

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Education
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18 June 2010

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: extended free school meal eligibility cancellation

We are deeply concerned at your recent decision not to proceed with the extension of free school meal eligibility to an estimated half a million primary school children from low income working families.

The recent Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post-2010 highlighted the disadvantages faced by those from the lowest socio-economic groups, and the importance of giving every child the best start in life. Ensuring that all primary school children living in poverty receive a healthy school meal would make a considerable contribution to reducing both education and health inequalities.

For example, the introduction of nutritional standards for school meals, guarantees those children who take advantage of them at least two of their five daily portions of fruit and vegetables, along with other essential vitamins and minerals. In a country where almost one-third of children are overweight or obese by the time they reach the end of primary school, school meals have an important role to play in developing healthy eating habits.

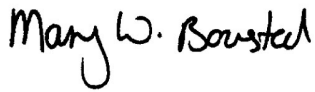
Eating healthy school meals, in particular exposing children to foods such as new types of fruits and vegetables which they might not otherwise have tried, influences not only the food children eat at home, but also what their families eat. Only one per cent of packed lunches meet the nutritional standards for school meals. As a result, those children who are not eligible for free meals, and whose parents are unable to afford to pay for a school meal each day, are unable to eat as healthily as their peers.

Eating food and drink high in fat, sugar or salt is linked to poor behaviour, resulting in poorer discipline and educational engagement for all children. By contrast, healthier school meals have been shown to improve classroom behaviour, helping to improve academic performance and attainment.

Poverty among working families is a significant problem in this country: currently, sixty per cent of children living in poverty have at least one parent in work. The planned extension of eligibility would have lifted 50,000 such children out of poverty. Instead, this significant barrier to parents entering employment remains. With the average primary school meal costing £1.66, failure to qualify for free school meals results in a "tax" of over £300 per child on parents returning to work.

We therefore urge you to review this decision as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review process and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,



Dr General Secretary
Association of Teachers and Lecturers



Dr Martin Caraher
Professor of Food and Health Policy
Centre for Food Policy, City University



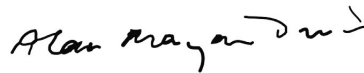
Imran Hussain
Head of Policy, Rights and Advocacy
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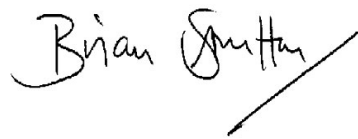
Charlie Powell
Campaigns Director
Children's Food Campaign



Head of Policy
Diabetes UK



Dr Alan Maryon-Davis
President
Faculty of Public Health




Brian Strutton
National Secretary
GMB



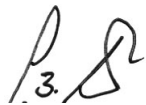
Chris Keates
General Secretary
NASUWT



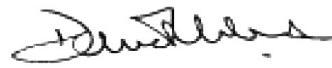
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