**Healthy Food for All**

Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection

Towards a National Food in Schools Strategy



**Recommendations:**

1. **Establish a Food in Schools Forum to develop a national strategy on school food provision.**
2. **Expand School Meals Programme to reach children from disadvantaged backgrounds attending non-DEIS schools.**
3. **Invest in school infrastructure to ensure appropriate facilities for school food provision.**
4. **Provide training and support for school staff to ensure best practice in school food provision.**

# Introduction

[Healthy Food for All](http://www.healthyfoodforall.com) (HFfA) is an all-island charity addressing food poverty by promoting access, availability and affordability of healthy food for low-income groups. Healthy Food for All

* Builds capacity and good practice for **Community** Food Initiatives which increase access to and availability of healthy food for low-income groups
* Advocates for and supports the development of an improved **School** food framework
* Promotes a greater understanding of food poverty across all aspects of public **Policy**

HFfA believes that no child should go to school hungry. We have identified the need for a joined-up Government approach to develop a national Food in Schools Strategy to support the educational, health and social wellbeing outcomes for children.

**Food poverty among children living in Ireland**

Currently 600,000 in Ireland are living in food poverty which is defined as “*the inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to issues of affordability and access to food*”. **One in five children (22%) go to school or to bed hungry as there is not enough food in the home.** One in six children never eat breakfast on a weekday. Children from the lower social classes are more likely to report going hungry and are less likely to consume vegetables twice or more daily ([HBSC, 2015](http://health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/HBSC2014web2.pdf)). In a survey of 600 principals one in five primary school principals (20%) report an increase in children coming to school hungry ([IPPN Conference, 2013](http://www.ippn.ie/index.php?option=com_mtree&task=att_download&link_id=4321&cf_id=24)).

**Impact of poor nutrition on children**

Children going to school hungry cannot fully participate in class. Lack of a nutritionally adequate diet has a negative impact on a child’s cognitive development and capacity to learn which is likely to lead to poor school performance and early school leaving. Education is a critical factor in addressing social exclusion. Every child should be supported to participate in, and benefit from, education to help reduce existing patterns of health and social inequalities.

Lack of an adequate, nutritious diet is also related to obesity. The Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative study found that more than one in five Irish children is overweight or obese ([COSI, 2014](http://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/COSI%20report%20(2014).pdf)). There is a social gradient to obesity with children from lower social classes more likely to be overweight or obese ([Growing Up in Ireland](http://www.growingup.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/Second_Child_Cohort_Reports/Growing_Up_in_Ireland_-_Overweight_and_Obesity_Among_9-Year-Olds_Executive_Summary.pdf), 2011). Obesity has an effect on respiratory, cardiovascular, musculoskeletal and metabolic effects including increased chances of heart disease and Type 2 diabetes. Aside from the physical impact, obesity leads to poor self-image and a poorer quality of life.

**Benefits of School Food Provision**

Schools are a key setting to address food poverty and to create healthier, social environments where children can access, enjoy and experiment with food, without financial and other constraints. National school food programmes are in place in many countries. Free school meals are provided for all Swedish children and those in primary education in Wales are entitled to a free school breakfast. Finland spends 8% of its entire education budget on school food due to its positive impact on health and wellbeing. Improved food in school is linked to better health and educational outcomes, as well as with benefits to the social and personal development of children. Food in schools has been shown to have a positive effect on:

* Short-term hunger in children (Ní Mhurchú et al., 2013)
* Punctuality at school ([Foley, 2011](http://healthyfoodforall.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/2011-03-31_HFfAScopingStudyonBreakfastClubScheme.pdf))
* Educational attainment ([Children’s Food Trust, 2008](http://www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/assets/research-reports/sft_breakfast_club_findings_dec08.pdf))
* Eating habits (Murphy et al., 2007).

The National Education Welfare Board identified breakfast clubs as the fourth most effective intervention of the School Completion Programme ([NEWB, 2009](http://www.newb.ie/downloads/pdf/The_Core_Elements_of_the_School_Completion_Programme.pdf)). Healthy Food for All established a [Pilot Programme of Breakfast Clubs](http://healthyfoodforall.com/about/hffa-programmes/breakfast-clubs-pilot-programme/) in north Dublin in 2013. The [evaluation](http://healthyfoodforall.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/policy-briefing-breakfast-clubs.pdf) of this programme found that children’s attendance, punctuality, energy levels and participation in class had noticeably improved with the introduction of breakfast clubs in their schools.

