



Professor Greta Defeyter and school holiday club participants

Jun 03, 2024 09:44 BST

New report calls for more support for schools to improve children's health and wellbeing

Northumbria University academics have contributed to a new report, published by the Centre For Young Lives, which calls for more support for schools to fix the broken school food system and boost children's physical activity in order to tackle issues such as childhood obesity and food insecurity.

The report, produced in collaboration with the N8 Research Partnership, Child

of the North, Health Equity North and a number of universities including three Northumbria University academics, outlined overwhelming evidence that the health of children and young people in the UK is getting worse and children's education, as well as physical and mental wellbeing, is being impacted by inactivity and unhealthy diets.

[A country that works for all children and young people – an evidence-based plan for supporting physical activity and health nutrition with and through education settings](#) is the fifth in a series of reports published by the Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives think tank which focuses on how both the Government and Opposition can reset their vision for children, to put the life chances of young people at the heart of policy making and delivery.

According to the report, statistics show that 2.2million 5–16-year-olds do not get 30 minutes of activity a day (Sport England, 2022/23) and that this physical inactivity is costing the UK an estimated £7.4billion every year.

The findings of the report also outline that young people from the most deprived backgrounds are the least likely to be active with only 44% achieving 60 minutes of physical exercise daily. This is being compounded by the current cost of living crisis which is impacting on purchasing decisions and leading people to cut back on nutrient-dense foods such as fruits, vegetables, fish, dairy and eggs.

The report sets out evidence-based recommendations to give schools the power to develop their own holistic approaches to improving diets and physical activity and urges Government to support schools in diversifying the curriculum, developing teacher training and putting the health and wellbeing of pupils at the centre of the school environment.

Speaking about the report, Professor Greta Defeyter, one of the core writing team alongside Northumbria colleagues Emily Round and Rosie King, said: "Schools are underfunded. The services currently in place are not being maximised to their full potential due to lack of funding or poorly designed systems, for example 11% of people entitled to free school meals are not applying for them for a myriad of reasons and this equates to around 250,000 children missing out on a hot meal they might really need.

"The government needs to fund initiatives such as national auto-enrolment

for free school meals, improve the nutritional and dietary content of school meals, provide additional opportunities for physical activity throughout the school day, and opportunities for children and young people both before and after school, such as universal school breakfast clubs and holiday provision. Such initiatives, if properly funded by government, could form the foundation of a coherent programme of school-led health and wellbeing interventions and go a long way to tackling some of the issues we're seeing, such as childhood food insecurity, childhood obesity and poor concentration and behaviour in school. However, schools need the resources, the funding, the support and the power to develop and implement plans that work for their children in their communities.”

The report goes on to state that providing schools with the support and resources they need to deliver more than just lessons in the classroom should be a priority. However, it warns that teachers, school staff, and current school budgets cannot be expected to deliver this ambition all on their own. Interventions need to be created collaboratively within communities working alongside higher education experts to ensure the best possible practice, impact and effective use of available budgets.

Dr Andy Daly-Smith, Reader in Healthy Childhood at the University of Bradford and an executive editor of the report, said: “A greater focus on physical activity in school is long overdue, as are the resources and specialist staff to deliver rich physical activity experiences.

“We need to better recognise those schools which are placing a greater importance on improving physical activity, healthier diets, and wellbeing by recognising their endeavours through the schools’ inspection system. Widening Ofsted’s remit to reward schools that follow such an approach would also encourage more schools to make this a priority for their students.”

The report outlined three key recommendations for achieving this including:

- Establishing individual whole-school approaches for physical activity and healthy nutrition that are created alongside teachers, parents, pupils, support staff and the wider community to bring together health and education and better support childhood health and wellbeing.
- Committing to support education settings in the delivery of a diverse curriculum, teacher training and a healthy ethos where

the health and wellbeing of pupils is at the centre of the school environment, including recognition by Ofsted for schools who are doing this well.

- Prioritising evidence-based practice and co-production to drive impactful and sustainable change within education through engagement with higher education institutions who can advise on the most appropriate and effective interventions.

Professor Defeyter, founder and director of the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria, continued: “This report focuses very heavily on action that can be taken through the education environment. It is estimated that obesity currently costs the NHS £6.4million per annum and with an already strained health system you can see why it’s important we look at earlier interventions and make sure we’re promoting healthy life choices from an early age and across the first 8000 days of life. Schools are absolutely pivotal in this process.

“Equally, in a survey conducted by the Child Poverty Action Group, 53% of teachers reported an increase in the number of pupils struggling to concentrate on learning due to hunger and fatigue.

“More than 18% of households with children experienced food insecurity in 2022-23 so, this is also about equity, ensuring all children have the same chances through initiatives such as free breakfast clubs and the extension of free school fruit and vegetable schemes. Children and young people are the future of the UK, and we need to be giving them the best chances of success through investing in education and the learner”.

Through seven key principles, including putting children first, addressing inequity, adopting place-based approaches, working together effectively across public services, putting education at the heart of public service delivery, establishing universities as the ‘research and development’ departments for local public services and using and sharing information across public service providers effectively the report evidences how a collective approach could help overcome the overwhelming challenges faced by children and young people across the UK today.

Anne Longfield, Executive Chair of the Centre for Young Lives said: “With the right support, schools have a crucial role to play as partners in developing and delivering wider approaches to supporting improved health nutrition and

increased physical activity. If we get it right, some of the other challenges facing schools – the rising number of absences due to ill health, concentration levels, and classroom behaviour for example – could also be improved.”

The report also identifies a number of innovative and impactful approaches already being utilised to improve the health of children and young people through schools including, auto-enrolment for free school meals, The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme and The Creating Active Schools (CAS) programme.

Professor Mark Mon Williams, Child of the North report series editor said: “The links between health and education are illustrated perfectly through the negative impact on learning created by a malnourished child. A healthy country needs to invest in its future workforce, and this means supporting schools to help children eat well and be active. The paltry costs necessary to ensure children learn effectively would be swamped by the long-term savings the NHS would make if it wasn’t picking up the obesity problems created through the first two decades of someone’s life.”

The authors of the report are currently running a petition to encourage the Government to [‘Prioritise Children and Young People in the UK’s Next Political Cycle’](#).

Professor Greta Defeyter has been instrumental in the introduction of free school breakfasts, tackling food insecurity and reduction in educational attainment after the school holidays through the HAF programme and more recently the development of the HAF Plus programmes for 13-16 year olds. Professor Defeyter is also currently campaigning for national auto-enrolment for free school meals to help reduce the percentage of families entitled to the provision who are missing out. She is also working closely with the Children’s Alliance to put action on food at the top of the Government agenda and drive policy change on food, diet and obesity. [You can read more about the Healthy Living Lab and its work here.](#)

Northumbria University is dedicated to reducing health and social inequalities, contributing to the regional and national workforce and improving social, economic and health outcomes for the most marginalised in society. Through its new Centre for Health and Social Equity, researchers will be delivering world-leading health and social equity research and creating

innovative, evidence-based policies and data-driven solutions to bring impactful change across the region, the UK and globally.

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--- Please contact media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk with any media enquiries or interview requests ---

Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences

rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences

andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk

07708 509436



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk

07377422415



James Fox

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk

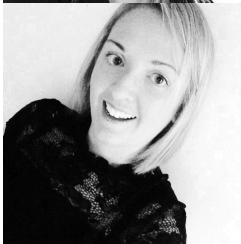


Kelly Elliott

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk