

CHiLD POVERTY ACTION GROUP

Filling the gap:

The case for a national school breakfast
programme in New Zealand

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Introduction

This Child Poverty Action Group paper argues the case for the provision of free breakfasts in decile one, two and three schools in New Zealand. It considers how the food insecurity faced by many New Zealand families might be ameliorated through the provision of breakfasts to children in schools. It begins with a discussion of the context of food insecurity, then considers evidence for the benefits of providing food to children in schools, and finally the costs of such a programme.

Food in schools has become a topic for public discussion as the reality that thousands of New Zealand children go to school hungry has garnered media attention. Kids Can, the Red Cross, and KickStart all provide food (mainly breakfasts) to low-decile schools, with demand reported to be increasing. While there remains an element of blaming the victim, many New Zealanders now accept that low household income is the key reason so many children go to school hungry. Greater understanding has arisen as two-income working households have found they, too, are cutting back to afford food, and once stable jobs have vanished in the recession.

Hunger greatly diminishes children's chances of growing up healthily into productive adults. The issue of feeding children must be broadened beyond the rhetoric into more practical solutions. The issue of feeding children must be tackled head on. Recent work by Martin Anscombe (2009) has found that discussion often focuses on bad parenting, the social factors that contribute to a lack of food, and other issues around hungry children, but seldom deals with the immediate problem. This must change. We can no longer pretend that hunger is simply the result of poor parenting, or is "cultural." New Zealand's counterparts in the rest of the developed world provide good quality, nutritious breakfasts to children on a quasi-universal basis, and we should, too. We need to honour our international commitments and ensure a rich life for all New Zealand children.

Background

In 2005 Child Poverty Action Group reported on foodbank use in New Zealand (Wynd, 2005). Using data from the Auckland City Mission and the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Service's Poverty Indicator Project the report found that foodbank use continued to rise despite improving economic conditions in the early 2000s.

In 2009, with rising unemployment and a deepening recession well under way, food in/security has become a more pressing issue for many families, especially as incomes fall and food prices continue their relentless rise. In 2005 CPAG found that the greatest users of foodbanks were beneficiaries. Now, although beneficiaries continue to use them, foodbanks report that the greatest increase in the number of people seeking help is coming from working families. Even with two or more incomes, many households are still short of food money at the end of the week.

Food insecurity arises for a number of reasons, but underlying almost all of them is inadequate income. Benefits remain at the levels they were slashed to in 1991, and after a period of strong wage growth beneficiaries are more marginalised economically than ever. For families on or even slightly above the minimum wage hours well in excess the standard working week is the norm in order to make ends meet. Since late 2008 reduced activity in the service sector has translated into reduced hours, resulting in further pressure on family food budgets. Similarly, dual-income households cut back to one income find they are not eligible for social assistance if one partner remains in work. Except in limited circumstances, families receiving the In-Work tax Credit also lose their child-related assistance. Housing continues to be a major expense, although a flat real estate market has made housing slightly more affordable for those in a position to buy. For others rents remain high, as do mortgage payments. As well, unexpected expenses can result in financial distress and borrowing. This is reflected in family budgeting services reporting record demand for their services.

In 2005 CPAG recommended intervening directly through the provision of free state-funded breakfasts in schools. The reasoning was simple: hungry children do not learn – feeding them improves their attendance, nutritional status, and academic performance and behaviour; direct provision of food to children ensures the resources go where the need is greatest; and the small amount of household income saved could be diverted to other living costs.

Since 2005 the need for some provision of food in schools has grown, as has the need for a coordinated, uniform response. The Counties Manukau District Health Board has recognised this in its *Best Practice Guidelines for Establishing Breakfast Clubs in Schools* (2008). After the National government was elected in 2008 it announced the withdrawal of food guidelines for schools which has created a further threat to children's nutritional intake. As well, the extremely modest Fruit in Schools programme is in danger of being cut as the government seeks to impose fiscal austerity on the most vulnerable families and communities in the country.

CPAG argues that, far from reducing social spending on low-decile schools and communities, spending should be re-prioritised so that additional resources are provided for vulnerable communities in order for them to achieve even a modest level of economic and social viability. Often these are the communities with the greatest number of children, and their needs cannot wait until the present recession recedes.

