

# Research Bulletin No 6:

## Uptake and factors impacting on demand for school meals



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## Background

Considerable work has been undertaken over the last decade in improving the nutritional quality of school meals. The introduction of mandatory standards for school lunches in September 2007 has been accompanied by an extensive programme of training for school and catering staff and has resulted in quality assured and nutritionally balanced meals for children in Northern Ireland. The provision of a healthy nutritious meal is of vital importance, given findings from this study revealing that a proportion of school age children still do not eat the recommended daily portions of fruit and vegetables; and skip important meals, such as breakfast and evening meal.<sup>1</sup> These dietary issues are exacerbated amongst pupils attending the most deprived schools<sup>2</sup> with these children less likely to consume as many portions of fruit and vegetables, more likely to skip breakfast, less likely to have an evening meal on a regular basis<sup>3</sup> and more likely not to have anything to eat at morning break time.<sup>4</sup>

Data gathered by the Department of Education in 2012 on School Meal Census Day revealed that more than four fifths (81.4%) of pupils eligible for Free School Meals actually used their entitlement, and overall, 56% of primary children and 55% of post-primary pupils took school meals.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, and as has been found in this study, a proportion of children, rather than choosing a nutritionally balanced school meal, opt for a packed lunch in school – despite suggestions from the caterers who participated in this research that the latter can consist of little more than sweets, crisps and sugary fizzy drinks, heightening the need to tackle barriers to school meal uptake.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No.5: The influence of school nutrition policy and practice on children's eating habits. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

<sup>2</sup> Levels of deprivation among schools and pupils are inferred using data on children's entitlement to free school meals. Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) is a proxy measure for deprivation (rather than a direct measure) frequently used in educational research and policy. (*Northern Ireland Assembly (2010). Research and Briefing Paper, Free School Meal Entitlement as a measure of deprivation, Paper 191/10 November 2010*)

<sup>3</sup> Beattie K, Gilmore. Research Bulletin No. 2: The influence of deprivation on knowledge, attitudes and healthy eating behaviours. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

<sup>4</sup> Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No.5: The influence of school nutrition policy and practice on children's eating habits. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

<sup>5</sup> *School Meals in Northern Ireland 2012/13*. NISRA, 2013. Available at [http://www.deni.gov.uk/school\\_meals\\_census\\_201213\\_press\\_release\\_final.pdf&rct=j&frm=1&q=&esrc=s&sa=U&ei=d\\_cGVN6RHIW17Abh2ID4Cg&ved=0CBQQFjAA&usq=AFQjCNF3qBueibuY3OJhgNZdcx-9rOQMMQ](http://www.deni.gov.uk/school_meals_census_201213_press_release_final.pdf&rct=j&frm=1&q=&esrc=s&sa=U&ei=d_cGVN6RHIW17Abh2ID4Cg&ved=0CBQQFjAA&usq=AFQjCNF3qBueibuY3OJhgNZdcx-9rOQMMQ).

Accessed 3/9/2014.

This bulletin specifically focuses on demand for school meals, and examines factors impacting on uptake, such as lunchtime environment, queuing, choice of food available and price. Information presented in this bulletin is compiled from a larger research study exploring attitudes towards food in schools, and eating behaviours implemented in 2008, and again in 2012. A total of 209 school principals participated in the most recent wave of research, alongside 212 teachers, 1119 parents, and 3306 children from schools across Northern Ireland. Qualitative research was undertaken with nutritional standards co-ordinators, area managers, area supervisors and catering managers, and school catering staff. Further details on the sample structure and research methodology, as well as policy background to the programme and information on other bulletins are presented in Research Bulletin No.1: School food; top marks<sup>6</sup>, research background and approach.<sup>7</sup>

## **Uptake of school meals**

**This research study has illustrated that in 2008 and 2012 more primary school children took a packed lunch to school than had school meals<sup>8</sup>** (see Figure 6.1). However, the most recent data reveal the gap between uptake of school meals and packed lunches has narrowed, as the proportion of primary children having a school meal increased between 2008 and 2012, (from 35% to 44%); while fewer children chose to bring in packed lunches during the same time period from 65% to 56% (p<.001).

However, there was **no change in the proportion of post-primary children who said they usually had school meals between 2008 and 2012** (40% respectively).

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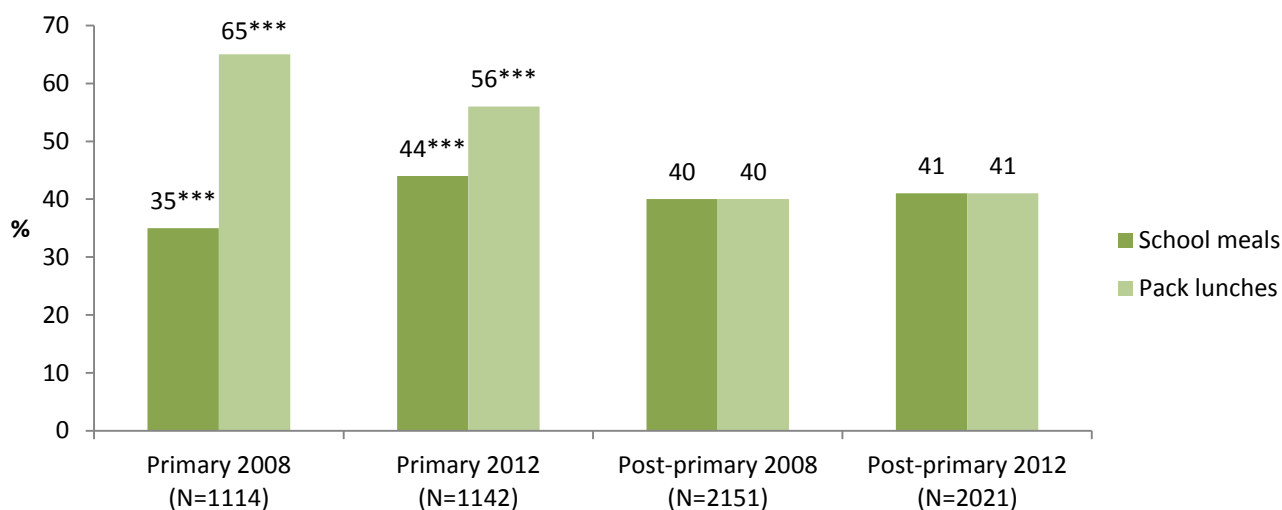
<sup>6</sup> Since the completion of this research, a review of the school food marketing and promotion strategy has taken place. Following consultation with stakeholders the school food, top marks programme has been renamed and rebranded to school food (try something new today). The aims and objectives of the programme have remained the same.

