

York Youth Council Good Practice Guide

Maximising Free School Meal Numbers

Why?

York Youth Council thinks that Free School Meals are important because:

- ★ School food has to meet high nutritional standards which guarantee pupils a healthy, balanced menu.
- ★ Research proves that when students eat at lunchtime, in a decent environment, they do better in the afternoon. (School Food Trust 2011)
- ★ Recent years have seen an increase in the number of pupils entitled to Free School Meals in York.
- ★ The Pupil Premium is tied to Free School Meal registration, enabling schools to better support those children that most need it.

Free School Meals matter and we think we should work together to ensure that:

- ★ **all pupils entitled to Free School Meals are registered for them**
- ★ **all registered pupils claim and eat their free meal**

Improving take up across the board

Approaches which seek to increase the overall take up of school dinners have proved effective in increasing the uptake of Free School Meals as well. This included promotion through assemblies, PSHE lessons, strong links to healthy school programmes, promotion to parents and addressing issues around the quality of food and the dining experience.

Free School Meals – the figures

- ★ **1.2 million** - the number of pupils in England registered as eligible for Free School Meals. (1)
- ★ **500,000** - the number of pupils in England that are put off claiming, because of systems that single out those receiving free meals, and the poor quality of some of the food. (2)
- ★ **827** - the number of pupils in York secondary schools registered as eligible for Free School Meals. (3)
- ★ **162** – the number of pupils in York secondary schools registered for a Free School Meal that don't eat them. (3)
- ★ **Between 1050 and 2700** - the estimated number of pupils in York who may be eligible for Free School Meals but are not registered. (4)
- ★ **£430** - the amount of Pupil Premium funding that each school receives per registered child.
- ★ **14%** - of pupils in York are obese at the end of Year 6. (5)

(1) DfE: Schools pupils and their characteristics, Jan 2011.

(2) Children's Society, Fair and Square, April 2012.

(3) January free school meal Census 2012.

(4) Estimates based on national % of non- take up and a comparison of families in receipt of full housing benefit and council tax benefit against FSM applicants Feb 2012.

(5) School Food Trust Sept 2011.

Things to try...**Parent involvement**

Communicating with parents about their entitlement to Free School Meals, how to claim, and what the benefits are. Giving parents the chance to try school meals at events like parent's evenings, and providing school menus and examples of what a Free School Meal could include.

Listening to pupils, staff and parents

Listen to feedback about lunchtime and tailor your service to address any issues. This will enable you to make school meals more appealing to both paid and Free School Meal pupils. We have developed an online questionnaire to help you do this- this can be found at www.yorkyouthcouncil.co.uk Get in touch if you want a link for your own website.

Supporting pupils who usually have pack-ups to mystery shop the dining experience can encourage them to try a meal- and provide you with feedback.

Food and eating experience

The quality, choice and quantity of food is important in promoting uptake of school meals. Research in Leeds suggested that parents concerns about portions not being big enough, restricted choices (limited to meal deals, or not including a drink) contribute to them not taking school meals. Addressing issues around the choice of foods, length of queues, dining environment and provision for pupils on special diets can help.

Incentive schemes

Providing rewards (e.g. entry into a raffle) when healthy choices are made have proved effective.

Ambassadors

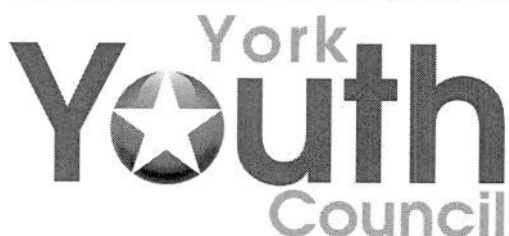
Consider adopting the School meal Ambassadors scheme which supports students to work with school catering teams to monitor, challenge and improve school food.

Grab and go

Providing a grab and go option, which can be pre-ordered and collected at break or lunch time lets pupils take part in lunch time activities, enables them to eat with their friends and eat outside, has been found to improve take up.

Summary

- ★ Improve the quality of school meals and the dining experience
- ★ Listen to pupils, parents and staff
- ★ Involve and communicate with parents
- ★ Introduce grab and go
- ★ Consider incentive schemes
- ★ Introduce School Food Ambassadors



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Removing the stigma from FSM

The problem

Nationally about 500,000 children and young people do not claim Free School Meals when they could (Children's Society). In York we estimate that somewhere between 1050 and 2700 children and young people fail to claim their entitlement. This represents between £451,500 and £1,161,000 of pupil premium money that isn't accessed. In secondary schools, in York in 2010-11 only 6.6% of the 8.3% of pupils who are entitled ate their Free School Meals. Meaning many went without the benefits associated with a nutritious school lunch.

