



Child poverty and education: A survey of the experiences of NEU members

Summary

A joint National Education Union (NEU) and Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) survey received responses from 908 NEU members working in early years, primary and secondary schools and settings across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It found that:

- 87% of respondents think that poverty or living on a low income affects the learning of their pupils/students significantly.
- 60% of respondents think that the extent of poverty in their schools and its effect on low-income pupils/students has got worse since 2015. Of these, a third (33%) think it has worsened significantly.
- Schools are increasingly stepping in to fill the poverty gap with almost half of respondents stating that their school directly provides one or more of a range of anti-poverty services. Almost one in five respondents (18%) say their school runs a low cost food club; 13% report that their schools runs a free food bank; 16% say their school offers free or subsidised family meals; 16% say they have a clothing bank; and in a small number of cases (4%), respondents say their school provides emergency loans to families.
- Schools are also supporting low-income families by fully funding or subsidising participation by poorer pupils/students in activities such as school trips, extra-curricular activities and sports teams or clubs. Between half and four fifths of respondents say their school supports families with one or more of these activities.
- School staff are personally providing vital support for their pupils and students from low-income families. On at least a termly basis, over half of respondents (53%) say they personally provide school equipment such as books and stationery; over a third say they provide food; more than a fifth are supplying PE or sports kit; 14% donate toys and play things; 10% provide sanitary protection; 10% provide other hygiene products; and 8% help with travel costs. Many are doing so at least once a week.
- Over half (55%) of respondents think not enough children/young people are currently entitled to free school meals (FSM) and that there are many others who are not eligible yet whose families struggle to afford the cost of school meals.
- A majority of respondents (60%) think that most children in their school who are eligible for free schools meals are receiving them, but over a fifth (21%) think some of those eligible are not getting their free meals. A further 4% think the number missing out on their entitlement is significant.
- Where eligible children do not receive FSM, 56% of respondents think this is because parents feel too embarrassed to claim them; 52% think parents don't realise their child may be eligible; and 46% think the process for claiming is too bureaucratic or complex.
- 44% think that children who are refugees and asylum seekers are more likely to be living in poverty than others; and a similar number (41%) think that disabled children/young people or those with special educational needs were more likely than others to be poor.

Key findings

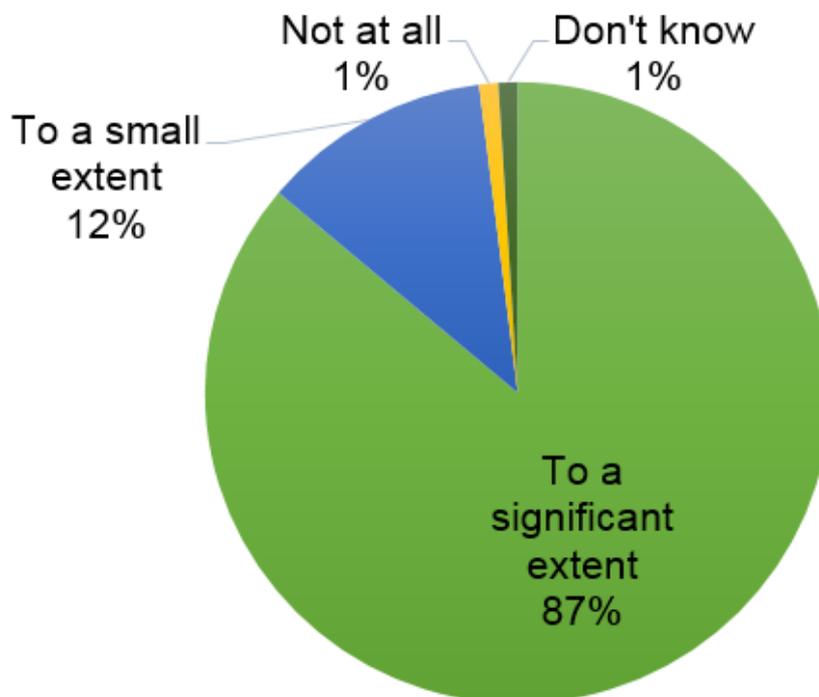
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The signs of poverty

Respondents were asked how often, if ever, they were aware of one or more of a number of signs of poverty among pupils/students in their school.

- 83% of respondents say they often (34%) or sometimes (49%) see children showing signs of hunger during the school day.
- 80% say they often (29%) or sometimes (52%) see pupils exhibiting signs of ill health.
- 93% of respondents say they often (62%) or sometimes (31%) witness children who are unable to concentrate.
- 95% of respondents say they often (65%) or sometimes (30%) see pupils showing signs of tiredness.
- 94% of respondents say they often (59%) or sometimes (35%) see pupils engaging in poor behaviour.
- 64% of respondents report that they often (17%) or sometimes (47%) are aware of pupils who are bullied because they from a poor family.

To what extent, if at all, do you think poverty/living in a low-income family affects the learning of your pupils/students? (908 answered)



*Numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding

Comments:

“I work in Early Years and the children ask every morning if they can have food, their mood and concentration picks up as soon as they eat.”