<sup>7</sup> Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No. 1: School food: top marks, research background and approach. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

<sup>8</sup> In this research, children were asked the question "What do you *normally* take for lunch?" The Department of Education (DE) also collect data relating to School meals and Free School Meal uptake, however DE data relates to the numbers of children taking a school meal on census day. This may account for disparity between the two sets of figures.

The proportion of post-primary children who usually took packed lunches also remained static, at 41% in 2008 and 2012 respectively (see Figure 6.1).<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 6.1 Uptake of school meals and packed lunches (data from primary and post-primary children)<sup>9</sup>**



## Variation in school meal uptake

**There were no differences in primary school boys' and girls' consumption of school meals. However, in post-primary schools, boys were more likely to have a school meal than girls (46% and 36% respectively;  $p < .001$ ) (see Table 6.1).**

**As primary children got older they were less likely to take school meals, and more likely to take packed lunches ( $p < .01$ ).** For example, 56% of 9 year olds usually had school meals, decreasing to 40% of children aged 11 (see Table 6.1); while 44% of 9 year olds usually had packed lunch, increasing to 60% for pupils aged 11 years (not shown in table). **This pattern was also repeated for post-primary pupils, with uptake of school meals decreasing as children moved up through the school ( $p < .001$ ).** For example, while 43% of 11 year olds usually had a school meal, this decreased to 36% for 15 year olds (see Table 6.1).

<sup>9</sup> Percentages for post-primary school children's responses do not total 100 due to multiple response. Post-primary pupils could also select "buying something from the tuck shop or vending machine"; "buying lunch outside school"; "buying something at the canteen"; "go home for lunch"; and "don't have anything for lunch". Responses to each of these are presented and discussed in Research Bulletin No. 5.- Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No.5: The influence of school nutrition policy and practice on children's eating habits. Public Health Agency. Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

**Table 6.1 Demographic breakdown of pupils taking school meals (2012)<sup>10</sup>**

|                                 |           |                  | %  |
|---------------------------------|-----------|------------------|----|
| Primary school<br>(N=1142)      | Age**     | 9 years (n=96)   | 56 |
|                                 |           | 10 years (n=543) | 45 |
|                                 |           | 11 years (n=498) | 40 |
| Post-primary school<br>(N=2021) | Gender*** | Male (n=883)     | 46 |
|                                 |           | Female (n=1138)  | 36 |
|                                 | Age***    | 11 years (n=58)  | 43 |
|                                 |           | 12 years (n=465) | 43 |
|                                 |           | 13 years (n=487) | 42 |
|                                 |           | 14 years (n=522) | 39 |
|                                 |           | 15 years (n=472) | 36 |

It was interesting to note in primary schools, **uptake of school meals was lowest in schools where 10.1-20.0% of pupils enrolled were entitled to free school meals (FSME)** (see Figure 6.2),

“You would have schools in low income areas where they are not entitled to free school meals but neither would they be able to afford to pay for school meals everyday...”  
Interview; school catering manager, Belfast Education and Library Board (ELB).<sup>11</sup>

suggesting that children from the most and least affluent schools (as assessed by FSME) were most likely to take a school meal.<sup>11</sup> For example, more than half (53%) of primary school children attending the most affluent schools took school meals, as did 68% of children in the most deprived schools; however, this decreased to less than one in three (31%) pupils in schools with 10.1-20.0% FSME (p<.001).

Similarly, in post-primaries, pupils in schools with 10.1-20.0% FSME were least likely to take school meals (36%), compared to pupils in the most deprived quartile (44%; p<.05).

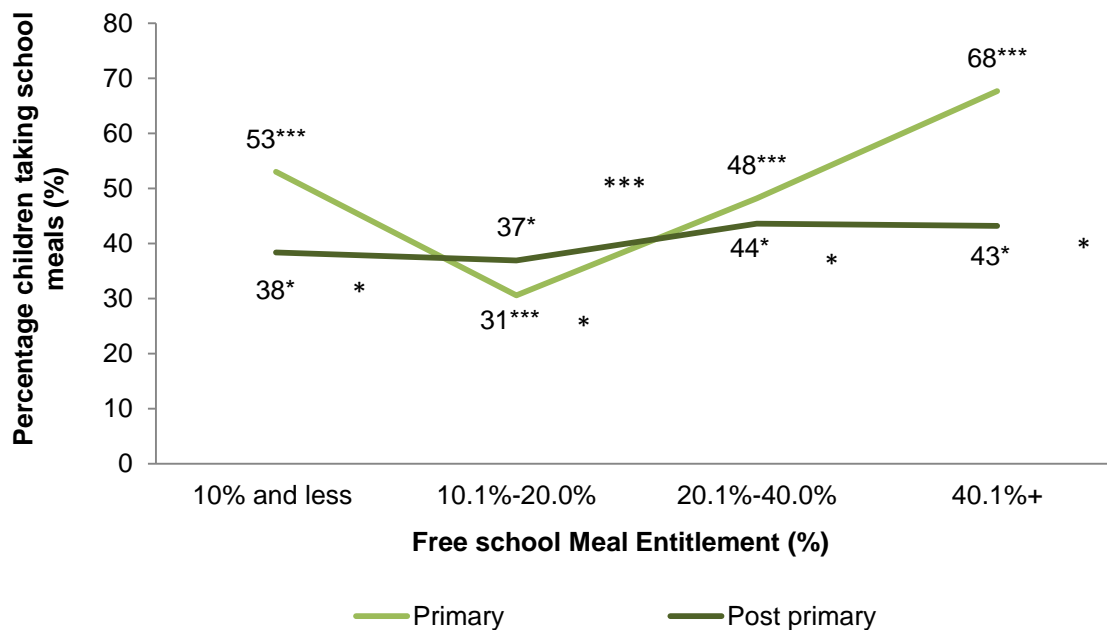
It was felt by some stakeholders – particularly school principals and catering staff - that the cost of school meals impacted on demand, and furthermore, that the cost of