Stigma

One of the reasons given for not claiming is stigma. Systems that use vouchers or having your name ticked at the till mean that it is **obvious** who receives Free School Meals. Some pupils find this **embarrassing**. Parents may feel **anxious** about their children being identified and others knowing they are receiving benefits. This can lead to **bullying** and name calling. It can also take longer than paying with cash, especially if they are topping up with cash.

The challenge

Completely removing peer to peer discrimination around free school meals in schools is a huge challenge. But there are things you can do to minimise the negative effect it can have on the pupil's willingness to eat a Free School Meal.

Non- stigmatised access

It is important that pupils who receive Free School Meals aren't identified. Explore ways to provide all pupils with exactly the same tokens or dinner tickets, so that no-one can tell who has or hasn't paid for them.

Make sure that queuing and seating systems don't separate out those who have Free School Meals and those who don't.

Ensure dinner staff are discrete in dealing with Free School Meal issues.

FACTS: 9% of pupils did not feel comfortable getting free school meals, 17% felt embarrassed, 10% were worried about teasing. (Education Leeds research)

Work with parents

Make sure you communicate with parents, letting them know what you are doing about ensuring access to Free School Meals is discrete.

Whole school approaches

Ensure that anti-bullying policy covers bullying related to Free School Meals.

Promoting the uptake of school meals to the whole school (and reminding people that it might be free) can increase uptake.

Cashless systems

York Youth Council recognises that cashless systems can be very expensive for schools. However they can be highly effective in tackling the problems of stigma associated with Free School Meals. They can reduce time queuing and ensure anonymity. They can also support the school in monitoring what pupils are eating.

More information...

The School Food Trust have produced an independent report that looks at cashless systems. You can find this at:

www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/partners/resources/an-independent-review-of-cashless-systems

Education Leeds have done research and produced a tool kit about improving free school meal take up.

www.educationleeds.co.uk/schoolmeals

Summary

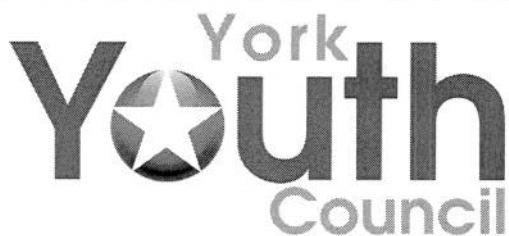
★ Embarrassment of being recognised as getting Free School Meals deters parents and pupils from claiming their entitlement.

★ Reducing the stigma associated with this can lead to an increase in Free School Meal registration and take up.

★ Any system for giving out Free School Meals should ensure that pupils can not be identified.

★ Make sure you tell parents what you are doing to make sure that pupils can't be identified.

★ It is important that pupils choose to take a Free School Meal because they: enjoy the food, enjoy the dining experience and feel comfortable- not just because they are FREE.



York's Free School Meal Charter

Reducing Poverty in York

York's Poverty Strategy states that poverty is everyone's business. We want to keep people out of poverty and help those in poverty to have a better life. Nationally it is estimated that 4.3% of children who could have a free school meal are not currently registered. Assuming that York follows the national trend, an estimated 1050 children in York may be entitled but not registered, local research supports this assumption.

What has been done...

- ★ The local Authority has improved the information about claiming free school meals.
- ★ The Local Authority is working with the Job Centre to see if people claiming benefits that entitle them to free school meals can be automatically entitled, rather than having to claim separately.

To improve Free School Meals our school will:

- ★ Ensure that any information sent home to parents about school meals or school uniform includes information on how to apply for financial support.
- ★ Ensure school staff can support parents in applying for free school meals.
- ★ Ensure young people getting free school meal can't be identified by those who are not directly involved in administering the system. This includes other pupils, school dining room staff, teachers, volunteers working in school.
- ★ Run the School Food Ambassadors scheme to support pupil's involvement with school food.
- ★ Seek and act on regular feedback from pupils, parents, and staff about school food. York Youth Council have developed an online questionnaire to help you do this. Look on www.yorkyouthcouncil.co.uk for more information.
- ★ Ensure there are a range of options available to pupils who are entitled to free school meals, including grab and go options.