

A national strategic response to food poverty among schoolchildren in Ireland: Preventing hunger in Irish schools

Introduction

Children going hungry in Irish schools (see background data) impacts upon their well-being, concentration and attention levels, learning and motivation, as well as heightening risk of aggressive behaviour in class and with peers. A systematic national strategy to prevent hunger in school is not currently in place. Current initiatives include the School Meals Programme funded by the Department of Social Protection and Breakfast clubs facilitated by School Completion Programme through the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Yet these are not systematically available for all children in need. Not every School Completion Programme includes breakfast clubs and school participation in the School Meals Programme is varied and requires a school principal to apply to be part of it. Unlike countries such as Britain, France and Poland, Irish schools have poor infrastructure for meals in schools, with little investment historically in kitchen facilities in schools.

Our Group seeks the following response to this urgent issue:

- A National Strategy for Hunger Prevention in Schools
- One Government Department to be responsible for developing the strategy, implementation and monitoring of this national strategy.
- A specific civil servant to have responsibility for this issue for the primary school age group (5-12)
- Establishment of a Food Forum to address the issue of hunger in schools
- Ensuring children's needs are met in a systematic rather than ad hoc way regarding hunger prevention in schools and quality of food

Proposed key features of a National Strategy for Hunger Prevention in Schools

Key benefits of an integrated national strategy:

- Educational outcomes from preventing hunger in schools/ improved school attendance, behaviour and performance and prevention of early school leaving
- Health issues / healthy food to prevent childhood obesity
- Life skills / food awareness for children, family and the wider culture, opportunities for developing cooking skills on the part of students and for social interaction in school
- Employment/ investment in kitchen infrastructure in school buildings, staff in school kitchens

Implementation issues

- investment in building kitchens in schools through a national building programme of infrastructure investment: priority given to schools most in need and new school buildings, though with long term aim of all schools having kitchens, as a combination of both a targeted and universal approach
- responsibility for project management of kitchens in schools must be delegated and not be additional work for either principals, teachers or other school staff

- the use of vouchers to avoid stigma where parents who can afford to pay would also have school meals for their children through a voucher system
- physical space to store, cook, distribute and eat food.
- opportunities to empower parents within the school regarding use of kitchens and nutrition (cooking and healthy eating) courses

Background data on hunger in Irish schools

Based on data collected in 2010 from 12,661 10-17 year olds in Ireland from randomly selected schools throughout the country (Callaghan et al. 2010), 20.9% of schoolchildren in Ireland report going to school or bed hungry because there is not enough food at home. This figure represents a slight increase from 16.6% in 2006. More boys (22.4%) report that they go to school or bed hungry than girls (19.3%). More children in the 10-11 year old age group report going to school or bed hungry at 26.8%, which is an increase from 18.3% in 2006. Children who report going to school or bed hungry are more likely to report having bullied others. These figures are of serious concern. However, they are likely to be an underestimate of the current situation as the effects of austerity budgets have come into force. A 2013 IPPN survey of over 600 primary school principals found that over 20% of primary principals observed an increase in children coming to school hungry.

Even before the current economic recession, differences between 7 DEIS Dublin primary schools ranged from 6% to 33% of pupils stating they were either often, very often or everyday too hungry to do their work in school (Downes & Maunsell 2007). It is evident that concerns regarding hunger continue into secondary school, with a conservative estimate of at least 17% of students in one DEIS secondary school stating that they were either often, very often or every day too hungry to do their work in school (Downes & Maunsell 2007). In a different Dublin area approximately 18% of the 6th class pupils attending school on the given day stated that they were either often, very often or every day too hungry to do their work in school – this figure was notably higher in 3 of the 4 schools where 21%, 25% and 25% of pupils stated that they were either often, very often or every day too hungry to do their work in school (Downes, Maunsell & Ivers 2006). Friel & Conlon (2004) observed in an Irish context, ‘At a policy level, food poverty per se has not received much attention and explicit efforts to alleviate the adverse implications of food poverty are sparse’. It is to be recognised that the School Meals Programme and National School Completion Programme plays a key role in preventing hunger in schools but a wider national strategy is needed.

The recent national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020, Better outcomes, brighter futures acknowledges the 'challenge of food poverty' and its impact on children's health and educational outcomes (p.53). It offers the following commitment to 'Continue to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the School Meals Programme and consider inclusion of DEIS schools not currently benefiting under the programme, subject to resources becoming available' (p.133). It is of concern that not only is this a limited commitment in scope and ambition, also weakened by the qualification 'subject to resources being available', it is notable that this commitment is only treated in this strategy as being one that is the responsibility of the Department of Social Protection - with no commitment to it being the responsibility of either the Departments of Education, Health or Children and

Youth Affairs. A more systemic and far-reaching response is required than that envisaged in this strategy.

Callaghan, M. and the HBSC Ireland Team (2010). Food poverty among schoolchildren in Ireland. Health Promotion Research Centre, NUI Galway

Downes, P, Maunsell, C & Ivers, J. (2006). *A Holistic Approach to Early School Leaving and School Retention in Blanchardstown : Current Issues and Future Steps for Services and Schools*. Dublin: Blanchardstown Area Partnership

Downes, P & Maunsell, C. (2007). *Count us in: Tackling early school leaving in South West Inner City Dublin: An integrated response*. Dublin: Commissioned by the South Inner City Community Development Association.

Friel, S. & Conlon, C. (2004). *Summary of Food Poverty and Policy*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency & St. Vincent de Paul Society

IPPN (2013). Survey of School Principals, Conference data.

Appendix

Limerick School Meals Project

The Limerick School Meals Project supplies school meals to seventeen schools across Limerick city. All schools are part of the DEIS Programme. The School Meals Project is coordinated by the Limerick Food Partnership which is a partnership of the Department of Social Protection, Limerick City Council, Health Services Executive, Limerick Institute of Technology, PAUL Partnership and local community groups. This forum has been a useful space to share learning and build on the knowledge and experience of others, and has helped to progress the School Meals Project in Limerick city.

Schools use a mixture of community and private suppliers to supply school meals and funding is sourced through the School Meals Programme. Limerick Food Partnership has supported a range of community organisations across the city to develop their food services to supply schools. This includes sourcing and processing food ingredients and accessing fruit and vegetable snack packs. There is frequent communication with suppliers to ensure that meals are cost-effective and support the nutritional needs of pupils.

The School Meals Project ensures that DEIS schools in Limerick can offer a healthy lunch and snack to their pupils. Many of the community organisations have gone on to further develop food based community and social enterprises such as meals on wheels, community cafes and catering services which provides further support to families in these communities. The School Meals Project has been running for over ten years and illustrates that such a model can be effective on a large-scale. This model should be replicated in other settings across Ireland to address the identified ‘challenge of food poverty’ and support positive nutritional and educational outcomes in all children.