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International School Meals Day: parents overwhelmingly back expansion of healthy school meals in new polling

- On International School Meals Day (14 March 2024) a major new research study with over 2000 parents* launched by the Children's Food Campaign reveals at least 3 in 4 parents now support expansion of healthy school meals for all children.
- Other measures widely backed by parents include expanding healthy options on school menus, fruit and yoghurts instead of sugary puddings, and adapting school menus to serve up more planet-friendly food.
- Polling also reveals parents' support for automating free school meal registration, as over 130 organisations call on Schools Minister Damien Hinds to ensure every child entitled to meals is able to receive them. It is estimated that up to 250,000 entitled children are still not registered for meals.

New public polling released by the Children's Food Campaign on International School Meals Day (14 March) shows the overwhelming support of UK parents for strengthening the school food system and ensuring all children can access healthy and sustainable food during the school day.

- **9 in 10 parents (89%)** want to see immediate expansion of free school meals to every child living in poverty.
- **More than 7 in 10 parents (75%)** would like all children of all ages to have access to a free school meal, regardless of their background.
- **Nearly 8 in 10 (77%)** would like to see a progressive, phased expansion of school meals to all children.
- **8 in 10 (81%)** parents support automatic registration for free school meals for all entitled pupils, instead of the current application system.

Responding to the findings, Children's Food Campaign Manager Barbara Crowther says:

"Healthy school food is absolutely the number one priority when it comes to how parents want the Government to support them in getting children to eat healthily. Politicians should be in no doubt – parents want the Government to make it easier for children to access school meals, and for ensuring the quality and nutrition of what is on offer."

Amie Watson, who has two children aged 9 and 11, and is a parent ambassador for the Children's Food Campaign, says:

"As a parent who has children on free school meals, it was relief to have one less thing to worry about. It reduces financial stress. But in my experience children can also feel nervous about having free school meals, and unsure about admitting it to people. Having free school meals for all would help reduce stigma attached to free school meals and create an equal environment.

I find it quite frustrating that the dietary requirements are not always catered for. If it's the same options all the time, children are not getting to try different foods. It is important schools are offering healthy, nutritious and sustainable meal options for children."

Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on School Food, Sharon Hodgson MP says:

"The will of the public is clear - parents, pupils and schools overwhelmingly support policies to expand student eligibility to Free School Meals. After the last two years of cost-of-living-crisis, we understand how school food acts as a lifeline for millions of children across the UK, securing them a hot, nutritious meal to keep them healthy and engaged at school. An estimated 900,000 children living in poverty aren't eligible for free school meals at all, and an estimated 200-250,000 children who are eligible aren't registered. Our school food system is not working, schools and caterers don't have the funding to deliver food that meets the school food standards, and too many children are missing out. The polling is clear - this is a priority for parents, and we need government action."

The survey revealed that the cost of living remains the highest concern for parents with children, whilst food prices are the biggest concern in relation to the cost of living. Whilst the Household Support Fund (which funds school holiday food vouchers in many areas) was extended for six months, the Spring Budget last week offered no further expansion of access to free school meals. Meanwhile an estimated 900,000 children in England are living in poverty but still not entitled to meals under the current earnings threshold of £7400 per annum (after tax, before benefits).

8 in 10 parents (81%) also support the idea of automatic registration for free school meals. Under the current free school meal system, the requirement to register for free school meals can be a key barrier to uptake. An estimated one in ten children (11%) who are entitled to free school meals are not registered for them, potentially around 200,000-250,000 children in total, which also means their schools are missing out on important pupil premium funding. Transitioning to an automated registration process (with an opt-out option) would mean that every child currently entitled to a free school meal can access one. Following successful pilots by local authorities, over 130 organisations** have now written a joint letter to Schools Minister Damien Hinds calling on him to ensure that all children entitled to free school meals are able to receive them.

The quality of school meals remains a paramount concern for parents. **8 in 10 parents want to see more rigorous enforcement of nutritional standards for school food**, with

Commented [BC1]: Barbara to see if Sharon wishes to comment

the same number agreeing that school inspections should encompass oversight of school food policy and the quality of food served.

In addition, parents widely support the promotion of healthy and sustainable school meal policies.

- Just over half of parents believe their children's school meals are nutritious, with parents of secondary school-aged children expressing less confidence compared to parents of primary school-aged children.
- 89% of parents want to see school meals offer a **range of healthy options**.
- 84% support **replacing sugary desserts** with more fruit and healthy yogurts.
- 77% of parents would like schools to be encouraged to serve foods that are **good for nature and the environment**, whilst just over half of parents (55%) support more meat-free days or replacing meat and dairy with beans, pulses or other healthy plant-based options.
- 74% of parents support all schools having **healthy packed lunch policies**.
- 66% of parents support **water and milk-only policies**.

The findings are released to coincide with International School Meals Day, 14 March 2024, which aims to raise awareness around the world about the role of school food in overall children's health and wellbeing.

There is a growing global School Meals Coalition, with many governments now progressively expanding school food investment as an investment in child health and future national prosperity. Countries currently providing school meals for all pupils include Brazil, India, Finland, Estonia, Sweden as well as 8 US states.

In Scotland and Wales, school meals are being expanded to all primary school children, with additional initiatives to connect expansion of school meals with more opportunities for local farmers and producers and using public procurement as an engine for wider sustainability goals. The Mayor of London recently announced that funding for universal primary school meals will continue for a second academic year 2024/25 with an increased per meal rate of £3, compared to £2.65 in the current academic year, and the national government funding rate in England of £2.53 per pupil per day.

There were no new announcements on school meal eligibility thresholds or funding levels during the Spring Budget on 6 March 2024, with children in the rest of England and Northern Ireland facing a disadvantage compared to pupils in Scotland, Wales and London.

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Notes to Editors:

* Fieldwork was conducted by the data, market research and advisory company Savanta. Savanta surveyed 2,039 parents of children aged 0-18 online between 2 and 11 January 2024. Data were weighted by gender and socio-economic groups to be representative of the UK population. Savanta is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

Further details on the polling can be found at [this link](#). Regional figures are available for the following regions: North East, Yorkshire and Humber, East Midlands, East of England, London, South East, South West, West Midlands, North West, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland.

The full Savanta survey asked parents about a variety of healthy food topics, with wider analysis to be released in mid-April 2024. The figures in this press release represent the section of the survey relating specifically to school food.

** The Children's Food Campaign is one of over 130 signatories to a letter to Schools Minister Damien Hinds, co-ordinated by the School Food Review coalition, Fix our Food, the Food Foundation and Bremner & Co, calling for a national auto-enrolment process for free school meals. Local authorities including Sheffield, Wakefield, Lewisham and Lambeth have trialed auto-registration processes, using data from DWP and DfE to identify and contact potentially eligible families to enable them to opt-out. Research from FixOurFood has pooled data from 5 local authorities in England which implemented FSM auto-enrolment in October 2023. Results suggested that over 2,500 additional children had been registered to receive free school meals as a result of auto-enrolment, bringing in over £4.5million in additional pupil premium funding for schools. Wakefield City Council alone registered an additional 1183 children through the opt-out model. For more details on this, please contact juliet.grant@foodfoundation.org.uk, 07929 075489