<sup>10</sup> \*\*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.001, where the observed difference could only be expected to have occurred by chance in 1 in 1000 times in repeated tests; \*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.01, suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 1% of the time, and \* suggests the difference is statistically significant at a p-value of less than 0.05 (suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 5% of the time).

<sup>11</sup> From 1 April 2015 the 5 Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have amalgamated to become the Education Authority

school meals was prohibitive for families just above the income threshold for free school meals. Attitudes towards the price of school meals are discussed at length later in this bulletin.

**Figure 6.2 Proportions of children taking school meals, according to relative school FSME<sup>12</sup> (primary N= 11421, post primary N=2021)**



## Attitudes to school meals

The most popular reason why both primary and post-primary children chose school meals was because they liked the food (59% and 57% respectively – see Table 6.2). Parental choice appeared to be the second most commonly cited reason as to why primary school children opted for school meals (32%), while 29% of post-primary school children maintained one of the key influences in their decision to have school meals was if their ‘friends all do the same’ (see Table 6.2). It was interesting to note, that **both primary and post-primary pupils were comparatively less likely to say that the reason they chose to have school meals was because they considered them to be healthy** – only 14% of primary school pupils who took

<sup>12</sup> \*\*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.001, where the observed difference could only be expected to have occurred by chance in 1 in 1000 times in repeated tests; \*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.01, suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 1% of the time, and \* suggests the difference is statistically significant at a p-value of less than 0.05 (suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 5% of the time).

school meals maintained 'it's healthier', while 17% of post-primary pupils said the same. This is an issue discussed in more detail overleaf.

**Table 6.2 Primary and post-primary children's reasons for choosing school meals or packed lunches (2012; multiple response)<sup>13</sup>**

|                            | Primary school          |                           | Post-primary school     |                           |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
|                            | School meals<br>(N=493) | Packed lunches<br>(N=635) | School meals<br>(N=813) | Packed lunches<br>(N=801) |
| I like them                | 59%                     | 57%                       | 57%                     | 53%                       |
| My friends all do the same | 16%                     | 17%                       | 29%***                  | 19%***                    |
| Mum/ Dad/ Guardian decides | 32%                     | 29%                       | 15%                     | 27%                       |
| It's healthier             | 14%                     | 15%                       | 17%***                  | 34%***                    |
| Best choice of food        | 21%***                  | 37%***                    | 26%                     | 29%                       |
| Quick to get and eat       | Not asked               | Not asked                 | 14%***                  | 30%***                    |
| It's cheaper               | Not asked               | Not asked                 | 17%***                  | 34%***                    |

When parents were asked why their children took school meals, although the most popular reason was that their child liked the food served (62%), more than half (53%) indicated that they, as parents, decided that their child should have

"Respondent 1: The parents really are the customer ... Respondent 8: But the ones (parents) that come are converted... (general agreement)". Focus group; area managers and supervisors.

school meals (see Table 6.3). This was reiterated in qualitative work with nutritional standards coordinators; area managers and area supervisors; and Education and Library Board catering managers<sup>10</sup> and school catering staff, who underlined the importance of parental influence in getting children to take school meals at lunchtime, a finding which further highlights the need to work with parents themselves to promote the school meals service.

**Table 6.3 Parents' reasons for choosing school meals (N=430; multiple response)**

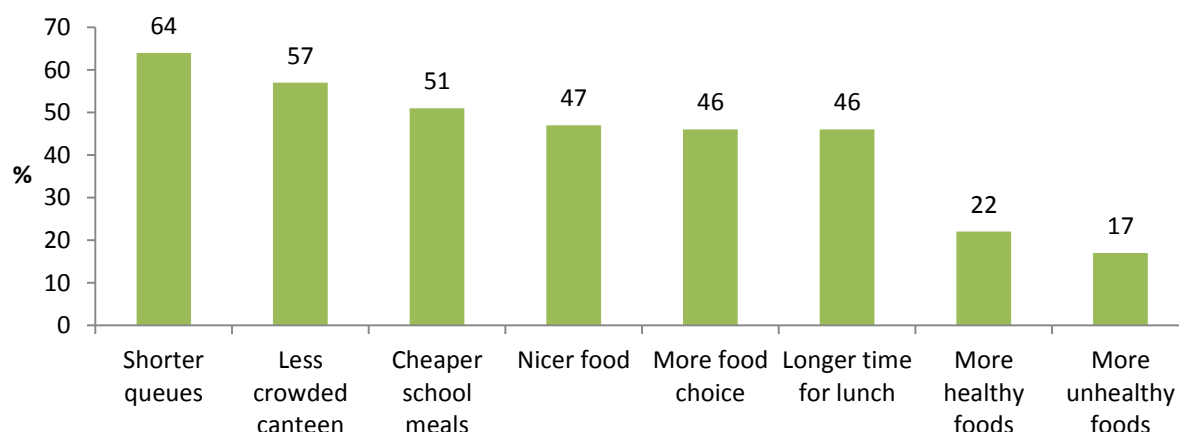
|   | %  |
|---|----|
| My child likes eating school meals      | 62 |
| I prefer my child to take school meals  | 53 |
| My child's friends eat school meals     | 37 |
| Good choice of food                     | 37 |
| School meals are healthy and nutritious | 31 |
| School meals are better value for money | 18 |

<sup>13</sup> \*\*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.001, where the observed difference could only be expected to have occurred by chance in 1 in 1000 times in repeated tests; \*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.01, suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 1% of the time, and \* suggests the difference is statistically significant at a p-value of less than 0.05 (suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 5% of the time).



Post-primary children<sup>14</sup> who usually took a packed lunch were asked what would encourage them to switch to school meals. The most popular suggestion made by these pupils to encourage school meal uptake was **‘shorter queues’ (64%)**, followed by a **less crowded canteen (57%)** and then **cheaper meals (51%)** (see Figure 6.3). Key issues impacting on uptake of school meals are illustrated and examined in more detail below.

**Figure 6.3 Post-primary pupils' suggestions as to what changes would make them switch from packed lunches to school meals (N=801; multiple response)**



## Queuing and dining environment

As mentioned above, **addressing the lengthy queues and crowded dining halls** were the most popular suggestions made by children currently taking packed lunches in order to encourage uptake for school meals: 64% of post-primary children who currently had packed lunches cited queues as a major barrier to school meal uptake. This was closely followed by 57% who said that they would consider having school meals if the canteen was less crowded (see Figure 6.3 above).

“We have a school that has 900 children coming in for lunch and it is expected that in 45 minutes 900 are served, fed and out. Their expectations of how long it takes you to serve the children and how long it should take them to eat their dinner is (sic) totally off the wall...”  
Interview; school catering manager, North Eastern ELB.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the school catering staff described how the children were moved in and out of the dining room or canteen as quickly as possible, with the result that pupils

<sup>14</sup> Primary school children were not asked this question.

frequently did not have time to eat their meals, particularly those who were slower eaters. It was also felt that because the catering assistants working in the dining hall or canteens were also responsible for maintaining discipline this could create a time pressured and stressful environment. School catering managers argued dining room assistants should be facilitated to adopt a different approach allowing them to spend time with the children, encouraging them to eat school meals, and sample new foods they had not perhaps eaten before.

**Post-primary pupils who took packed lunches were twice as likely as those who took school dinners to say that they did this because it was quick to get and eat (30% and 14% respectively;  $p < .001$ ; see Table 6.2, page 8).**

Overall, results suggest that queuing for school meals and the time allocated for lunch (initially identified as an issue in the 2008 research)<sup>15</sup> continues to be problematic, particularly in post-primary schools. In both years of the research, **over seven out of ten post-primary**

“In our school... the queues put them off, so at times your numbers will drop... they have to wait outside to come in. They're only allowed so many in the canteen, each class take it in turn, so it's not the food, it's the waiting and they can't be bothered...” Interview; school catering manager, South Eastern ELB.<sup>10</sup>

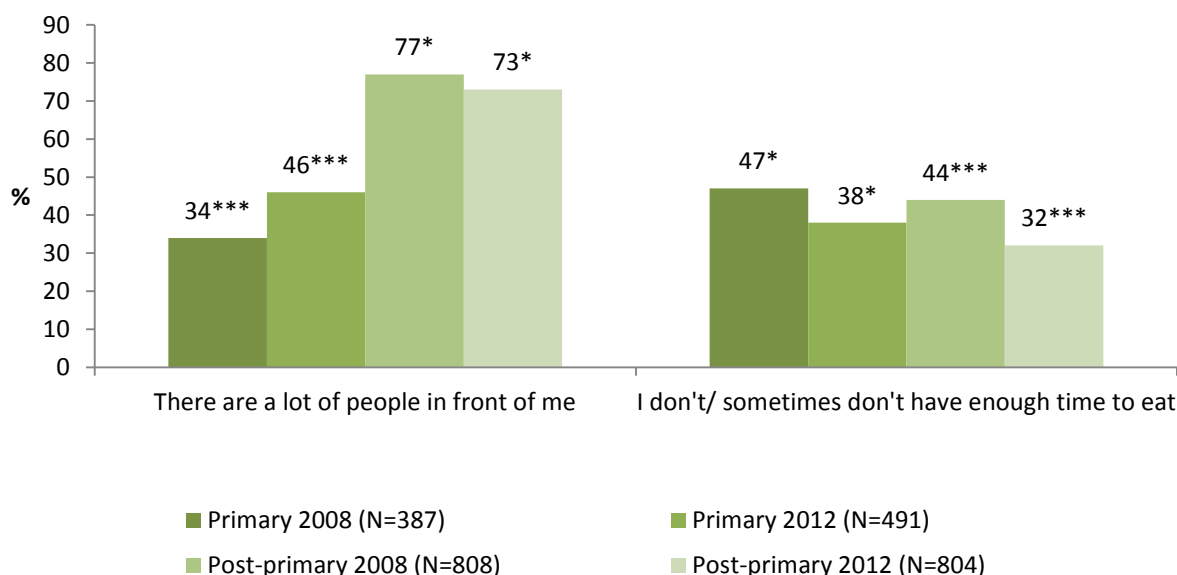
**pupils who had school meals said there were a 'lot of people in front of them'** (77% in 2008, and 73% in 2012;  $p < .05$ ). Moreover, **the proportion of primary children taking school meals complaining of lengthy queues increased from 34% in 2008 to 46% in 2012** ( $p < .001$ ; see Figure 6.4) It is suggested these changes may be linked to extra pressure being placed on school dining facilities as more primary children are now taking school meals.

