



School Meals Provision-

Equality of access is a
basic right

Prepared for:

Joint Committee on Education &
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1. INTRODUCTION

The Hunger Prevention in Schools Strategy Group comprising of representatives from IPPN, INTO, NPC, IMPACT, HFFa & DCU highlight the fact that *'children going hungry in Irish schools 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'*.

Current estimates are that 600,000 people are living in food poverty, while 1 in 5 children come to school hungry. Despite this the GUI (Growing up in Ireland) studies of the DCYA doesn't ask any questions on hunger in school, which is why this issue has fallen off the radar. Since 2008 low income and social welfare dependent households have experienced increases in taxes and charges coupled with decreases in income, with the latter group in particular experiencing a 5-8% drop in income. Low income households are twice as likely to experience food poverty, spend proportionately more on food and experience particular difficulties around healthy eating due to affordability, accessibility, availability and food awareness issues. The GUI study does highlight the increasing problem of obesity however which is linked to poor eating habits and unhealthy food choices. IPPN notes that DEIS schools are particularly concerned with, and involved in addressing Food Poverty, however the absence of a systematic national strategy to prevent hunger in schools is evident in terms of an ad-hoc, uneven and sometimes inequitable provision.

2. OPPORTUNITIES:

IPPN acknowledges government commitment to School Meals to date in terms of increasing the School Meals Budget which currently stands at €42m. This progress makes the goal of eliminating Hunger in Schools more attainable. Improving economic circumstances provides government with an opportunity to take the additional steps necessary steps to eliminate Hunger in Schools.

The National Policy Framework Better Outcomes Brighter Future articulates 'the vision for Ireland to be one of the best small countries in the world in which to grow up and raise a family.'

The Framework names DES, DCYA and DSP as lead Departments in terms of 'addressing food poverty' with the DSP the lead Department of 'School Meals'.

IPPN sees an opportunity for one of these Departments to fully accept responsibility for developing, implementing and monitoring a National Strategy for Hunger Prevention in Schools and for initiating school meals programmes in all schools beginning with DEIS schools.

IPPN considers that a co-ordinated and streamlined School Meals Programme, in the context of a National Strategy for Hunger Prevention in Schools, provides an excellent opportunity to address the 'Transformational Goals' and 'Outcomes' detailed this Framework.

Schools, through the School Meals Programme, provide an ideal setting to address Food Poverty with positive effects on short-term hunger in children, and positive impacts on punctuality, eating habits, health, welfare and educational attainment.

That the new budget commitment to school infrastructure provides an opportunity allocate an explicit funding strand within it, for building kitchens in schools and to make schools aware of this possibility.

IPPN feels that the Centenary Year celebrating the ideals of 1916 provides an excellent opportunity for Developing a National Strategy for Hunger Prevention in Schools, *'cherishing all of the children of the nation equally'*

3. CHALLENGES:

There is no National Strategy for Hunger Prevention in Schools nor indeed is there any National Food in Schools Strategy. Instead we have a fragmented approach to school food provision: DSP- funding for Schools Meals; DES-school infrastructure and links with curriculum; DAFM -EU School Milk Scheme & Food Dudes; DCYA – SCP; DH – Healthy Eating Guidelines

Having 3 lead agencies responsible for addressing food poverty means that no one department/individual is responsible for developing, implementing and monitoring a National Strategy for Hunger Prevention in Schools.

The current system has resulted in ad-hoc provision whereby there are different models of provision, different levels of funding, inequities, lack of clear guidelines and confusion. 100 DEIS schools are still not availing of School Meals.

The current system lacks flexibility. Changes in demographics and/or enrolment can result in schools having inadequate provision, leaving them unable to respond adequately to the needs of pupils. Schools accessing funding from other sources or in receipt of small amounts for specific initiatives also lose out.

In the context of improving education outcomes in DEIS schools account needs to be taken of the impact of poor nutrition on children in terms of academic development, school performance, concentration, attendance and early school leaving; physical health and well-being; emotional well-being; social development, life skills, self-esteem etc.

Schools face significant challenges in terms of engaging with School Meals Provision. These include

- Lack of information and clear procedures.
- Lack of Personnel– e.g. secretarial / admin staff, volunteers etc.
- Absence of In-school Management structures coupled with increasing demands on schools and school personnel.
- Inadequate space and facilities – storage, distribution, dishes, washing etc.
- Work-load and administrative burden for principals and school staff.
- Volunteer management.
- Concerns around 'food waste' – bin charges, food in bins etc...
- No dedicated funding for infrastructure, funding is provided for food only. Recommending using the Minor Works ignores the pressure on School Budgets.
- Concerns around stigmatisation of 'poor' kids in the absence of providing for all children.

4. STRENGTHS & RECOMMENDATIONS

School Meals Provision in terms of breakfast clubs and school lunches, effectively organised and run has been one of the most significant developments in DEIS schools in recent years, transforming the relationship between schools and the community they serve.

Providing a healthy lunch for a child is easy, cheap and the educational, psychological and social benefits are far reaching making investing in school meals good economic sense.

Ireland is fertile country with an abundance of high quality food available to feed its population.

The current schemes have facilitated effective initiatives involving community and private suppliers with consequent good practice models.

Suppliers who prepare food off site reduces the need for extensive kitchen facilities in schools. Lunches being provided can be monitored in terms of health and nutritional values.

Breakfast, snack and lunch, where they are provided ensure regular food intake in appropriate portions for small children with consequent improvement in concentration etc.

A co-ordinated and efficient School Meals Programme addresses ***all*** the Goals and Outcomes of the Better Outcomes Brighter Futures Framework.

5. IPPN RECOMMENDS:

Expanding the School Meals Programme, linked to enrolment, ensuring children's needs are met in a systematic rather than ad hoc way with greater flexibility for schools to address a child's needs.

Setting a target where no child should go hungry in school and every child in a DEIS school should have access to a healthy breakfast and lunch.

The appointment of **one** Government Department to be responsible for developing, implementation and monitoring a national Strategy for Hunger Prevention in schools. A specific civil servant to have responsibility for this issue for the primary school age group.

Actively supporting schools in funding infrastructure for school meals without recourse to the Minor Works Grant

The responsibility for project management of kitchens / breakfast clubs etc. in schools must be delegated and not be additional work for either principals, teachers or other school staff.

All staff engaged in food provision in schools be provided with clear guidelines, adequate training and support.

Build on the experience of effective initiatives involving community and private suppliers.

The establishment of a national working group on hunger prevention/food in school