Benefits of food in schools

In its 2005 report, CPAG focused on the provision of breakfasts in schools. This was because breakfast is the meal most likely to be skipped (Affenito, 2007), with only 40% of New Zealand children report eating breakfast at least once a day (Ministry of Health, 2003). It is "older children experiencing the most socioeconomic deprivation were the least likely to eat breakfast" (Utter, Scragg, Mhurchu, & Shaaf, 2007). Yet breakfast can make a positive contribution to children's learning. As well, anecdotal

evidence from existing breakfast clubs suggests shared breakfast has positive social benefits, as well as providing somewhere to go for children with working parents. The positive social benefits seen in New Zealand have also been observed overseas (Wahlstrom & Begalle, 1999).

Evidence for the benefits of breakfast for children is mixed. In large part this is due to benefits diminishing as children get older and exercise more control over their food intake, and older children being more likely to skip breakfast altogether (Wilson, Parnell, Wohlers, & Shirley, 2006). However, for younger children the evidence is clear that breakfast provides a number of benefits (Gerritson, 2005).

Improved nutrient uptake

Wilson et al (2006) argue that for the children who do not eat breakfast, a significant improvement in their daily nutrient uptake could be achieved if they did so. Consumption of a good-quality breakfast has been shown to be positively correlated with nutrient uptake (Kleinman et al., 2002a; Rampersaud, Pereira, Girard, Adams, & Metz, 2005; Wilson, Parnell, Wohlers, & Shirley, 2006). Poor nutrient uptake, or “hidden hunger” (van Stuijvenberg, 2005), can have detrimental effects on children’s mental and physical development (see Wynd, 2005, pp. 39-41), and “may play an important role in chronic disease risk” (Rampersaud, Pereira, Girard, Adams, & Metz, 2005, p. 744). Poor nutrient uptake is a greater threat in an age of cheap highly processed food than it might have been once, and that risk has been exacerbated now that schools are no longer obliged to provide healthy food and drink to students.

A New Zealand study based on data from the *Children’s Nutrition Survey* (Ministry of Health, 2003) found significantly better nutrient uptake for children who reported eating breakfast. “Although breakfast provided only 16.2% of the daily energy intake, it provided a significant proportion of the daily intake of calcium (29.9%), iron (26.9%), zinc (20.2%), thiamin (37.0%), riboflavin (35.1%) and folate (36.8%)” (Wilson, Parnell, Wohlers, & Shirley, 2006). This result held for all ethnic groups. A large study based in Spain also found that one of the factors putting children – especially girls – at risk of poor nutrition was no or a poor quality breakfast (Serra-Majema et al., 2002).

Another New Zealand study found children who miss breakfast are less likely to meet guidelines for fruit and vegetable consumption and more are likely to snack on unhealthy foods (Utter, Scragg, Mhurchu, & Shaaf, 2007). At present it appears the Ministry of Health’s Fruit in Schools is likely to be discontinued, and this will increase the risk of inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption for children in low-decile schools who are more likely to skip breakfast.

Improved academic performance and attendance

There is now a substantial body of research showing breakfast consumption contributes to students’ academic performance and school attendance (Rampersaud,

Pereira, Girard, Adams, & Metzl, 2005). Alleviating short-term hunger appears to be one pathway through which this occurs: this is consistent with teachers' (and parents') observations that hungry children do not learn.

Eating a good quality breakfast has been found to slow the rate childrens' cognitive performance declines during the morning (Ingwersen, Defeyter, Kennedy, Wesnes, & Scholey, 2006). Here, "good quality" is defined as having a low glycaemic index (GI), that is foods high in fibre and complex carbohydrates. It has been established clearly that blood sugar improves cognitive performance in children and low GI foods provide a more stable supply of blood sugar over a longer period than foods high in sugar such as soft drinks and high-sugar cereals (Ingwersen, Defeyter, Kennedy, Wesnes, & Scholey, 2006).

