

Children's Food Campaign Media Release:

For immediate release

'All children in poverty should be eligible for Free School Meals' say parents, as House of Commons squares up for debate

- 9 out of 10 members in Parents' Jury survey support free school meals for any child living in poverty.
- MPs to debate proposed new £7400 net earnings threshold for eligibility under Universal Credit on Tuesday 13 March
- Parents overwhelmingly support secondary school stay-on-site policies at lunchtime
- School Food Standards should apply to all schools, say parents
- Parents express concern about junk food marketing to kids and takeaway outlets close to schools

All children living in households in poverty should be eligible for Free School Meals said 125 out of 141 parents responding to a recent survey by the Children's Food Campaign.

Despite overwhelming parental backing, the Government is about to introduce a new net-earnings threshold of £7400 for eligibility for Free School Meals as part of Universal Credit. The move will mean that the opportunity to provide free school meals to an additional 1 million children living in poverty will now be missed.

Commenting on the Parents' Jury findings, Barbara Crowther, co-ordinator of Children's Food Campaign, said:

"Our survey with parents of school-age children showed overwhelming support to make free school meals available to any child from a family living in poverty, and this is a huge missed opportunity to do just that. It is a cruel blow to around one million children who might have become eligible for Free School Meals but will now miss out. The fairest and simplest solution would have been to ensure all children in families receiving Universal Credit are also universally eligible for Free School Meals. Instead the new earnings threshold will undermine the principle of 'making work pay' – as parents falling slightly above the net earnings threshold will then lose their entitlement to Free School meals, which are estimated to be worth £400 per year per child. This is a backwards step for the 1 million children who might have benefitted, and for their parents too."

The controversial proposal has been challenged in Parliament, following a motion to annul the new regulation in the Commons, with a debate on the subject to take place on Tuesday 13 March. Motions are also being tabled in the House of Lords, with likely debates to follow.

As well as supporting free school meal programmes, and welcoming the progress made in many schools in putting healthier food on the lunch menu, many parents still believe that there is a lot more to do to make schools healthy eating zones – from the meals on offer, to the healthy eating messages received throughout the school day, introduction of clearer policies on packed lunches, opportunities for children to learn by growing and cooking food, and the wider junk food and takeaway environment surrounding the school.

There was overwhelming support from parents responding to the survey to make current School Food Standards apply to all schools, including academies and free schools, with 123 out of 141 parents agreeing. Many parents told the Children’s Food Campaign that they feel that the School Food Standards still do not go far enough, especially because they allow continued inclusion of sugary puddings as part of school meals, which undermines healthy eating messages being promoted.

As well as sugary puddings, parents of some children also pointed to the continued practice of providing sweets as rewards for good work or behaviour, a culture of distribution of sweets to classmates on children’s birthday, and the sweets, cakes and biscuits handed out and sold at school events and on sports days as ways in which their children are still getting very mixed messages about sugary foods in the school environment.

The prevalence of fast-food outlets in the near vicinity of schools was also raised by several parents in terms of undermining the healthy eating messages and practices many parents and schools are trying to promote. 115 out of 141 parents supported the idea of stay-on-site policies for secondary schools, and more focus on making food in school healthy and attractive to pupils. Although the survey did not ask parents specifically about fast-food outlets, several raised the idea of banning the opening of more hot-food takeaways in the vicinity of schools, a policy that is currently being proposed in the new Mayor of London’s Plan.

Finally, a number of parents expressed concern that their children are still subjected to too much advertising of junk food, on TV, in outdoor advertising, on product packaging and in-store. The next survey with the Parents’ Jury, to be launched in April 2018, will explore this further.

“In the meantime, the Parents’ Jury is still recruiting. We welcome any interested parent with a child under 18 to apply at www.parentsjury.net”

Media Contact:

For interviews, and for further information, please contact Barbara Crowther, co-ordinator, Children’s Food Campaign, on 07753 837945 or 020 7065 0902, barbara@sustainweb.org or via twitter @childrensfood

Quotes from Parents’ Jury members:

Free School Meals

"I feel for parents who can't afford school lunches. Costs add up when you have 2 or 3 kids in school and I am disappointed this Government doesn't take school food more serious[ly]." Parent of 2 primary age children, paying for school lunches

"As she's KS1 it's free. So one less thing for me to worry about before going to work. Also we are able to pre order, so we can plan what she will have and how that will fit into our evening meal plan." Parent of 1 child on free school meals.

Applying Policies and Standards across Whole School and All Schools

[Would like to see] *"Consistent messages from government level for all schools not just leaving one school to do well and the other not."* Parent of 2 children, one primary local authority school and one secondary academy school.

[Would like to see] *"A whole school policy that ensures that the food provided meets the school food standards and encourages parents to send in healthier packed lunches. Schools teach about healthy eating but practice does not reflect the teaching. In my child's primary school sweets and chocolate are often used as rewards, which I think should be banned. Most children give out sweets on their birthdays. School regularly sell sweets and cakes as a way of fundraising for the school. There is a privately run breakfast club on the school site which serves sugary cereals such as cocoa pops."* Parent of 2 children, one primary age mixing school meal with packed lunch, one secondary age purchasing food in/near school

"Their school became an academy within the gap that means they are not required to follow the school standards, and as of last year they had not signed up to follow them voluntarily. I find that even if the quality of the school meals was OK, there is no way for a parent to know what or how much the kids have eaten through the day unless they have a packed lunch." Parent of 2 children in academy school, taking packed lunch due to concerns over school food quality.

"The primary school should improve in areas other than school meals - too many sweets as rewards, sweets for birthdays, unhealthy things available from tuck shop and at breakfast club/after school club. I don't know as much about the ethos at the secondary school, but I don't think the vending machines have healthy food in them." Parent of 3, with youngest on universal infant free meals, older children now taking packed lunches.

Making School Meals Healthier

"I have also asked the school to ensure that my children aren't given puddings but only the fresh fruit and yoghurt on offer to all the children. The current School Food Standards in England allow for very sugary puddings to be offered every day which isn't healthy/appropriate." Parent of 2 primary age children, paying for school lunches

"To help reduce sugar consumption by school age children I think the Government should amend the School Food Standards to only allow fresh fruit to be offered as a school lunch time dessert. The standards currently allow desserts, cakes and biscuits

to be offered as part of school lunch menus.” Parent of 2 primary children in fee paying free school, eating school lunches.

“The school meals do not have enough portions of vegetables and no whole grains and therefore I feel are very poor value for money. I also would rather they did not buy a lunch as then they can choose and would be tempted by puddings, cakes and cookies as well as sugary drinks.” Parent of 2 children now taking packed lunches.

Learning About Healthy Eating

“Children need to be educated on food and nutrition with a hands-on approach. Only then can a real change be made for future generations.” Parent of 2 primary school children, with one on universal infant free meals.

“Teach children to grow and cook food - then they will understand the basics of food health.” Parent of 2 primary children on free school meals.

Junk Food Advertising

“It does seem logical to me that schools aren’t surrounded by fast food/take away outlets, or corner stores with limited offer of healthy food. There should be stricter rules on advertising of unhealthy food in general, and starting this around schools would be great.” Parent of 2 primary children, one on infant free school meals, the other on paid-for school meal & occasional packed lunch.

“I would also like to see a branding blackout zone in schools, where the psychological methods used by big brands to pose as ‘friends’ to young children are recognised as unacceptable and are tackled by schools. Having said that, my experience with the ice cream Fridays at our school reminded me that currently these sorts of ideas would seem alien to a lot of parents, and that change will probably be slow and hard to achieve!” Parent of 2 primary academy school children taking packed lunches.

[I think we should] *“Restrict promotions in shops - especially large supermarkets, better labelling of food and education about what the labels really mean...where sugar is hidden etc. NO fast food advertising on TV, posters etc”.* Parent of 2 primary school children on free school meals.

