

Spain schools to charge pupils for eating packed lunch

August 9 2012

Several Spanish regions plan to charge pupils who bring their own lunch to school a fee to eat in the cafeteria, in the struggle to bring public deficits under control.

The northeastern region of Catalonia has said it will charge students who bring a packed lunch up to three euros (\$3.70) a time to use a [school](#) canteen and the adjoining region of Valencia plans a similar move.

"What this will do is give the green light for the entry of Tupperware containers in schools," Ignacio Fornells, the spokesman for the Madrid regional education ministry, which also plans to apply the fee, said Thursday.

"Up until now this was not allowed, except in exceptional cases" such as when a student suffered from food allergies, he added.

With one in four Spanish workers out of work following the collapse of a property bubble in 2008, many families have started sending their children to school with a packed lunch instead of paying for a meal at the canteen.

Only about 60 percent of the 234,000 students at the 791 public schools in the Madrid region ate meals prepared at school canteens during the 2011-12 school year, Fornells said.

The figure could drop further because the Madrid regional government

has cut its subsidies to [poor families](#) to help pay for canteen meals to 16 million euros this school year from 29 million euros to help bring down its deficit.

Parents' associations and left-wing parties oppose the new fee, saying it will mainly affect poorer students.

"The government attacks the most disadvantaged sectors and does not guarantee basic principles such as ensuring that no one leaves school for economic reasons," said Miquel Soler, a top official with the Valencia region's opposition socialists.

Spain's central government has ordered the country's 17 regional governments, which control education and health budgets, to cut their deficits to 1.5 percent of their output this year and 0.7 percent next year.

The regions are held responsible for two-thirds of the nation's overall deficit slippage last year, when the country missed its deficit target of 6.0 percent of economic output and let it slide to 8.9 percent.

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Citation: Spain schools to charge pupils for eating packed lunch (2012, August 9) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-08-spain-schools-pupils-lunch.html>

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