

- A partnership of public health researchers across the five universities in North East England
- Working with policy makers and practice partners to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)

## The role of school food policy in shaping young people's diets

Taking an effective and healthy approach to school food is critical to improving the diets of young people, and potentially reducing the gap in health inequalities. The current diet patterns of teenagers in the UK are of grave concern, with many public health initiatives failing to improve the nutrition of the 11-18 years age group. Schools provide an ideal environment to capture the attention of young people, therefore this policy brief provides an outline of updated research in this area.

The dietary habits established in adolescence are likely to be carried into adulthood. The significant cognitive changes experienced in teenage years, mean young people are extremely susceptible to advertising and social marketing techniques. The impact of this vulnerability, coupled with the need for independence and a strong social identity at this stage in life, has led to the culture of eating 'unhealthy' fast food becoming the norm.

A focus on the social and environmental influences of eating behaviours has the potential to enhance the understanding of how to improve the health of our young people. Unhealthy dietary behaviours known to contribute to obesity such as skipping breakfast, irregular eating patterns, and consuming fast food and high sugar drinks are common in this age group. Also, young people from areas of socioeconomic deprivation are less likely to eat fruit and vegetables, and more likely to choose options that are high in fat, sugar and salt. This means that UK teenagers are far from meeting recommended nutrient levels that are essential for healthy development and growth. Intervention strategies using educational messages, current school food standards and policy have limitations and have failed to sustain improved nutrition in young people.

Poor nutritional quality of school food, taste preferences, and the low cost and high accessibility of fast food are all established barriers to healthy eating in young people. The school environment creates opportunities to intervene and reach a large proportion of students. However, the relationship between food provided by schools and policy, and its effect on diet in adolescence is poorly understood.

The considerable cost and time pressures placed on schools mean that school leaders often fail to carry out sustained whole school healthy eating policies.

The systematic review (a summary of existing research) referenced in this policy brief, aimed to explore the effectiveness of school-based nutrition interventions, and the perceptions of young people experiencing a nutrition focused intervention or change in school food policy.

### Key Findings

- School based nutrition programmes can be effective in **reducing** sugar, sugar sweetened drinks, saturated fat, and **increasing** fruit and vegetable intake.
- Social acceptance is of critical importance to young people. In the school environment where peer and friendship groups naturally exist, there may be opportunities for interventions to explore social influence within the school culture.
- 'Whole school approach' interventions that are embedded into the curriculum significantly improved nutritional knowledge and dietary behaviours.
- Young people indicated the importance of cost, with expensive healthy food options seen as a barrier to improved nutrition. Free or low-cost interventions provided opportunities for young people to try a range of non-familiar foods and supported increased food familiarity (important in improving nutrition habits).
- The social aspects of the dining hall should be considered in a 'whole school approach', for example, time spent in the space, queuing and aesthetics.
- Autonomy is also important to young people, and behaviour change approaches such as 'nudges' (for example, product placement, stickers, colourful menus, and adapting cooking methods) are useful as part of a 'whole school approach'.
- The most promising evidence combines interventions which focus on physical activity and nutrition simultaneously embedded into the school day via policy, which are also less disruptive and easier for schools to implement over time.

## Policy relevance and implications

- Healthy school food policy should remain a priority, with local government supporting schools within a 'whole systems approach' incorporating consistent evaluation and shared good practice.
- Whole school approaches where environmental and behavioural change, alongside food and nutrition education, is embedded within school policy, hold most promise in improving the diets of young people.
- Students can help determine what success looks like to them, and what interventions they are more likely to engage with. Therefore, it is important to design interventions in collaboration with young people.
- Incorporate innovative school lunch ideas, such as pasta, wrap, pitta pocket stations offering a variety of toppings or fillings. Using wholemeal options as a default in school food. Making the healthy choice the normal choice.

*“Schools that prioritise health are more likely to have healthy food choices and adopt a whole school approach”*

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Research undertaken by experts from **Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health** based at Teesside University. The systematic review (a summary of existing research) aimed to explore the effectiveness of school-based nutrition interventions and the perceptions of young people experiencing a nutrition focused intervention or change in school food policy. It affirms the importance of school in shaping healthy eating practices and their role in addressing the inequalities gap for young people's health.

Rose, K, O'Malley, C, Eskandari, F, Lake, AA, Brown, L, Ells, LJ. *The impact of, and views on, school food intervention and policy in young people aged 11–18 years in Europe: A mixed methods systematic review*. Obesity Reviews. 2021; 22:e13186.

Web: <https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.13186>

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