Although the proportion of primary and post-primary children who felt they did not have enough time to eat their school meal decreased between 2008 and 2012, **almost two in five (38%) of primary school pupils who take school meals sometimes or never have time to finish their lunch**, while **almost one in three**

<sup>15</sup> Gilmore G, Gossrau-Breen D, MacDonald L, Taylor L and McGowan L. School food: top marks. A summary report on food in schools research in Northern Ireland. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2010. Available at: <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/Top%20marks%20summary%20report.pdf>. Accessed 18 July 2013.

(32%) of post-primary school pupils don't always have time to eat a school meal at lunch time (see Figure 6.4).

**Figure 6.4 Attitudes towards queuing and time allocated for lunch (children who take school lunches only)<sup>16</sup>**



## Perceived healthiness of school meals and packed lunches

Despite the nutritional standards, post-primary pupils who took school meals were significantly less likely to say their lunchtime choice was based on the healthiness of the food, compared to those who took packed lunches. Only 17% of those who took school lunches said they did it because it was the healthy option – half that said the same of packed lunches (34%;  $p < 0.001$ ) (see Table 6.2, page 8).

Interestingly, **less than one in three parents whose children took school dinners said the reason for this was that school meals were healthy and nutritious** (31%; see Table 6.3, page 8), while 17% of parents who sent their children into

“One wee boy had chocolate digestive biscuits and a bag of crisps for his lunch and that was it – that was his lunch.” Interview; school catering manager, North Eastern ELB.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>16</sup> \*\*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.001, where the observed difference could only be expected to have occurred by chance in 1 in 1000 times in repeated tests; \*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.01, suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 1% of the time, and \* suggests the difference is statistically significant at a p-value of less than 0.05 (suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 5% of the time).

school with a packed lunch felt that this was healthier than what is provided by the school (see Table 6.5, page 17).

“You had pack lunches that were sitting down along with children eating their (school) dinner and they’ve got a packet of crisps and a bottle of coke and the children having their dinner are not allowed it.” Focus group; food in schools co-ordinators<sup>11</sup>

However, this research has also revealed that items pupils<sup>17</sup> brought in from home (at break time) tended to be high in fat, sugar or salt. Moreover, a common theme running throughout interviews with the school catering staff were the unhealthier foods in lunchboxes compared to that

served in school meals, an issue brought to the fore in the original food in schools research<sup>18</sup>. School catering staff argued that lunch boxes frequently contained items high in fats and sugars. This had two important ramifications – firstly, children who were having packed lunches were not having a nutritionally balanced meal with some children simply snacking on sweets, crisps and fizzy drinks; and secondly, it detracted from the healthy food ethos within the canteen reducing demand and uptake for school meals, as children taking school meals were restricted to foods compliant with the nutritional standards - i.e. no sweets, chocolate etc.

All of those who participated in the qualitative research emphasised the positive contribution that school meals made to children’s nutrition - particularly with regard to increased consumption of fruit and vegetables. Since the implementation of nutritional standards for school lunches, kitchen staff all mentioned that children’s

“The day we do curry, it is very popular... we would maybe sell 100 curries that day. That’s why the nutritional guidelines have been so good, it shows how you can incorporate all the different vegetables into one dish.” Interview; school catering manager, Belfast ELB<sup>11</sup>

consumption of vegetables had substantially increased, as these were now blended into almost all school meals. This suggests a need for awareness-raising and

<sup>17</sup> Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No.5: The influence of school nutrition policy and practice on children’s eating habits. Public Health Agency. Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

<sup>18</sup> Gilmore G, Gossrau-Breen D, MacDonald L, Taylor L and McGowan L. School food: top marks. A summary report on food in schools research in Northern Ireland. Public Health Agency, Belfast, 2010. Available at: <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/Top%20marks%20summary%20report.pdf>. Accessed 18 July 2013.

marketing aimed at both pupils and parents about the healthiness of school meals and quality of ingredients that are used.<sup>19</sup>

## Choice of food available

Primary school children who took packed lunches were more likely to say that bringing lunch in with them gave them more choice than children who took school lunches (37% and 21% respectively;  $p < .001$ ) (see Table 6.2, page 8).

Between 2008 and 2012, there was an increase in the proportion of primary school children who said increased choice of food would encourage them to switch from packed lunches to school meals (see Figure 6.5, page 14). In the initial wave of the research, 30% of primary school children who took packed lunches said they would consider school dinners if there was a greater variety of food on offer, but this increased to 46% by 2012.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, although 55% of post-primary pupils in 2008 wanted to see different types of foods on offer before they would take school meals, this decreased to 46% in 2012 ( $p < .001$ ), perhaps suggesting there is now a better choice of food available in post-primary canteens.

It was also interesting to note, that although some primary and post-primary children who took packed lunches were requesting greater choice they were not, in the main, requesting healthier foods.<sup>21</sup> In the most recent research, approximately 1 in 10 (11%) of primary pupils wanted the option of healthier foods, such as chips, while 17% of post-primary pupils said the same. In fact, pupils were slightly more likely to request a greater selection of healthy food items – with 12% of primary and 22% post-primary pupils wanting to see more healthy options before choosing to take school meals.

