

Providing free school meals to all secondary pupils is feasible and acceptable, finds study

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Providing free school meals to all secondary pupils is feasible and acceptable, and brings many potential benefits, finds a new University of Bristol-led study of a pilot scheme in the London Borough of

Hammersmith and Fulham, published March 22 in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. The pilot program was also featured in an article published in *BMC Public Health* in February.

In January 2020, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (LBHF) trialed providing free school meals to all [pupils](#) (aged 11–16) in two [secondary schools](#) of approximately 400 and 100 pupils. They were the first U.K. local authority to pilot such a scheme. Of the 500 pupils in both schools, more than a quarter were shown to be experiencing food insecurity in a survey carried out during the research. Results from interviews with those who were involved in the scheme, showed an overall positive impact on pupils' behavior, concentration, food insecurity, healthier diet choices, and mental health of both students and their families.

In the U.K., one in five households with children experienced food insecurity in 2022. The current cost of living crisis has exacerbated this with increasing reports of pupils whose parents are not able to pay for school meals.

Dr. Judi Kidger, Senior Lecturer in Public Health from Bristol Medical School at the University of Bristol and one of the study's lead authors, explains, "Currently in England, free school meals are provided to all children in the first three years of school, and to pupils of all ages whose households are in receipt of Universal Credit, provided they do not earn a net income of more than £7,400. However, this current means tested system does not reach all families in need, either because they do not quite meet the required threshold or they do not claim the free meals they are entitled to, possibly due to stigma."

Using food insecurity survey data and [observational data](#) collected by pupils during their lunchbreaks, alongside interviews with pupils,

parents/caregivers and school/catering staff, researchers from Bristol Medical School evaluated the acceptability, feasibility and perceived impact of the scheme for pupils and their families.

Their evaluation showed expanding the scheme to all pupils was considered feasible and easier to deliver than the current means tested system. School staff, students and parents were unanimous in their support for universal free school meals, seeing it as a positive intervention with benefits for all participants including reducing food insecurity, and improving quality of food intake, [social skills](#), behavior and concentration at school and the [mental health](#) of both students and parents and caregivers.

In both schools, the proportion of students eligible for free school meals who accessed a free school meal also increased. In November 2019, just before the start of the pilot, 55% of free school meals students in School 1 and 74% in School 2 took a free lunch. In November 2021, this had increased to 78% and 79% respectively.

Furthermore, the team found the stigma experienced by young people who claimed free school meals under the targeted system was reduced. The new scheme also led to less stress and financial worry for parents and caregivers.

Staff felt that students who had changed from packed or bought-offsite lunches to free school meals were more likely to be consuming healthier and more nutritious food. Staff also reported the increased uptake of school lunch enhanced the social benefits of students eating together, bringing an opportunity to gain social skills and develop healthy eating habits. Parents were keen to see the scheme continue (with some worried about the impact if it was withdrawn), and many hoped that it would be extended to other schools.

Sally Brooks, Executive Principal at Fulham Cross Academy Trust, one of the participating schools, said, "Our canteen is now full of students enjoying a warm, healthy meal together which enables great social interaction. We are seeing greater focus in afternoon lessons and more students staying on for after school activities than ever before. The UFSM offer is making a genuine difference to our school community."

Dr. Kidger added, "Experiencing [food insecurity](#) in childhood has health and social consequences. In adolescence, nutritional intake influences the onset and timing of puberty, which in turn affects height, muscle and fat mass, and the risk of non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease in adulthood.

"Our research provides the first U.K.-based evidence showing that universal free [school meals](#) are possible to deliver in secondary schools, and that they are welcomed by school communities because of their perceived health, social and educational benefits by improving nutrition, levels of obesity, behavior at school and educational outcomes. However, more evidence is required from larger studies on the impact on long-term health, psychosocial and educational outcomes."

More information: Patricia E. Jessiman et al, A qualitative process evaluation of universal free school meal provision in two London secondary schools, *BMC Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-023-15082-3](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-15082-3)

Victoria R. Carlisle et al, A Mixed Methods, Quasi-Experimental Evaluation Exploring the Impact of a Secondary School Universal Free School Meals Intervention Pilot, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph20065216](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20065216)

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