MiSoC | ESRC Research Centre on Micro-Social Change

Universal Free School Meals reduce child obesity and improve children's Reading scores

Dr Angus Holford and Professor Birgitta Rabe

The research

We study the impacts of providing Universal Free School Meals (UFSM), as opposed to means-tested Free School Meals (FSM), on primary school children's take-up of school meals, educational attainment, health and household finances.

We focus on four London local authorities that rolled out UFSM to all primary-age children: Newham (from academic year-ending 2010), Islington (2011), Southwark (2012) and Tower Hamlets (2014), and study how outcomes evolved in these local authorities, compared to local authorities in the rest of London or across England that did not run UFSM schemes.

See more detailed results and methodology in our full project report at https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/files/misoc/reports/Impact-of-the-UFSM-schemes-in-England.pdf.

Findings

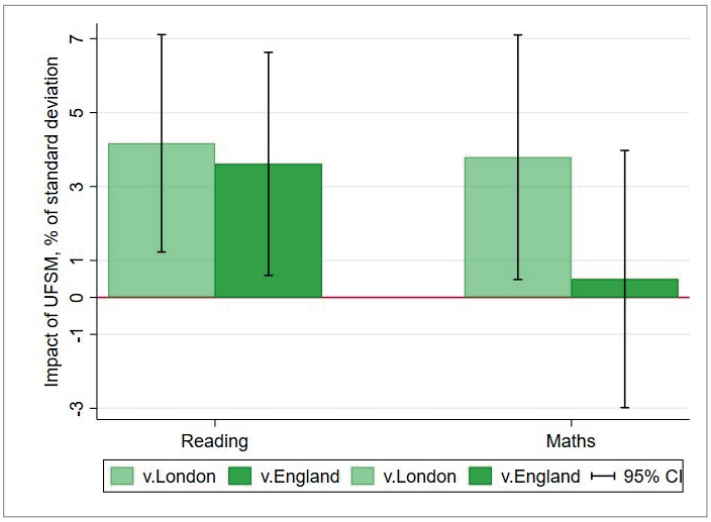
Impacts on take-up of school meals

- UFSM increased take-up among those already eligible for means-tested FSM by 1.3-1.6 percentage points. This is equivalent to shifting around 8% of non-takers into taking up their entitlement, despite this group facing no change in price. It suggests that UFSM increased the attractiveness of taking a school meal for this group.
- Introducing UFSM led to one in three children newly eating a school lunch, mostly those not already eligible for FSM.

Impacts on educational attainment:

- UFSM causes children to make approximately two weeks additional progress in Reading by the end of primary school. There is not consistent evidence of a benefit to Maths scores
- Effects on Reading are similar for pupils registered for means-tested FSM, who see no change in the price of their lunches, and those not registered for means-tested FSM, who become newly entitled to a free lunch, and for whom the rise in take-up was likely to be much larger
- Finding similar impacts for both groups supports there being benefits from universal provision not just driven

Figure 1 Impact of UFSM on children's standardised test scores in Year 6, by subject and compared with different control groups



Economic and Social Research Council
ISER Institute for Social & Economic Research
University of Essex
Nuffield Foundation

DOI: 10.5526/misoc-2024-001

by individual take-up. For example, the change in nutritional intake may mean children newly taking up a UFSM exhibit less disruptive behaviour. This may also benefit other children in their class

Impacts on children's body mass index (BMI) classifications

- UFSM reduces the proportion of Reception children living with obesity by approximately 1-1.5 percentage points on average (from a base of 14% in the four London local authorities). This represents a 7-11% reduction in obesity rates
- UFSM reduces the proportion of Year 6 children with obesity by about 0.6-1.2 percentage points on average (from a base of 25%). This represents a 2-5% reduction in obesity rates
- The effects of UFSM on Year 6 children are biggest (1.2-2.1 percentage point reduction in obesity) for those who received UFSM throughout primary school, from Reception onwards. This group experiences a 5-8% reduction in obesity rates
- The beneficial impacts of UFSM did not extend to the schools with the highest pre-existing obesity rates. This indicates that additional support will be needed in more challenging environments

Impacts on absences from school

- The availability of UFSM did not materially affect children's absences from school

Impacts on household finances

- UFSM helps households with the cost of living, because those who previously purchased a school meal no longer have to pay, and those who previously assembled a packed lunch no longer need to purchase the food items for the child's lunchbox. Parents also save time if they do not have to put together a lunch.
- Our analysis suggests that households spent the money they saved on non-food items, rather than increasing the quality or quantity of food they buy at supermarkets or eat out

Authors' main messages

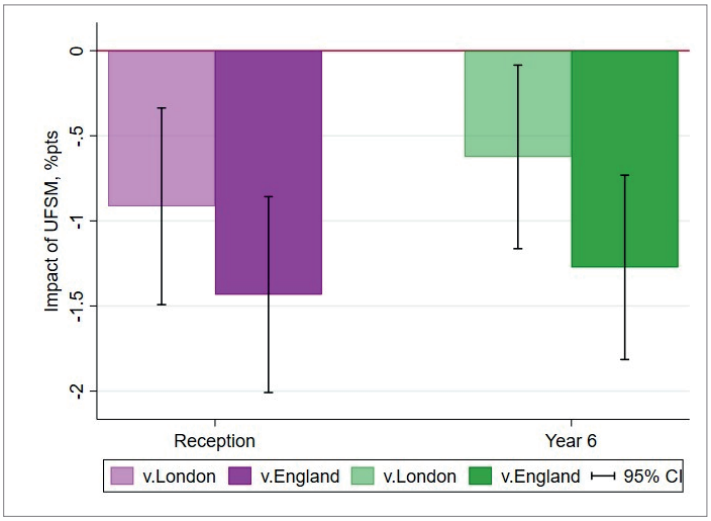
Universal provision of FSM throughout primary school helps ensure that all children have access to a meal of high nutritional standards. This has health and educational benefits for these children, while also providing cost-of-living support to families with primary-age children.

Our results on educational attainment and take-up show that the switch to the universal environment improves the welfare of already FSM-eligible children from low-income households, despite not being the targeted beneficiaries.

Our results on obesity prevalence suggest that starting free meal provision early and maintaining it throughout primary schools would maximise the impact on cutting obesity rates and would thereby best contribute to lowering the long-term healthcare and indirect productivity costs of obesity.

Longer-term benefits of UFSM will rely on the health benefits persisting and a continued high take-up of high-quality school lunches. This could be supported by an attractive and social school dining environment, and ensuring that funding for school food is high enough to provide hot meals meeting nutritional standards, and to cover utility and staff costs taking inflation into account.

Figure 2 Impact of UFSM on children's obesity prevalence, by age and compared with different control groups



Data sources Figure 1: National Pupil Database, 2002/03-2018/9. Figure 2: National Child Measurement Programme, 2007-2019. '95% CI' = 95% confidence interval; we are 95% sure that the true effect lies between the ends of this capped line. See full results, sample sizes, and methodology in the full project report.

About this analysis

The Nuffield Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Website: www.nuffieldfoundation.org X (formerly Twitter): @NuffieldFound. The authors acknowledge additional support from the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-Social Change [ES/S0124861]. This work uses data provided by individuals and collected by the NHS as part of their care and support. Specifically, this work uses data from the National Child Measurement Programme, supplied by NHS England's Health and Social Care Information Centre, part of the Government Statistical Service. This work also uses data from the Department for Education's National Pupil Database, carried out in the Secure Research Service, part of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Statistical data from ONS is Crown Copyright, and copyright of the statistical results may not be assigned. The use of the ONS or NHS England statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement or quality assurance of the ONS or NHS England in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates. Cite as: Holford, A., Rabe, B., (2024), 'Universal Free School Meals reduce child obesity and improve children's Reading scores'. *MiSoC Explainer 2024:001*, https://doi.org/10.5526/misoc-2024-001.