Notes:

1) Children’s Food Campaign

The Campaign aims to improve children and young people's health by campaigning for policy changes in our schools, in our communities and throughout our society that would promote healthy and sustainable food environments. The Children's Food Campaign is supported by over 100 UK-wide and national organisations, including public health professional bodies, trade unions, school food experts, children’s charities and environmental groups. We are a campaign of the charity Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming.

www.childrensfood.org.uk

2) Parents’ Jury

The Parents' Jury is an initiative from Children's Food Campaign aimed at giving parents a stronger voice on the food available and promoted in their children's schools, in shops, on the high street, and beyond. Jury members are sent regular online surveys, and given ad hoc opportunities to comment on topical news, adverts and policy announcements. Jury members will also be encouraged to share examples of the best and worst products and marketing practices they come across; and to rate business and government attempts to make healthy choices easier.

The Parents' Jury began on 3 August 2017, and now has over 380 members. They come from all parts of Great Britain; and so far most are between 25-54 years old; 85% are women; and three-quarters have degrees. The Jury is open to any parent in the UK with a child under 18 years of age. Children's Food Campaign is looking for a broad mix of parents from different backgrounds and areas, and with a range of views and experiences. Any parent wishing to apply can currently do so at www.parentsjury.net

The launch of the Parents' Jury has been made possible due to funding from the Food Commission, who ran a similar initiative from 2002-2005. Professor Aubrey Sheiham was an advisor and friend to both Children's Food Campaign and the Food Commission, and this new Parents' Jury on food and food marketing continues his legacy.

http://www.foodcomm.org.uk/campaigns/parents_jury/

3) Parents' Jury survey responses in detail

The survey undertaken by Parents' Jury members has been on the issue of school food

Total no: of fully completed survey responses received from Parents' Jury members = 141

Total no: of children of Parents' Jury members covered by the survey = 244

Total no: of children of Parents' Jury members receiving Free School Meals at time of survey = 43

Q1 What stage of schooling is your child at?

	Primary	Secondary	Not yet in school	Other	N/A	Total:
Oldest	74	52	10	4	1	141
2nd child	57	25	26	14	19	141

Other: Home-schooling (for the oldest), or not yet in school for other child

Q2 Starting with the oldest, what type of school are they in?

	LA	Academy	Free school	Fee paying	Other	Blank	Total:
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School 1	77	35	3	10	5	11	141
School 2	41	16	5	9	11	59	141

Q3 In an average week, what does your child mostly eat at lunchtime?

	FSMs	In school	Pack lunch	Outside school	Not sure	None of these	At home	Blank	Total:
Child 1	27	50	48	2	0	0	3	11	141
Child 2	16	32	32	0	0	3	5	53	141

Q5 Has your child's school provided info on whether it meets the School Food Standards?

	No info	Unsure	Yes	Skipped	Total:
School 1	40	47	40	14	141
School 2	31	30	19	60	141

Q6 Does the school have a packed lunch policy?

	Don't know	Informal policy	N/A	None	Rules	Skipped	Total:
School 1	37	31	10	21	20	12	141
School 2	14	21	14	23	10	59	141

Q10 [R] Which packed lunch policy do you think is most appropriate for primary schools?

Compulsory	No pack lunch	No policy	None	Undecided	Voluntary	Skipped	Total:
63	7	4	3	2	59	1	141

Q8 [O, P] How do you rate the school's approach to healthy eating?

	Acceptable	Good	Poor	Very impressive	Very poor	Skipped	Total:
School 1	47	25	39	4	13	13	141
School 2	30	17	21	3	8	60	141

Q11 [S] Do you think secondary schools should adopt a 'stay-on-site' policy at lunchtime?

No	None	Undecided	Yes – all	Yes – KS3+	Skipped	Total:
14	2	10	75	40	0	141

Q12 [T] Do you believe that School Food Standards should be compulsory for all schools?

Don't know enough	No	Undecided	Yes	Skipped	Total:
6	8	4	123	0	141

Q14 [V] Should all school-age children in households living in poverty be entitled to receive Free School Meals?

1*	2	3	4	5	Total:
8	4	3	125	1	141

* explanation:

1. Don't know enough about this issue
2. No but ensure an extra 50,000 kids 'most in need' are entitled to FSMs
3. No, keep the number of eligible children the same as now
4. Yes, extend provision so all children living in poverty are entitled to FSMs
5. Undecided