A controlled study in Minnesota that provided a nutritious breakfast to primary-aged children found children who participated showed "better concentration, increased alertness and energy, and a decrease in stomach aches and headaches." Other benefits included "a decrease in discipline problems, and benefits in social behavior, attendance, and a general increase in math and reading scores" (Wahlstrom & Begalle, 1999). Also, parents were reported as being positive about the programme, with most parents reporting that the breakfasts were "positive for the family." A Boston study that provided free breakfasts to children in public schools likewise found that among the children who consumed breakfast, there was a significant improvement in maths tests scores and a decrease in the number of days they were absent (Kleinman et al., 2002b). Similar results held in studies in Philadelphia and Baltimore (Murphy et al., 1998), Spain (Lo'pez-Sobaler, Ortega, Quintas, Navia, & Requejo, 2003), the UK (Colquhoun, Wright, Pike, & Gatenby, 2008) and elsewhere (Taras, 2005).

Weighty issues

Skipping breakfast has been found to be associated with overweight in young people both overseas and in New Zealand (Affenito et al., 2005; Rampersaud, Pereira, Girard, Adams, & Metzl, 2005; Utter, Scragg, Mhurchu, & Shaaf, 2007). The link between skipping breakfast and increased body mass index (BMI)¹ is not well understood but there is some evidence of lower percentage of fat intake among children who eat breakfast (Rampersaud, Pereira, Girard, Adams, & Metzl, 2005; Wilson, Parnell, Wohlers, & Shirley, 2006), in part because children who skip breakfast may overcompensate by eating calorie-dense snacks during the day (Sjoberg, Hallberg, Hoglund, & Hulthen, 2003). In addition, "skipping breakfast has been associated with less healthful lifestyles, including poorer food choices and

¹ BMI expresses the weight-for-height relationship as a ratio, that is, weight (in kilograms)/height (in meters). Experts recommend BMI because it can be obtained easily, is correlated strongly with body fat percentage, is associated only weakly with height, and identifies the most overweight individuals correctly, with acceptable accuracy (Krebs et al., 2007).

infrequent physical activity among adolescents and adults” – all risk factors for overweight and obesity.

In New Zealand there is a clear socioeconomic and ethnic gradient in the consumption of breakfast, with more deprived groups, Maori and Pasifika children being less likely to eat breakfast. This reflects the distribution of overweight and obesity within the community, with low-income groups more likely to be overweight, and suffer the consequences of that.

Overweight and obesity contribute to New Zealand’s biggest killers, including heart disease, stroke, cancer and diabetes. The cost to the health system is staggering, with diabetes alone estimated to cost about \$600 million per year, rising to \$1.3 billion by 2016/17 (Ministry of Health, 2009). For this reason alone any move to reduce future health costs must be considered seriously, including the provision of breakfast to children in low-decile schools, which demonstrably has so many educational and physical benefits. Whatever it costs, it will be less than the costs of dealing with poor nutrition directly through the health system.

A matter of equity

If a few children go hungry in the morning then that suggests a temporary or perhaps ongoing problem within individual families. If thousands of children go hungry morning after morning then the problem is structural, and society can move to change that. Despite the ubiquity of hunger in New Zealand’s small towns and low-income suburbs, children’s hunger is often portrayed as one of individual failing. This stigmatisation means parents sometimes do not send hungry children to school, so as not to draw attention to their hardship. This unseen hunger is in addition to the hunger evident at New Zealand schools every day. Blaming of parents and families avoids the real issue: if a child is hungry, that child must be fed. Rectifying the cause must come after.

In New Zealand, not only are thousands of children being fed by schools and social agencies, the demand for school meals is increasing as families struggle to meet costs. Food is a discretionary expense – housing and utilities expenses are the first priority, food can be cut back if necessary. With children in disadvantaged households being less likely to eat breakfast, an ethnic disparity is also present with Maori and Pasifika children less likely to eat breakfast (Ministry of Health, 2003). This disparity increases as children get older.

Children from lower socioeconomic families, and Maori and Pasifika children, are more likely to come to school hungry, and, as a result, are more likely to be lacking important nutrients in their diets, be unable to concentrate at school, and suffer from overweight and obesity. Breakfast therefore emerges as both a symptom and a cause of the well-documented health, educational and social inequities found in New Zealand’s children and young people (Ministry of Health, 2007; OECD, 2007; St John & Wynd, 2008).