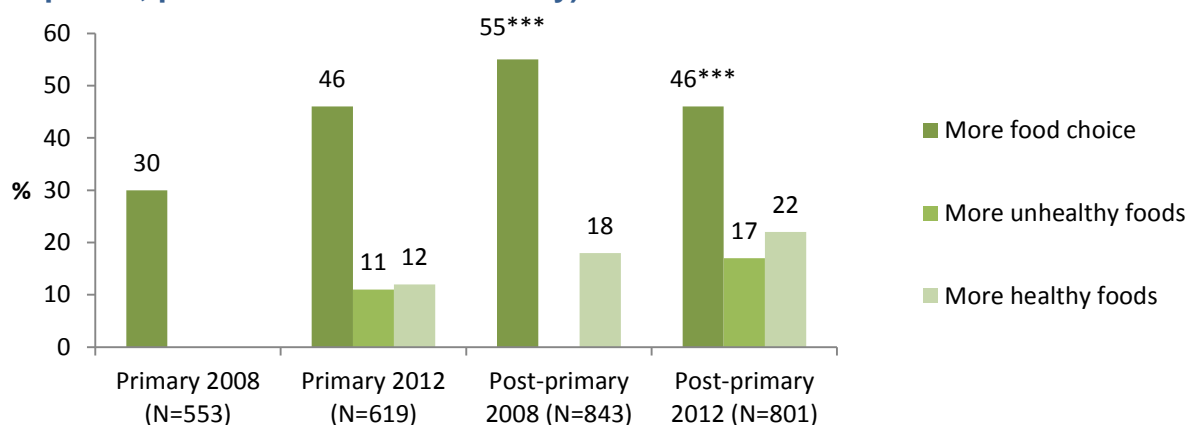
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<sup>19</sup> Beattie K, Gilmore G. Research Bulletin No. 4: Marketing the school food: top marks programme and healthy eating messages. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

<sup>20</sup> It was not possible to conduct tests of statistical differences between primary school children's responses in 2008 and 2012, as responses were recorded in an open-ended format in 2008 and closed in 2012.

<sup>21</sup> This was not explored with primary children.

**Figure 6.5 What would make you want to eat school meals more? (Multi response; packed lunch children only)<sup>22</sup>**



A minority of kitchen staff felt that there was a lack of choice in the meals, however it should be noted that during the research a new cook book was launched to increase the variety of meals that could be prepared. Caterers who took part in the research following this launch maintained the introduction of new recipes had helped to tackle the previous lack of choice. Respondents described how the new recipe book included additional recipes for desserts, and other meals that were very popular with the children and sold well, as well as complying with the nutritional standards.

“There was a new cook book out last week, and it was really good with more of all the favourite recipes... They have taken on board that the children do like sweet stuff, like make it that wee bit healthy – put dates or sultanas in it...” Interview; school catering manager, Western ELB.<sup>11</sup>

## Price of school meals

As mentioned earlier, perceived cost of school meals played a key role in lunchtime choice. In 2012, **post-primary pupils taking packed lunches were twice as likely as those who had school meals to say they based their choice on value for money, or because they thought packed lunches were cheaper** (34% and 17% respectively;  $p < .001$ ) (see Table 6.2, page 8). Moreover, **more than half (51%) of post-primary pupils who currently took packed lunches said they would consider switching to school meals if they were cheaper** (see Figure 6.3, page

<sup>22\*\*\*</sup> signifies a p-value of less than 0.001, where the observed difference could only be expected to have occurred by chance in 1 in 1000 times in repeated tests; \*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.01, suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 1% of the time, and \* suggests the difference is statistically significant at a p-value of less than 0.05 (suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 5% of the time).

9) making this the third most popular suggestion after shorter queues and less crowded canteens. Indeed, the cost of school meals was a key issue thought to limit uptake of school meals reported by a variety of other stakeholders in the research.

**In 2012, over two in five principals (41%) felt that school meals were too expensive**, increasing from 26% in 2008 ( $p < .01$ ; see Table 6.4). Fewer principals consider the price of school meals to be ‘about right’, decreasing from 47%, in 2008 to 36% in 2012. In 2012, less than one in four (23%) principals considered school meals to be ‘good value for money’.

**Table 6.4 Principals’ and parental attitudes towards the cost of school meals in 2008 and 2012<sup>23</sup>**

|                             | Principals’ attitudes |                 | Parents’ attitudes |                 |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|
|                             | 2008<br>(N=289)       | 2012<br>(N=204) | 2008<br>(N=973)    | 2012<br>(N=874) |
| <b>Too expensive</b>        | 26%**                 | 41%**           | 37%                | 36%             |
| <b>About right</b>          | 47%**                 | 36%**           | 48%                | 48%             |
| <b>Good value for money</b> | 27%**                 | 23%**           | 15%                | 17%             |

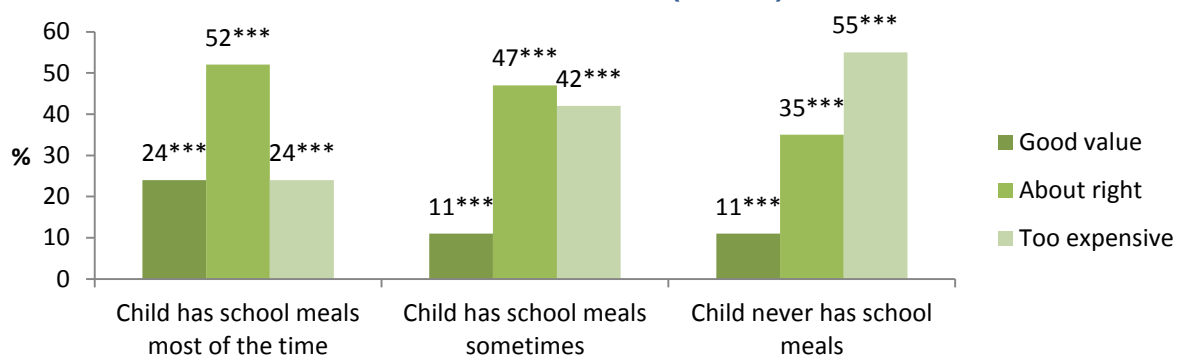
Parents’ attitudes towards the cost of school meals were also explored, revealing little change over the duration of the research. In 2012, **over one in three (36%) parents felt that school meals were too expensive**; however, when attitudes of this group of parents were looked at in more detail, it was found that almost one in five (19%) of those who considered school meals to be too expensive, did not actually know what was served in a school meal. Slightly less than half (48%) of all parents **felt the price of school meals was ‘about right’**. **In comparison with principals, fewer parents felt school meals represented ‘good value for money’** (see Table 6.4).

