

SERVING OUR KIDS A HEALTHIER FUTURE

The school meal is an infallible index of the values of a society. Originally designed to counter the scourge of hunger, the school meal service is now expected to promote social justice, public health, educational attainment as well as being climate friendly.

Perhaps this is the reason why the school meal service is finally being propelled from the margins to the mainstream of political debate in many countries, where the demand for *universal* free school meals (UFSM) is now gathering momentum.

Scotland, Wales and the London boroughs have already launched UFSM schemes for state-funded primary school children, perhaps the most important policy change since the 1944 Education Act, when all state schools were required to provide a school meals service.

Currently there are no plans for England to adopt a national UFSM scheme. The Labour Government claims it has no need to follow suit because it plans to introduce a Free Breakfast Club programme instead. The government claims that breakfast clubs, designed to last 30 minutes before school starts, will improve behaviour, attendance and attainment as well as help families with the cost-of-living crisis.

But a school breakfast is not the nutritional equivalent of a hot school meal, so they should not be treated as mutually exclusive food offers. Labour's commitment to breakfast clubs and its opposition to UFSM in England could fuel tensions between breakfast vendors and lunch caterers. This would be a great shame because they should be working in concert to champion good food for all children.

The *School Food Matters* charity has warned that the school meals system in England urgently needs investment because under-funding is compromising quality and pushing schools into deficit. Research commissioned by the charity found that the current funding rate of £2.53 per school meal in England is 63p below what is needed, making the true cost £3.16.

If this shortfall is allowed to persist, England will see more of its local authorities follow the examples of Hampshire and Oldham, which are terminating their in-house school catering service, placing the onus on schools and leading to further fragmentation of the English school meals system.

Why does this matter? In my book, *Serving the Public*, I argue that it matters because the school meal system is the litmus test of a government's commitment to social justice, public health and ecological integrity, the quintessential values of sustainable development:

- At a time of growing inequalities in many countries, a UFSM programme promotes the cause of *social justice* by removing the stigma associated with means-tested schemes.

- A nutritious midday meal is also a sound investment in *public health*, helping to counter hunger and obesity, the twin spectres of the double burden of malnutrition.
- When it is composed of sustainably sourced ingredients, and cooked from scratch, a school meal service can help to mitigate the existential threat of *climate change*.
- Research and experience also suggest that healthy and nutritious food and drink in school helps concentration levels, creating more conducive conditions for *learning* and progression.

To secure these societal benefits, public bodies need to embrace a new and more enlightened approach to food procurement. Public purchasing needs to shift from a narrow conception of value for money – where low cost often masquerades as best value - to a more capacious conception of *values for money* to capture the multiple benefits of a sustainable school meals system.

What political conditions are necessary to enable this transition? Here it is worth drawing on the experience of Wales because it is currently the only UK nation to have implemented a UFSM service in *all* its primary schools.

The UFSM policy was launched in 2021 as part of a unique Cooperation Agreement between the Welsh Labour government and Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party, to secure a working majority in the Senedd, the Welsh Parliament. The Cooperation Agreement was presented as part of a new collaborative politics that aimed to be ‘radical in content and co-operative in approach’. The Agreement contained forty-six policy commitments covering social, economic, cultural and constitutional goals, but top of the list was the commitment to:

‘*Free school meals ... as a further step to reaching our shared ambition that no child should go hungry. We agree that universal free school meals will be a transformational intervention in terms of child hunger and child poverty, which will support educational attainment and child nutrition and local food production and distribution, benefiting local economies.*’

Although it is premature to assess the impact of this social innovation, what is clear is that it would not have emerged without a novel political alliance between the two main progressive political parties in Wales. In other words, cross-party collaboration was the single most important condition for the UFSM programme to become a reality. The challenge now is to ensure that the programme remains a priority for future Welsh governments.

This is also the challenge for governments everywhere because of the glaring disparities in school food coverage around the world. Globally, only 41 percent of children enrolled in primary school benefit from school meal programmes. The School Meals Coalition (SMC) was established to address this problem. Launched at the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021, the SMC aims to ensure that every child has access to a nutritious

meal at school by 2030, an aim that would be easier to meet if UFSM was universally recognised as a fundamental right of children.

Disparities in school food policies are essentially a political challenge. In the case of the UK for example, uneven coverage is the natural outcome of the devolved political system: different governments have different priorities. But some services are so essential, so foundational to physical and cognitive development, that more unity in diversity is necessary across the four nations – and what could be more essential than the nutritional wellbeing of children?

A universal free school meals scheme is hugely popular with the British public, so politicians would not be taking an electoral risk by embracing it. If the UK Labour government is serious about its manifesto pledge to create “the healthiest generation ever”, then there is no better place to start.

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