Until recently New Zealand policymakers have aimed to create equality of opportunity for children as part of a broader social investment strategy. Providing breakfast, for free, to all children attending decile one and two schools would be one positive way to achieve this stated policy aim, with concomitant health and social benefits that would pay dividends in the long run. Moreover, state-run and funded breakfasts have the advantage of being able to save costs through centralised planning and coordination. At present, provision of food in schools is often highly stigmatised and episodic – some charities provide to anyone who asks, others give food to children without other children or in some cases even parents being aware it is happening. Universal provision within schools would remove the arbitrary nature of current private arrangements. Funding must be long-term and secure and, as the global financial meltdown is clearly showing, funding dependent on private sources cannot ensure this.

What would it cost?

At present the Fruit in Schools programme provides fruit to 100,000 children in 500 low-decile schools every day at a cost of \$12 million per year. It seems probable that some of the administrative capability of Fruit in Schools could be extended to the provision of breakfast in low-decile schools with relatively little cost.

Some schools would incur one-off set-up costs for items such as fridges, stoves, cutlery, etc. Others may need to cover staff costs for a coordinator to ensure consistent and “hassle-free” breakfasts. One option for schools is to use breakfasts as an opportunity to encourage parents to get involved in helping with breakfast, as already happens in some schools. Positive spin-offs include community building, educating parents about nutrition, and in some cases motivating parents to return to education themselves (Neale, 2009). This points to the need for communities to be involved in setting up programmes, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all top-down model. Consistency is important, but so is adopting programmes that meet local needs and conditions.

Schools should have the opportunity to pick up a small additional operating grant from the Ministry of Education to run breakfast programmes. This grant would be ring fenced to ensure it went to the intended beneficiaries, with expenditure subject to audit of both spending and food quality: overseas, state funding of food programmes has provided a powerful incentive for corporates to lobby to sell schools poor-quality food. If the benefits of breakfast discussed above are to be realised, the temptation to provide cheap junk food must be resisted.

Breakfast could be funded through the Ministry of Education through a grant of \$1 per student per week. For an average-sized school this would be about \$20,000 per year, which would feed up to half the school (experience suggests that not all children take advantage of free breakfast). If this amount is feasible – and evidence from existing programmes suggests that it is – then it will be possible to achieve a great deal with very little. If all up costs – food, administration and transport – were

\$45,000 per school then over 550 decile one and two schools, this would come to approximately \$25 million dollars per year. If this were extended to decile three schools the cost would reach \$36 million.

New Zealand has the “fattest tail of underachievement” in the OECD. The spectacular failing of our education system to engage young people is most notable within low-income communities, and among Maori and Pasifika youth. The statistics for Maori boys in particular are extremely concerning. There are many inter-related reasons young people fail at school, and schools are always looking for ways to encourage children to come school. The evidence shows that providing a decent breakfast to children improves their school attendance and enables them to learn better when they are there. If similar results hold in New Zealand – and there is no reason to believe New Zealand children are notably different from their overseas peers – then improving attendance and academic performance in low-decile schools would on its own justify the cost. If the potential savings to the health system through improvements in diet, including a reduced likelihood of obesity, are factored in then New Zealand’s stance in not providing breakfasts looks short-sighted and mean.

Conclusion

New Zealand recently had its first Telethon for sixteen years. The subject of this generosity was KidsCan, a private charity that provides food and basic items of clothing such as raincoats to disadvantaged children. Like most private charities, KidsCan has faced increased demand in recent months.

Yet the question that remained unanswered – in large part because it appeared to have been deemed impolite to ask – was why do so many New Zealand children live in households unable to afford breakfast, raincoats, or gumboots? Such disadvantage was not the norm thirty or even twenty years ago. Have parenting standards slipped so much within a generation, or is there some other reason thousands of parents are unable to provide the basics to their children?

If we do not accept the idea that some spontaneous, mass mutation has caused this generation of parents to be worse than their forebears, then it is clear child poverty and hunger are a matter of societal choice. If we can choose to let children go hungry, then equally we can choose to ensure they start the day with a good-quality, securely funded, universally provided breakfast. Regardless of the multifactorial reasons in our society why children go hungry, offering regular breakfast would be a positive investment in the future of the most disadvantaged children, and make a real contribution to reducing the equity gap that exists between high- and medium-income school students and their peers in low-decile schools.

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