

School meal budget cuts, U-turn on cooking skills in schools could affect childhood obesity

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New evidence commissioned by a leading partnership of food charities shows that a whole school approach to food that links practical food education with quality school dinners leads to a better family diet and can improve academic performance and behavior.

The [Food](#) for Life Partnership (FFLP) project was set up to encourage pupils and their parents to eat [healthy food](#) and learn how to cook it and grow it themselves. It also reconnects families with farms and the dilemmas of modern food production. An independent evaluation of its work, by a team from the University of the West of England (UWE) and Cardiff University, provides hard evidence that schools were rated more highly by inspectors after taking part in the FFLP program. It also showed that pupils' interest in healthy and sustainable foods was having a "nudge effect" on their eating habits and their parents' shopping habits.

More than 3,600 schools are now members of the programme which encourages them to work towards Bronze, Silver and Gold levels of the Food for Life Partnership award scheme. Over 2,800 schools now serve Food for Life menus which are seasonal and freshly prepared with no hydrogenated fats or battery eggs.

The UWE evaluation of the FFLP project found:

- More than twice as many FFLP primary schools received an Ofsted

rating of outstanding following their participation (37.2% compared to 17.3% outstanding pre-enrolment). Headteachers reported a positive impact on pupil behaviour, attention and attainment.

- The programme is associated with changes in eating habits; with an increase in the proportion of primary school-age children reporting eating five portions of fruit or vegetables a day by 5 percentage points to 21 per cent (those reporting eating four or more portions rose by 12 percentage points to 49 per cent). And 45 per cent of parents said the family is eating more vegetables, with 43 per cent switching to healthier and more sustainable choices in the shopping basket.
- Disadvantaged pupils are benefiting: over a two-year period, free school meal take-up went up 13 percentage points in FFLP schools, 20.9 per cent in secondary schools, and by 21 per cent across the board in schools achieving our Silver or Gold award. Nationally, over 20% of primary school pupils and 30% of secondary school pupils eligible for healthy free school meals choose not to eat them for reasons including fear of stigma and the lure of fast food outlets.
- Inspectors have recognised the positive role of FFLP in supporting personal development and wellbeing: 67.1 per cent of schools felt the programme had a clear impact on their Ofsted report in terms of pupils' personal development and well-being.

Libby Grundy, director of the FFLP, said, “The UK has the highest rate of childhood obesity in Europe, with almost a quarter of adults and about one in ten children classed as obese and a further 20-25 per cent of children overweight. The UWE evidence shows that our programme has made a positive difference to improving diet and this in turn is having a knock-on effect on behaviour and attainment. Yet, just as the programme looks as if it has reached the tipping point in terms of making a cultural shift, cuts to local authority school meal budgets – and an uncertain funding future for the FFLP programme itself – could undo all the good work.”

Mat Jones, senior lecturer in health and social policy at UWE said: “FFLP is a remarkable project in its ambition to connect food issues across the whole school and out into the community. It brings together students, teachers, cooks and [parents](#) in a shared mission. This holistic approach appears to make a lot of sense for children who are encouraged to take their learning from classroom to dining hall and into their homes. Evidence of positive outcomes – for health, environmental awareness, wider learning and parental involvement -- highlight the potential of joined-up action in schools.”

Professor Kevin Morgan, of Cardiff University's [School](#) of City and Regional Planning who was part of the research team, said: "This research shows that ending the FFLP scheme because of the current short-term emphasis on cost cutting would have a negative long-term impact on public health and the public purse."

Monty Don, presenter of Gardeners’ World and president of the Soil Association said: “The children in FFLP schools not only eat good food, they also learn where it comes from, how it is produced and how to grow and cook it. Mealtimes are transformed into more positive social experiences in which [pupils](#) can sit down to eat together and learn better manners and conversation skills.”

More information: A full copy of the report can be obtained at eprints.uwe.ac.uk/14456/

Provided by University of the West of England

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