



The importance of hot meals in schools

Hot meals in schools are one policy response to unacceptably high child poverty rates in the Republic of Ireland. Between 2008 and 2011 child poverty in Ireland rose at the fastest rate in Europe (11% on At Risk Of Poverty or social Exclusion [AROPE] indicator), with Latvia (10.4%) and Bulgaria (7.6%) being our nearest rivals for this unwanted distinction. From 2011 to 2014 child poverty rates rose dramatically again (see graph based on official Irish Department of Social Protection statistics) before some reduction from the 2014 high, in recent years. It is no exaggeration to state that Irish society placed the burden of the last economic crash onto its children in disproportionate terms compared to any other society in the EU.

Child poverty and the related problem of child hunger in school was exacerbated in an Irish context by policy failures regarding lack of hot meal provision in schools over many decades. These policy failures involved a diffusion of responsibility for food provision in schools across many Irish government departments leading to a complete fragmentation of strategic response at national level – a fragmentation recognised as being unacceptable by the Department of Education and Skills in the DEIS Social Inclusion in Education Action Plan 2017.

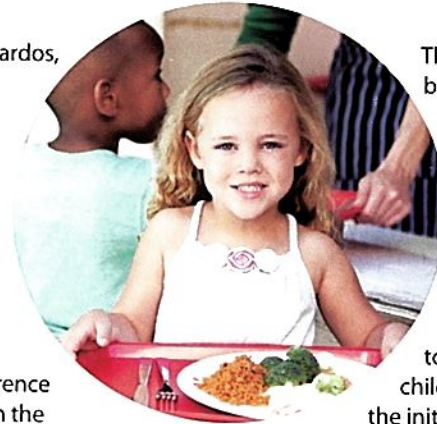
In response to the issue of child hunger prevention in schools, our Educational Disadvantage Centre, Institute of Education, DCU established a national working group in 2013 consisting of organisations including the INTO, IPPN,

IMPACT (now Forsa), Barnardos, Healthy Food for All, as well as subsequently the Children's Rights Alliance and Focus Ireland to examine and advocate for a national strategic response on this issue.

It was also raised as a priority issue at the joint INTO/Educational Disadvantage DEIS Conference (December 2015) to inform the 2017 DEIS Action Plan.

This Hunger Prevention in Schools Working Group highlighted the need for hot meal provision in schools as part of a phased universalism, targeting areas most in need and without the need for a stigmatising approach. It recognised the importance of providing hot meals for children and young people rather than establishing committees of professionals to make intrusive judgments into fluctuating levels of poverty of children and their families. Concern was also raised that the current Irish *National Children's Policy Framework, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (2014-2020)* does not have a robust antipoverty focus.

Even during the Celtic Tiger, research by the Educational Disadvantage Centre found 18% of pupils in a range of Dublin DEIS schools were either often, very often or every day too hungry to do their work in school, even in schools with breakfast clubs. More recent national surveys found that a 20% of students report that they are going to bed or school hungry.



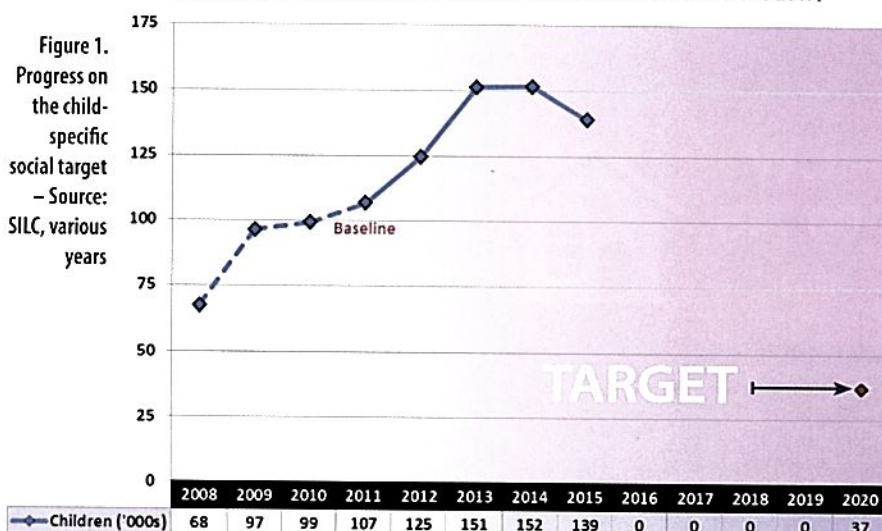
These concerns are being addressed through the significant commitment of the Irish government in the last budget to expanding hot meals in schools to 35,000 more children, building on the initial almost 7,000 children receiving such hot

meals the previous year. This is part of a wider review with a commitment to further embedding hot meals in schools nationally.

Hot meals in schools need to be a routine, unremarkable part of Irish school life, as they are in many European countries, such as France, UK, Lithuania, Finland, Slovakia, Spain, Slovenia, Austria, etc. Our Hunger Prevention in Schools Working Group also argues for the benefits of kitchens in schools, as part of constructivist learning methodology where children can be involved in learning to cook, as part of integrated cross-curricular approaches, including additionally a lifelong learning angle for parental involvement.

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CHILD POVERTY TARGET (DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL PROTECTION FIGURES 2017)



BACKDROP OF INCREASED POVERTY RATES FOR CHILDREN

The AROPE indicator is defined as the share of the population in at least one of the following three conditions:

- 1) at risk of poverty, meaning below the poverty threshold,
- 2) in a situation of severe material deprivation,
- 3) living in a household with a very low work intensity. From 2008 to 2011, the AROPE for children rose in 21 EU Member States.

Eurostat: The largest increases in the AROPE since 2008 were in Ireland (+11.0 percentage points (pp) up to 2010) and Latvia (+10.4pp). They were closely followed by Bulgaria (+7.6pp), Hungary (+6.2pp) and Estonia (+5.4pp).