parents also highlighted the positive social aspects of communal eating:

“He has learnt the social etiquettes of eating from watching his peers. As well as being given a choice of what he eats, it’s taught him to be independent.”

“I think it’s nice for my child to eat the same as their peers and try new food. It helps with them to be less picky.”

School staff also reported that universal entitlement has helped children to develop different eating habits, both in terms of broadening their tastes and developing vital social skills through eating with others. The head chef at a primary school in Southwark illustrated this:

“We can really see what the children are eating. Staff work with the children to change their eating habits and we see improvements in terms of the variety of foods that the children will eat and how they are educating their palates.

“Universal entitlement improves the food choices of the children and their dietary evolution as they try things alongside their peers. They’re eating together, the same things, it’s communal and communication is involved. They all have the same experience.

“We have had situations where parents have asked the catering teams for recipes for dishes the children have tried and liked at school and usually would not eat at home.”

6 *A richer school life*

THE UNIVERSALISM MULTIPLIER

Universal Free School Meals for a rich educational experience

This report suggests that the benefits of universal entitlement go beyond the sum of the money spent per pupil in ways that are difficult to quantify.

As outlined above, a reduction in feelings of stigma and shame was perceived to enable parents and pupils to better engage in their education. What is more, the responses suggest that universal entitlement takes some of the strain off household budgets and allows parents to spend more quality time with their children. It also frees up money and time that can be spent on enrichment activities for their children and enables parents to have more positive relationships with their child's school.

A means-tested system based on arbitrary eligibility criteria means that schools have to spend time administering the system. The stigma experienced by parents and children also makes it more difficult for schools to work in partnership with families. Finally for families on lower incomes, the additional financial and psychological security means that they can afford to take part in other school-related activities, such as clubs and trips, that they may otherwise miss out on.

Illustrating this dynamic, a school business manager in a Southwark primary school told us:

“Messages that parents used to receive were about dinner money whereas now they are about the trips and programmes that are happening at the school.”

This sentiment was echoed by a head teacher in a Southwark primary school. They told us:

“I can tell you that I would not be willing to run this school, with the challenges our community have had historically, if we didn’t have universal FSM. Trying to do an afternoon curriculum on some of the cold lunches children bring in which may not meet the school food standards would be incredibly difficult.

“Ten pounds a child per week in a community like ours where our parents are allocating £10-£15 to raise their children a week, would mean you would see an impact on uniform, which would raise concerns about stigma and neglect, you would see reduced participation rates in things like clubs and trips, so children are getting less educational experiences.

“If you take sport for example, students will now participate in the sport even though there is a cost attached. They will go on trips too. I would say more children are coming to sport clubs with the right equipment more than a few years ago. This is particularly true for girls. We see more girls now coming in with full kit for PE and to play football. That will be to do with priorities, but I think that freeing up funds because of the universal provision helps.

“If the programme were taken away I would hate to try to do the same things we do now in our schools without it, it would be much harder.”

Another head teacher in Tower Hamlets commented that without universal Free School Meals:

“We would also see an increase demand for broader food support such as our food pantry and holiday hunger provision. We would find ourselves subsidising more support with food and it would become a much bigger piece of work for us as a school which would take our eye off teaching.”

Parents who we spoke to and surveyed felt similarly. When we asked parents what they would have to give up if they didn't receive universal FSM, or how not having universal entitlement would affect them, respondents told us:

“I would be taking the kids out less as going out we spend a lot of money.”

“We would have to give up devices, that the children use for education and entertainment outside of school. We would have to give up trips, again, used as external education and family bonding time.”

“It would mean that I have to budget our family money more carefully and rethink some spending that goes towards my son's hobbies.”

The testimonies of the people we spoke to suggest that universal food entitlement can provide a crucial step in ensuring education is accessible for all students. The impacts of universal FSM entitlement go beyond the sum of the money spent on the programme and offer a range of important benefits for primary aged children and their parents.



CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

With all primary school children in London now receiving Free School Meals, it will be important to build on this report and further understand the impact of a universal policy on different groups of families and pupils across London. It will be important to unpick what the enablers and barriers are to children taking up and enjoying food at school, and understand the myriad impacts that a policy like this can have on the experiences of children and families at school.

Continuing to build an evidence base on universal FSM entitlement helps to develop our understanding of what is needed at local and national level to ensure school food plays a positive role in children's learning and to develop a complete picture of how policies impact on the lives and relationships of the people they affect.

The perspectives summarised here help to paint a picture of the many ways that universal Free School Meals can support pupils, families and schools. Universal FSM entitlement can allow schools to build closer relationships with parents and remove an administrative burden from school business managers and admin teams. At a time of high workload and increasing pressure on schools, including around child wellbeing and attendance, this could have a real impact on schools' ability to engage with parents. It is clear that universal entitlement of FSM can significantly reduce stigma and social exclusion faced by children living in poverty. This is true for those pupils currently eligible for FSM under the Government's criteria as they are less likely to be singled out when entitlement is universal. It is also true for those children who are living in low-income households but not eligible for means-tested FSM, as many of these families struggle to

pay for packed or school lunches with both parents and children carrying the burden of money and food worries. In the current economic climate, the impact of means-testing on children who fall just short of the eligibility requirements can be serious.

This report about London schools' experiences suggests that where the universal primary FSM entitlement is in place, this is having a beneficial impact on children's experience of education, with children better able to engage in learning and families being able to afford for them to join clubs and school trips. The experience of communal eating can also help children to develop healthier eating habits, foster a sense of community and friendship, and reduce pupil anxiety about money and stigma. For parents, universal Free School Meals are providing vital financial breathing room and allowing them to invest in extra-curricular activities or family activities which are a crucial part of a rich and happy childhood. It's a childhood that we should aspire to for every child.





FURTHER READING

This report contributes to a growing body of literature highlighting the impact of universal FSM programmes, some of which is summarised here.

Research on the impact of poverty on children's educational attainment is rich (including evidence that universal entitlement has a greater impact on the attainment of the most disadvantaged pupils than expanded means-testing criteria)^{11 12}, while the stigma associated with means-tested Free School Meals is also well documented.¹³ What is more, the barriers inherent in a means-tested system mean that many pupils who are eligible miss out¹⁴, while hundreds of thousands of others are financially struggling but ineligible.¹⁵

There is evidence that universal entitlements to school food increase the take up of school meals, including by those who were previously eligible¹⁶ while reducing stigma and social exclusion.¹⁷ Furthermore, in addition to the evidence outlined above that universal FSM entitlement can improve attainment, universal FSM can also be seen to improve health outcomes in children¹⁸. Importantly, media reports suggest that universal entitlement to FSM is incredibly popular with parents¹⁹, and polling data appears to confirm this.^{20 21}



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