**Challenges of implementing School Food Initiatives**

There are over one hundred DEIS schools not availing of funding via the School Meals Programme even though they are entitled to it. The programme needs to be flexible enough to respond to meet the needs of the child. Through our work with schools we get feedback on the challenges schools face is providing food in school. These include a lack of clarity on the various supports available to them. Many schools highlight that funding under the School Meals Programme is for the food item only and does not provide for any additional costs in setting up a school food initiative such as crockery or staffing. Due to recent cutbacks there is no funding within core school funds to meet these additional costs. The majority of schools highlight the lack of adequate space and dining facilities and the need for minor refurbishments to ensure food can be provided in a safe way. There was a concern around the administrative burden and how staff would be able to manage the different administrative requirements. Many principals and school staff said they needed support on understanding what good practice with regard to serving healthy options is. Schools cited the importance of parental involvement in school food provision and looked for guidance on how to positively engage parents and to avoid stigmatising children receiving food. They also cited that volunteer management was an additional administrative task.

***“Funding is number one (resource needed). If you have funding you can build around the other things. If you don’t have funding, it’s so difficult.”* (Club Coordinator)**

While over one hundred DEIS schools are not availing of this funding there are a number of non-DEIS schools that have unsuccessfully sought funding through the School Meals Programme. These schools have set up a food initiative in response to children coming to school hungry.

**Policy Context**

[Healthy Ireland](http://health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/HealthyIrelandBrochureWA2.pdf) identifies schools as a key setting to deliver health outcomes for children. The national policy framework for children and young people, [Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures](http://dcya.gov.ie/documents/cypp_framework/BetterOutcomesBetterFutureReport.pdf) acknowledges the 'challenge of food poverty' and its impact on children's health and educational outcomes. The framework highlights the need for a joined-up Government approach to address this multi-dimensional issue and recognises the important roles that schools play in supporting healthier choices. It explicitly commits to *“continue to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the School Meals Programme and consider inclusion of DEIS schools not currently benefiting under the programme, subject to resources becoming available”.*

The current DEIS review presents an opportunity to address hunger in schools and to identify, co-ordinate and mobilise resources to ensure a child-centred approach. Efficiencies can be gained, through partnership and collaboration, to synergise the activities of all partners to achieve better outcomes from the scheme. Currently there are five government departments with a role to play in providing school children with a nutritious meal:

* *Department of Social Protection* funds the School Meals Programme which reaches over 200,000 children annually. A further €3 million was allocated to this programme in Budget 2016 bringing the total spend to €42 million.
* *Department of Education & Skills* is responsible for school infrastructure as well as ensuring food skills features on the education curriculum.
* *Department of Agriculture, Food & Marine* manages the EU School Milk Scheme and the EU Fruit & Vegetable Scheme via the Food Dudes programme.
* *Department of Children & Youth Affairs* manage the School Completion Programme which has taken a lead role in the delivery of school food initiatives and breakfast clubs in particular.
* *Department of Health* is currently updating the food and nutrition guidelines for school children. It is important that food provided by the State meets the nutritional needs of children.

**Policy recommendations**

Healthy Food for All believes that investing in a National Food in Schools Strategy will have long-term benefits for the health and social well-being of children. HFfA recommends:

1. The establishment of a **National Food in Schools Forum** to develop and implement a national Food in Schools Strategy that systematically responds to the need of children. This forum needs to be led by a single government department and to be part of the specific remit of a senior civil servant to ensure policy coherence across the five government departments involved in school food provision.
2. The DEIS Review expands the reach of the School Meals Programme to include support for non-DEIS schools that have students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
3. Investment in school infrastructure to ensure appropriate facilities are available for school food provision. This includes a requirement that all new school builds will include catering and dining facilities and that funding schemes are promoted to schools as resources to make necessary refurbishments to provide food on site.
4. Delivery of a training and support package for school staff to ensure good practice in the set-up and operation of breakfast clubs and to draw in key partners such as the School Completion Programme and the HSE’s Health Promoting Schools.There is a need to engage key partners at national level to ensure long-term commitment and to promote uptake across all networks. At a local level, training should be provided to key school staff to ensure the set-up of effective food initiatives.