Figure 6.6 shows over half (52%) of parents whose children took school meals most of the time felt that the cost of school meals was ‘about right’, and almost one in four (24%) thought school meals represented good value for money. In comparison, **parents whose children only sometimes or who never took school meals were more likely to consider school meals too expensive**, with more than half (55%) of

<sup>23</sup> \*\*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.001, where the observed difference could only be expected to have occurred by chance in 1 in 1000 times in repeated tests; \*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.01, suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 1% of the time, and \* suggests the difference is statistically significant at a p-value of less than 0.05 (suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 5% of the time).

these considering the price prohibitive ( $p < .001$ ) (see Figure 6.6). In fact, as is displayed in Table 6.5, the second most popular explanation given by parents as to why their child does not have school meals, is that they are simply too expensive (39%).

**Figure 6.6 Parental attitudes towards the cost of school meals based on whether their child takes school meals or not (N=855)<sup>24</sup>**



“Respondent 3: If a child takes everything they are entitled to, they are getting a really good meal.  
Respondent 5: If they take everything it is good value but if they don’t...they are going down with a mashed potato and gravy for £2.40 you know...”  
Focus group, food in schools co-ordinators

Although catering staff (i.e. school catering staff, nutritional standards coordinators; area managers and area supervisors; and Education and Library Board<sup>11</sup> catering managers) recognised that the cost of school meals could seem expensive, when the quality of ingredients was considered, these stakeholders felt it actually represented very good

value for money. However, it was recognised that unless children actually consumed the whole plate, rather than simply eating a few elements of it, school meals could work out to be quite poor value for money.

Indeed, when parents who gave their children a packed lunch were asked why they chose this lunch option, as opposed to school meals, the most popular response was that they knew their child would eat the food in the packed lunch (52%), whereas they might not eat all of a school meal (see Table 6.5).

<sup>24</sup> \*\*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.001, where the observed difference could only be expected to have occurred by chance in 1 in 1000 times in repeated tests; \*\* signifies a p-value of less than 0.01, suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 1% of the time, and \* suggests the difference is statistically significant at a p-value of less than 0.05 (suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 5% of the time).



It was also recognised by stakeholders that if parents had to pay for school meals for two or more children, this could prove very expensive. As was pointed out by the catering managers and by the food in schools co-ordinators, providing packed lunches could actually work out cheaper for some working families with more than two children compared with the cost of school meals.

“The price of a school meal is going up to £2.30... Now you take someone with 2 children – that’s an awful lot of money, never mind over the week – you count that up over a month. I think it’s too dear. If it was less expensive I think more parents would take them.” Interview; school catering manager, Belfast ELB.<sup>11</sup>

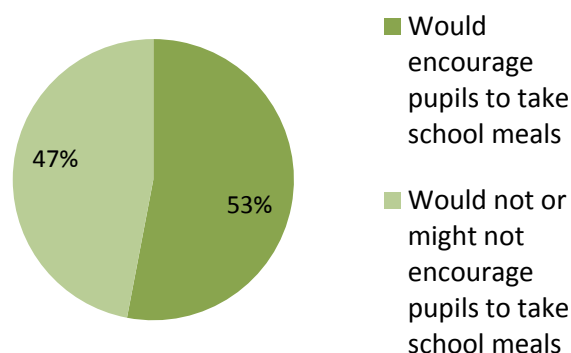
**Table 6.5 Parents' reasons for choosing something other than school meals (N= 586; multiple response)**

|  | %  |
|--|----|
| I know that my child gets what he/she will eat   | 52 |
| School meals are too expensive   | 39 |
| My child doesn't like the meals provided by the school                                   | 32 |
| The queues are too long for school meals   | 32 |
| My child prefers to eat the same as their friends  | 16 |
| This provides healthier food than what is provided by the school                         | 17 |
| My child doesn't have enough time to eat school meals                                    | 11 |
| My child doesn't have enough time to eat school meals because of other school activities | 4  |

