

24138

Jamie Oliver: Sadiq Khan's free school meals pledge is brilliant

Jamie Oliver, *The Times*, 15 January 2024

In a bold and brilliant move this week, Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, stepped up to extend the provision of free school meals across the entire city for another year. With this decision, every child in London, whatever their circumstances, has access to nutritious meals and, in turn, has the opportunity to thrive.

What I find mind-blowing is that we shouldn't have to be talking about this decision being bold or brilliant. Food in schools is as essential as exercise books — you can't learn without it. But as it is, Khan is one of the few politicians in power who seems to understand this. Khan knows what he's doing. As well as being the right human response, he knows that this decision makes sense.

Research suggests that these London children will now be more likely to do better, both personally and academically. They'll be able to concentrate better in lessons, achieve better grades, go on to get better-paid jobs — not to mention it resulting in happier, healthier young people.

All this good stuff has an economic impact, too. As much as you can measure these things, PwC has calculated that if you give all children a free school meal, it will boost the economy by £41.3 billion over 20 years. So it's simple — feeding kids isn't just the right thing to do, it puts more money in the coffers too.

But for now, these benefits are reserved for the few. Primary schoolchildren in London join those in Scotland and Wales, as well as those few schools in England which have enlightened pockets, where all kids are given a free school meal. Otherwise, to qualify for it, your household income has to be £7,400 or less, after tax and before benefits.

Estimates vary, but this means there are about one to two million children whose families are in poverty or financially struggling, who are excluded from free school lunches. And for these kids, it's often the only nutritious meal they'll get.

Khan's decisive action should serve as a wake-up call to other decision-makers, politicians and mayors across the country. Ignoring the significance of initiatives like free school meals risks leaving people behind and suppressing their opportunities for growth and success. I'm sure over the next few days we'll see critics pick at the edges. Yes there will be challenges, but don't let that detract from the core of this decision, which is undeniably fantastic and crucial.

406 words