

Study provides strongest evidence yet of a link between breakfast quality and educational outcomes

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Credit: Wikipedia.

A direct and positive link between pupils' breakfast quality and consumption, and their educational attainment, has for the first time been demonstrated in a ground-breaking new study carried out by public health experts at Cardiff University.

The study of 5000 9-11 year-olds from more than 100 primary schools sought to examine the link between [breakfast](#) consumption and quality and subsequent attainment in Key Stage 2 Teacher Assessments 6-18 months later.

The study - thought to be the largest to date looking at longitudinal effects on standardised school performance - found that children who ate breakfast, and who ate a better quality breakfast, achieved higher academic outcomes.

The research found that the odds of achieving an above average educational performance were up to twice as high for pupils who ate breakfast, compared with those who did not.

Eating unhealthy items like sweets and crisps for

breakfast, which was reported by 1 in 5 children, had no positive impact on [educational attainment](#).

Pupils were asked to list all food and drink consumed over a period of just over 24 hours (including two breakfasts), noting what they consumed at specific times throughout the previous day and for breakfast on the day of reporting.

Alongside number of healthy breakfast items consumed for breakfast, other dietary behaviours - including number of sweets and crisps and fruit and vegetable portions consumed throughout the rest of the day - were all significantly and positively associated with educational performance.

Social scientists say the research, published in the *Public Health Nutrition* journal, offers the strongest evidence yet of a meaningful link between dietary behaviours and concrete measures of academic attainment.

Hannah Littlecott from Cardiff University's Centre for the Development and Evaluation of Complex Interventions for Public Health Improvement (DECIPher), lead author of the study, said: "While breakfast consumption has been consistently associated with general [health](#) outcomes and acute measures of concentration and cognitive function, evidence regarding links to concrete [educational outcomes](#) has until now been unclear.

"This study therefore offers the strongest evidence yet of links between aspects of what pupils eat and how well they do at school, which has significant implications for education and [public health](#) policy - pertinent in light of rumours that free school meals may be scrapped following George Osborne's November spending review.

"For schools, dedicating time and resource towards

improving child health can be seen as an unwelcome diversion from their core business of educating pupils, in part due to pressures that place the focus on solely driving up educational attainment.

"But this resistance to delivery of [health improvement](#) interventions overlooks the clear synergy between health and education. Clearly, embedding health improvements into the core business of the school might also deliver educational improvements as well."

Professor Chris Bonell, Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University College London Institute of Education, welcomed the study's findings. He said: "This study adds to a growing body of international evidence indicating that investing resources in effective interventions to improve young people's health is also likely to improve their educational performance. This further emphasises the need for schools to focus on the health and education of their pupils as complementary, rather than as competing priorities. Many schools throughout the UK now offer their pupils a breakfast. Ensuring that those young people most in need benefit from these schemes may represent an important mechanism for boosting the educational performance of young people throughout the UK".

Dr Graham Moore, who also co-authored the report, added: "Most primary schools in Wales are now able to offer a free school breakfast, funded by Welsh Government. Our earlier papers from the trial of this scheme showed that it was effective in improving the quality of children's breakfasts, although there is less clear evidence of its role in reducing breakfast skipping.

"Linking our data to real world [educational performance](#) data has allowed us to provide robust evidence of a link between eating breakfast and doing well at school. There is therefore good reason to believe that where schools are able to find ways of encouraging those [young people](#) who don't eat breakfast at home to eat a school breakfast, they will reap significant educational benefits."

Dr Julie Bishop, Director of Health Improvement at Public Health Wales also welcomed the findings. She said: "Public Health Wales welcomes this important work. It increases our understanding of the link between health, in this case what we eat, and educational outcomes. We need to understand more about how eating breakfast helps to improve educational outcomes but this work will certainly support the case for schools to consider measures to improve diet for children - to benefit not just their immediate health but also their achievement."

Provided by Cardiff University

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