## Whole school approach

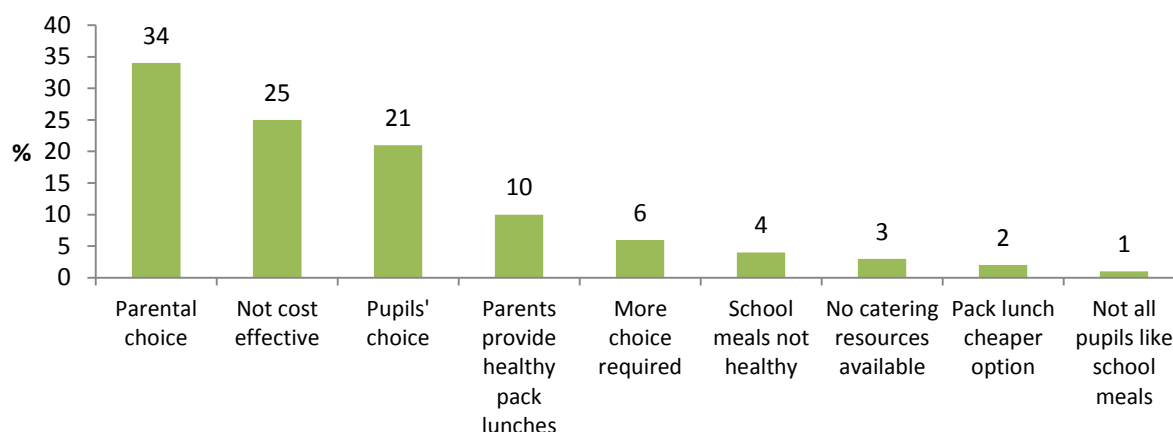
Although over half (53%) of principals who participated in the research felt that pupils should be encouraged to take school meals rather than other lunch options, such as packed lunches, it is concerning that a **large minority (47%) of principals did not** (see Figure 6.7). Almost one in three (29%) principals maintained that pupils should not be encouraged to take a school meal, while 18% were unsure.

**Figure 6.7 Should pupils be encouraged to take school meals? (Principals; N=206)**



More than one in three (34%) principals who might not or would not encourage school meal uptake maintained that it was up to parents to choose whether their child had a school meal at lunchtime. One in four (25%) maintained that school meals weren't cost effective, and over one in five (21%) said that pupils should be left to make their own choice as to whether they had a school meal or packed lunch.

**Figure 6.8 Reasons why principals would not or might not encourage pupils in their school to take school meals (N=97)**



**The relatively large proportion of principals who do not buy in to the school meals service is of concern.** The importance of a whole school approach was a major theme throughout this wave of the research, as well as in the initial work in 2008<sup>25</sup>, and integral to the success of healthy eating in schools. Other stakeholders highlighted the importance of principals' attitudes in implementing the school meals service, commenting on the effect of healthy eating policies within schools, including packed lunches; keeping pupils on-site at break and lunch times; and the other food and drinks sold in schools from tuck shops and vending machines.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

The aim of the food in schools programme is to ensure school children in Northern Ireland eat healthy and nutritious food within school. However, although demand for

<sup>25</sup> Gilmore G, Gossrau-Breen D, MacDonald L, Taylor L and McGowan L. School food: top marks. A summary report on food in schools research in Northern Ireland. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2010. Available at: <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/Top%20marks%20summary%20report.pdf>. Accessed 18 July 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No. 3 Adherence and attitudes to nutritional standards and healthy eating polices in schools. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at [www.publichealthagency.hscni.net](http://www.publichealthagency.hscni.net)

school meals has increased (among primary school pupils) and pupils are now eating fewer high fat and sugary snacks and drinks at break<sup>27</sup>, research demonstrates children are still not consuming the recommended portions of fruit and vegetables per day.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, given that this research has demonstrated that post-primary children and children from low income families are less likely to eat as many portions of fruit and vegetables than younger children and those from more affluent backgrounds, the initiatives described below should target pupils in the post-primary sector and particularly in areas of high deprivation.

- There is a need for the Food in Schools Forum, in particular the school catering service, to work with school staff to improve 'buy in' to the service. A large minority (47%) of principals intimated that they would not or might not encourage uptake of school meals within their school. As has been pointed out by other stakeholders, principals' buy in to the school meals service is integral to the sustainability and success of the nutritional standards. It is suggested that further training is needed in order to make principals more aware of the rationale behind the school food: top marks programme, and the importance of good nutrition.
- It is also suggested a consultation with principals should be established in order to ascertain and tackle any reasons behind this reticence, and motivate them to promote school meals within their school community.
- Price was still regarded as one of the main obstacles to increasing school meal uptake by the majority of stakeholders who participated in the research, with over two in five principals (41%) and more than one in three (36%) parents considering school meals were too expensive. It is suggested that insofar as possible, the price of school meals should be kept as low as possible in order to maintain or increase demand for the service.
- It was also recognised that if a parent had more than one child taking school meals this could prove expensive when compared with alternatives, such as packed lunches. However, as was pointed out by the catering staff, given the quality of ingredients and nutritional value of a school meal, this actually

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<sup>27</sup> Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No.5: The influence of school nutrition policy and practice on children's eating habits. Public Health Agency. Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

<sup>28</sup> Beattie K, Gilmore G. Research Bulletin No. 2: The influence of deprivation on knowledge, attitudes and healthy eating behaviours. Public Health Agency Belfast, 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

represented good value for money. It is suggested that loyalty schemes should be considered, in order to improve demand for school meals, with additional cash benefits or allowances made for families with more than one child taking school meals in order to increase uptake amongst this particular group. Moreover, it is also suggested that school meals should be marketed in a more effective manner to both pupils and parents, emphasising the nutritious and healthy ingredients used, and demonstrating that a school meal represents good value for money.

- The findings suggest a lack of awareness of the nutritional value of school meals, with more than one in three (34%) post-primary children and 17% of parents who currently supply their child with a packed lunch perceiving this option to be more healthy than a school meal. This suggests that marketing for school meals should clearly demonstrate the nutritional value of school meals compared to other lunchtime choices, with linkages made between nutrition and overall health.<sup>29</sup>
- Environmental factors continue to play a role in pupils' lunch time choice. For example, 73% of post-primary pupils felt there were 'a lot of people in front of them' in the canteen or dining hall while 57% considered changing from packed lunch to school meals if the dining room was less crowded. It is suggested that the Food in Schools Forum work with schools to identify environmental factors negatively impacting on the demand for school meals, examining ways that issues such as queuing can be addressed.

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<sup>29</sup> Beattie K, Gilmore G. Research Bulletin No. 4: Marketing the school food: top marks programme and healthy eating messages. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>