

Summary of evidence in support of Universal Free School Meals



Health and Nutrition

A universal approach [increases uptake](#) of school meals and so the nutritional benefits of school meals reach more students. A [pilot study of UFSM \(Universal Free School Meals\)](#) in Hammersmith and Fulham secondary schools saw uptake of school meals increase considerably.

[School meals are generally better quality](#) than packed lunches as they contain more veg and lower sodium levels. Research has shown that [school meals also contain less ultra-processed food](#) than packed lunches.

A universal approach to food can support “[eating healthy foods](#), sharing a meal together, and interaction between students and teachers at mealtime, to promote health, learning, and equality” and these habits prevail throughout childhood.

School leaders reported universal school meals improved the healthy eating profile, including [higher fruit and veg consumption](#) – alongside parents reporting that children were more likely to try new foods.

A [UFSM pilot study](#) found that pupils were significantly more likely to eat veg (+26%) and less likely to drink soft drinks.

UFSM provision is associated with reduction in [prevalence of obesity](#). The research finds a cumulative effect over time which suggests starting universal school meals early and maintaining it throughout primary school could [maximise the impact](#) of the policy.

Education and Employment

Universal school meals [reduce absenteeism](#) (FSM is attributed to 1.2 fewer days of absences per year). This [leads to improved educational attainment](#) and consequently employment and cost savings for the school as less resources are required for catch-up programmes.

Teachers reported [greater readiness to learn](#) when UFSM were implemented.

A study in Sweden found significant [improvement in lifetime earnings](#) and productivity as a result of the school lunch program. Whilst all students benefitted from universal school meals, those from more deprived households benefitted the most.

One study found that only universal entitlement led to positive impact on attainment, however the mechanism is not clear. Children receiving UFSM made between [four and eight weeks' more progress in maths and English](#) than similar pupils in comparison areas. The attainment improvement was greater for pupils from less affluent backgrounds.

The evidence suggests that through improved nutrition, learning and attainment [the inequality gap can be narrowed](#).

Economy

[Every £1 spent returns £1.71 social and economic benefits](#) in a universal approach. This is higher than a roll out to those in receipt of universal credit (£1.38)

Universal provision supports [household finances](#) by reducing household food expenditure and enabling greater financial security in the household (Universal Infant Free School Meals is estimated to save a family of 2 adults and 2 children approx. £20/month).

Improved nutrition and dietary habits can support a reduction diet-related disease and [reduce pressure on health services](#).

It is estimated the NHS could [save £1.6bn-£4.1bn](#) and the UK's economic output could increase £2.2bn-£5.7bn if healthy weight targets in the UK were met (these stats are taken from the National Food Strategy).

The recent cost-benefit analysis estimates UFSM could [save the NHS £3million](#) due to reduction in prevalence of childhood obesity.