

CHiLD POVERTY ACTION GROUP

Research funding:

Why do we need yet another study to tell us the obvious?

Child Poverty Action Group position paper

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A significant grant of \$810,000 over two years has recently been made by the Health Research Council to support research which will investigate the effects of providing breakfasts to children on their learning, academic performance, nutrition, and health.

Child Poverty Action Group welcomes the official interest being shown in the link between breakfast and their performance at school – indeed it is long overdue. There is mounting evidence that more families are having trouble feeding themselves as their incomes fall or remain stagnant, while food prices continue to rise relentlessly. Anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests more children are coming to school without having had breakfast, and the number of schools applying for food assistance from private charities is also increasing. Moreover, those children who might claim to have breakfast are often, in reality, getting a pie and a bottle of fizzy drink. Lots of empty calories with no nutritional value.

Children's need for a nutritious breakfast is beyond doubt. Which is why CPAG harbours deep disquiet that this research is progressing when there are so many other pressing concerns that are worthy of investigation. Without wishing to question the credibility or good intentions of the researchers, there are several reasons for our unease.

The first is the obvious fact that children do not learn, grow or behave well if they are hungry. This is one of the reasons almost every other country in the OECD has some government funded in-school food programme. Teachers in schools where children are getting good quality breakfasts or lunches report that children learn better and behave better in the classroom.

Teachers' observations are backed by a significant body of research showing that, especially for younger children, breakfast improves their attention and learning, and school attendance; their nutrient intake; and helps establish good eating patterns that contribute to good health later in life.¹ It is difficult to believe that yet more research is needed to establish these results, especially when so many other issues relevant to children's wellbeing remain unexplored.

Food insecurity for New Zealand children has been well documented by organisations such as CPAG and through official publications such as the Ministry of Health's Children's Nutrition Survey.² Many factors contribute to food insecurity, but chief among them is income. As the Public Health Association observes:³

"There is more than enough food to go around in New Zealand and it is a basic human right that everyone who lives here can access sufficient, nutritious food. By doing nothing, or not enough, the country is wasting some of its human resource. Children growing up without enough food don't develop to their full potential. And the flow-on effects of regular inadequate food include poor mental and physical health, which are current and future burdens on the health system. "

Dealing with food insecurity does not require research, it requires political will to ensure that all children have at least a chance of learning while they are at school. To date that political will has been absent.

CPAG's biggest concern, however, is with the idea that more research on something so well established is required in order to justify spending any money. If children are coming to school hungry, as so many are, there is clearly a moral imperative to feed them. As Martin Thrupp (Professor of Education at the University of Waikato) has put it, "the idea that there have to be achievement gains for there to be a political rationale for feeding breakfast to hungry children is a sad indictment on all of us. Children's wellbeing should not be the object of abstract notions of efficiency and value for money."

Similarly, the idea that governments cannot or should not act without evidence that their actions will pay off is patently nonsense. If evidence really held a privileged position in politics then free breakfasts would be available universally to all schoolchildren, and discussions about the efficacy of bootcamps, the deterrent effect of three-strikes legislation, or national standards in education would not have seen the light of day.

Evidence is not the issue here. Given the benefits of breakfast for children, nor is the cost. The issue is government unwillingness to acknowledge hunger in New Zealand, and to deal with it directly and comprehensively.

¹ See Child Poverty Action Group, forthcoming, The case for a national school breakfast programme, and Child Poverty Action Group, 2005, Hard to swallow. Available at <http://www.cpag.org.nz/resources/publications/res1123805616.pdf>.

² Ministry of Health, 2003, NZ Food NZ Children: Key Results of the 2002 National Children's Nutrition Survey. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

³ Public Health Association, 2008, New Zealanders who go hungry: Time to start intervening, Available at: <http://www.pha.org.nz/media/080703confnzhungry.pdf>.