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London's Universal Free School Meals provision could come at a cost to primary schools

Plans from the Greater London Authority to deliver universal free school meals to all primary school children across London next year were welcomed when they were announced. However, [a new report](#) by Northumbria University finds that the scheme could result in significant losses in school funding through a drop in pupil premiums.

In England, free school meals are currently provided to all children in reception, Year 1 and Year 2 in state-funded schools. From Year 3 onwards,

they are means-tested, meaning only children from families receiving certain benefits or earning less than £7,400 per year are eligible.

To receive means-tested free school meals in England, parents must register their child via their local authority or school. State schools then receive funding known as the 'pupil premium' for every child eligible and registered for free school meals.

This funding is significant – worth £1,455 per primary school pupil and £1,035 per secondary school pupil per year – and is available to schools to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve their full potential. As such, most pupil premium funding goes to schools in the poorest areas.

Across London, pupil premiums provided nearly £400 million in support to primary and secondary schools in the 2021/22 academic year.

In February, the Mayor of London announced a [one-year trial of free school meals](#) to all primary school pupils across London to help families with the cost-of-living crisis. The trial is widely welcomed, with a number of London boroughs considering a further roll out of free school meals to secondary schools, and other local authorities nationwide considering similar schemes.

However, as all primary school children in London will receive free school meals regardless of household income, it is expected that there will be a drop in the number of parents registering their child as eligible to receive them.

Because of the way the registration and pupil premium schemes are linked, concerns have been raised that schools can expect to see a reduction in the amount of pupil premium funding they receive from the government.

To [estimate how much income may be lost](#), researchers in Northumbria University's Healthy Living Lab used school census data from the Department for Education and a DfE report that stated that 11% of parents whose children are eligible for free school meals but are not registered to receive them.

Their analysis suggests that London's primary schools lost out on an estimated £30.6 million in pupil premium funding in the 2021/22 academic year when parents did not register for the scheme.

In the same year, London's secondary schools lost out on an estimated £17.9 million in pupil premium funding.

Based on the current publicly available data, there is no way to calculate the actual number of parents that may not register their child to receive free school meals when the London scheme is rolled out in September. What it is known is that when universal infant free school meals were introduced in 2014, over 30% of school leaders reported a drop in their pupil premium income.

While the research team welcomes universal free school meals for all families, they expect these lost costs to schools via pupil premiums will increase.

They state in the report that they believe schools in boroughs that have higher levels of poverty will be hardest hit by any drop in pupil premiums and are calling on the Greater London Authority and councils to develop plans to mitigate any impact.

In particular, the researchers say their findings provide evidence of the urgent need to simplify the registration process parents use to register for free school meals in England.

The Healthy Living Lab also estimated that, in the same year, families in need with children attending primary schools lost out on £9.6 million towards the cost of a school meal and £7.9 million in secondary schools because their children were not registered to receive free school meals.

[Professor Greta Defeyter](#), Director of the Healthy Living Lab, explained: "We have known for some time that the process for registering for free school meals needs to be reviewed. We also know that despite significant efforts by schools and local authorities, more than 200,000 children who are eligible for free school meals – approximately 11% of children currently entitled to free school meals – are not registered to receive them.

"This is partly because the registration process is not straightforward, and partly due to stigma and cultural reasons. But if an eligible child is not registered for free school meals, then not only are families being hit with additional costs of having to pay for a school meal, or provide a packed

lunch, but both primary and secondary schools are missing out on vital pupil premium funding.

“Parents likely do not realise that when they register their child to receive free school meals, the school receives pupil premium funding that pays for essentials like teaching assistants, academic support, staff development and even support for attendance, behaviour and social and emotional wellbeing.

“The registration system as it stands is hugely complex and muddled and we urgently need to find ways to simplify it.”

Professor Defeyter added: “Our findings highlight the real difficulties for local authorities in making well-intentioned but sweeping changes to the school meals system.

“Of course, we absolutely want all our children to have access to nutritious school meals and we absolutely welcome the support that the Mayor of London is providing to families of young children in the capital.

“But we must consider the impact this scheme may have in the potential drop in the number of parents registering their children for benefits-related free school meals, and the associated drop in pupil premium funding to schools.

“There is a disproportionate knock-on effect for the poorest boroughs, schools and families, especially when school budgets are stretched due to increasing costs.”

Dr Nick Capstick, Chair of the School Food Review, added: “In recent years following unfunded pay rises and increased costs to school budgets, not least in the areas of pupil resources and energy, the need to provide universal free school meals has never been more important.

“But equally as important is the need to ensure that significant funding streams and especially pupil premium funding is maximised, not lost.”

The research team recommend that any changes to the school food registration process should be implemented on a phased basis to allow time for implementation. This would ensure that the necessary structures and processes are in place to drive sustainable change and improvements to the

school food programme.

Northumbria University's Healthy Living Lab has partnered with the national charity, Feeding Britain, and will be evaluating the implementation of an auto-enrolment process for free school meals across a number of local authorities in the academic year 2023-2024.

The Healthy Living Lab has undertaken [extensive research](#) into the provision of school feeding programmes, food insecurity and holiday hunger over the last 20 years. Research findings from the team have been instrumental in ensuring children have access to healthy meals at school, both during term time and holidays, and in the development and expansion of the Department for Education's [Holiday Activities and Food](#) programme in England.

The full paper, [School Meals & Pupil Premium: Hungry For Change](#), is available now.

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