

More curry please! Free school meals for all?

Changes to who can claim a free school meal are an opportunity to put children's nutrition first, says Katie Palmer, programme manager at Food Sense Wales.

It's a sunny afternoon in Cardiff in the school holidays. For the nearly one in three children in Wales living in relative poverty, the holidays can be a tough time. But this primary school has opened its doors to provide "Food and Fun" in order to support families over the long break. During Food and Fun the school catering staff prepare meals the children would receive during term time. The vast majority of children attending this summer scheme should be eligible to receive free school meals. Why then do I find myself sitting in a canteen with children, most of whom have never tried the school curry? Why does the child next to me tell me that he makes his own sandwiches, that "*Mum says school meals are too expensive*" and that "*Mum is saving for new clothes*"?

The Free School Meal system is fraught with challenges. It is supposed to provide a safety net to ensure that children in families on a low income receive a nutritious meal. The reality is that many children living in poverty aren't eligible. Children who are eligible aren't taking up their entitlement because of the perceived quality of school meals, the stigma attached to being a '*free school meal child*', or because parents just don't claim. For every child who is eligible and doesn't take their Free School Meal entitlement, schools miss out

on £1,150 of pupil development grant. This is money that can provide extra teaching support, school equipment, additional enrichment activities or enhancement of school facilities. Parents of children in reception and year 7 may also miss out on the pupil deprivation grant access fund, £125 additional funding to help with the costs of new uniform and school trips.

In England and Scotland all children from Reception to Year 2 receive free school meals and there are calls for the same to happen in Wales. There are also calls for school meals to be made entirely free across all age groups. Universal provision would eliminate many of the reasons children don't access free school meals, but at a time of increasingly stretched public sector budgets this universal provision is probably unrealistic.

However, if we are serious about preventing ill health and reducing the attainment gap in Wales, school food needs to come right up the political agenda. This means not only ensuring that all children who

supports the local economy, and is served in a conducive environment.

The harmful consequences of insufficient food or food of poor nutritional value for children are well documented and affect both the physical and mental health of the child and the family unit. Now is the time when the Welsh Government has the opportunity to be brave and progressive. It should come up with a solution proportionate to the challenge that 55,000 children living in poverty in Wales are missing out on free school meals – most of these living in working families and many of them in households where a family member has a disability. The challenge that we have 160,000 children living in households in Wales that can't afford the government's recommended healthy diet. The challenge that over 130,000 children living in relative poverty might start the day without breakfast and that over the school holidays families battle to find additional funds to supply meals that are provided during term time, when they may also be struggling to work

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need free school meals access them, but that the food is tasty and nutritious, procured in a way that

due to child care.

I have been shocked and quite frankly distressed by the increasing

visibility of child poverty. I don't work on the front line, but I have been directly approached in a desperate bid for help. You feel pretty useless when the best you can do is to take a bag of shoes into a holiday scheme because you've witnessed children sitting out of activities because their shoes are so small that they make their feet hurt.

more hours would make them worse off overall once the value of losing a free dinner is considered.

The need for a change in school meal policy is set against a backdrop of increasing uncertainty from the hardship caused by Universal Credit, continued welfare and public sector cuts and Brexit. Come March, food prices are forecast to rise, especially

role to play. Our objective shouldn't be just about feeding, it should be about nourishing, through teaching about food, supporting our next generation to become savvy shoppers, inspiring them to understand the food system and the power of food for health and its power to create social change. We need our children to become our future food producers; we only produce 3 per cent of Wales' requirements for vegetables and around 75,000 new people are required in roles throughout the food supply chain.

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Calls have been made for Welsh Government to radically reform school food policy by taking the opportunity of revising eligibility criteria for free school meals so that every child on Universal Credit would automatically be passported onto Free School Meals. This would increase the percentage of children entitled to Free School Meals from 20 per cent to around 40-50 per cent. It would also eliminate the "cliff edge" that undermines Universal Credit's ability to 'make work pay,' where working

for fresh produce. 95 per cent of teenagers in the UK don't eat enough vegetables as it is. This year we saw life expectancy in Wales fall for the first time on record. Of course there are all sorts of reasons for this, but our diets could be one of them. The gap in the prevalence of obesity among our four- and five-year-olds in the most and least deprived quintiles has increased from 4.7 per cent last year to 6.2 per cent this year.

If we want our children to have a healthy diet, school has a central

What then could be a better policy under the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act than to ensure that our children are given the best possible opportunity to meet their potential?

Universal Credit is not the design of Welsh Government, Welsh Government does not (yet) have the control of welfare measures. It does however have obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and it does have choices. Prevention is a key theme in Welsh Government's draft budget. Investment in a policy that ensures all children in need throughout their school years have breakfast, a nutritious lunch and access to "food and fun" in the holidays to prevent ill health and reduce the attainment gap is surely money well spent. The Welsh Government has the opportunity to make a bold and progressive policy decision in order to protect, nurture and nourish a prosperous future generation.

Back to the school canteen and the child proudly tells me "*I've had seconds of the curry and I loved it!*"