

24043 Free school meals 'cut obesity and help reading skills' in England, study finds

Michael Savage, *The Guardian*, Sun 4 Feb 2024

Labour is facing calls from MPs to back the provision of free school meals for all primary school children in England, after a new study found evidence that it reduces obesity and boosts reading skills.

Levels of obesity were reduced by 7% to 11% among first-year-of-primary-school children in the four London boroughs that have already adopted the policy, according to the study seen by the *Observer*.

The study, by the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, found that apart from the cost of living help to parents, there was an associated increase in reading. It suggested that by the age of 11, the impact was equivalent to "approximately two weeks' additional progress in school".

A series of Labour MPs called for the national rollout of free meals. Stephen Timms, the Labour chair of the work and pensions select committee, said the policy was in place and working within his London borough. "The policy has been hugely popular among parents, and the research now shows that it is making a real difference to children's health and learning," he said. "I welcome the decision by the mayor of London to extend the policy London-wide. It should be rolled out nationally, too."

Kim Johnson, the Labour MP for Liverpool Riverside, said that in her city, an average of 11 children in a class of 30 live in poverty. "Access to healthy, nutritious food is a necessity for children to thrive," she said. "

The mayor of London said, "Providing all children with the offer of a nutritious meal during the school day helps to improve health and enable pupils to focus on their schoolwork, rather than worry about being hungry."

Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary, has pledged to have breakfast clubs in every primary school. However, the party has no plans to expand free school lunches.

Researchers examined the impact of expanding the policy to all primary school children by studying four London boroughs which have their own schemes. "There are lots of long-term benefits that we'd expect, such as an improvement in reading ability, even at the end of primary school," said Dr Angus Holford, the study's co-author. "Other evidence suggests this will persist into a benefit in lifetime earnings. Even if these effects on obesity prevalence don't fully persist into adulthood, even delaying the onset of obesity, or reducing your total lifetime duration of obesity, still reduces the risk of developing later diseases."

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