

Before banning fast food shops near schools, give pupils a reason to dine in

26 April 2018, by Wendy Wills



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A [ban](#) on fast food shops operating within 400 metres of schools has been called for by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. At a time when nearly one third of children aged two to 15 [are overweight or obese](#), this measure sends a strong message to young people and their families, about the importance of cutting down on fast food. Even so, I doubt it would work.

Young people from poorer backgrounds [are more likely](#) to go past [food](#) shops on their way to or from [school](#), compared with pupils from wealthier backgrounds. Having the opportunity to buy food or drink makes people more likely to do so, so it's important to consider access to food shops, when searching for ways to encourage [young people](#) to eat better.

But many young people go out to buy food before, during or after school at shops further than 400 metres away. Some will run to the shops during their lunch break, to get the food they want. Independent shops, in particular, understand their school-aged customers' preferences, which are typically to buy something that fills them up quickly,

at a price they can afford.

And it's not just fast food shops which sell goods that are high in fat, salt or sugar; supermarkets also attract pupils with meal deals and other marketing promotions, which means that a group of friends can chip in to buy a multi-pack of donuts, for example, at a price that appeals to them.

Reality bites

If government is serious about enacting this kind of regulation, it would need to extend the ban to all [food outlets](#) within an 800-1,000 metre radius of schools. Otherwise, the policy will do little to change where young people buy their food and drink.

Students from lower income families want their money to stretch as far as possible, so they are canny consumers when it comes to finding the best value chips, crisps or soft drinks.

Of course, this is not the food and drink that public health professionals such as myself would like young people to consume. But the reality is that most teenagers prioritise spending time with their friends over setting out to find healthier food or drink options.

Consulting with caterers

But there's still a lot schools can do to help. Basic things, such as ensuring tables and chairs in the cafeteria are not broken; providing cool, fresh jugs of water; not pushing young people outside once they have eaten and taking the time to find out what students actually want to eat and drink.

These simple solutions come up time and again [in research](#), and still many schools find it difficult to consult with young people about improving the food and dining environment, in a way that will appeal to them.

Yet the big companies with contracts to provide food and drink in schools, such as [Sodexo](#), are increasingly willing to spend time producing strategies together with young people. School governors, head teachers and in-house catering staff need to prioritise working with contract caterers to come up with [new, inclusive ways](#) of persuading young [people](#) that school is the cool place to eat.

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