“Food poverty has a massive impact on children’s learning in the borough I work in. We have links with a local food bank and issue vouchers to the families that are willing to accept them but I am aware there are families that don’t for many reasons which means children from those families often have a lot less to eat.”

“Children from poverty stricken families frequently bring home issues into school with them which impact upon their learning and the learning of others.”

Children and young people often lack the essentials of daily life

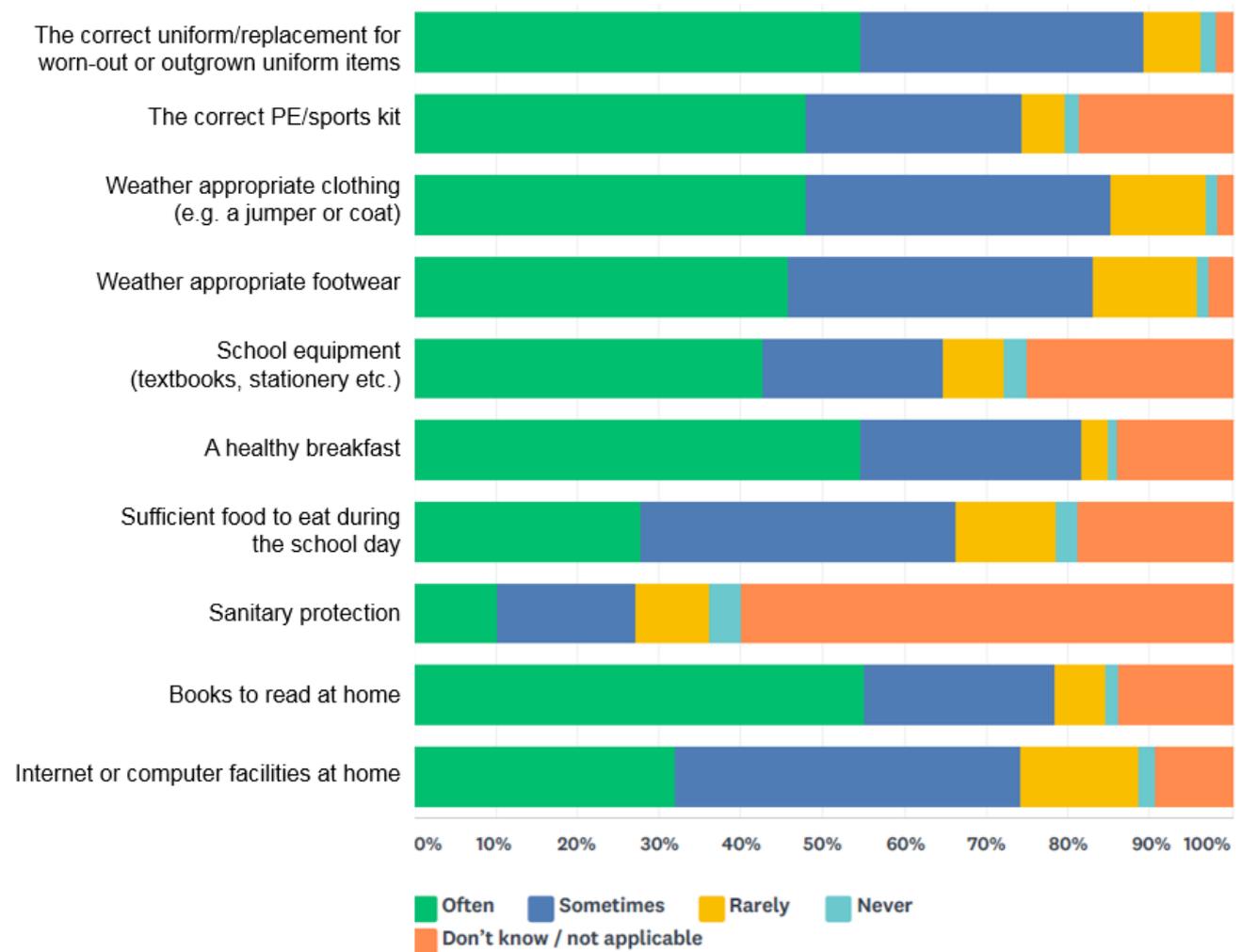
Children and young people from poor families frequently lack some of the daily essentials of life and this can affect their ability to learn in school or even to attend school in the first place. For example, hungry children may be unable to concentrate, children without a warm coat may be kept off school in cold weather or girls without sanitary protection may miss school during their periods.

NEU respondents are clear that the extent to which children from poor families miss out on the essentials of life is significant.

- 85% said they often (48%) or sometimes (37%) knew of pupils without weather appropriate clothing, such as a coat or jumper; and 83% said they often (46%) or sometimes (37%) see pupils without weather appropriate footwear.
- 81% of respondents said they often (55%) or sometimes (27%) come across pupils who hadn’t eaten a healthy breakfast; and two thirds 66% said they often (28%) or sometimes (39%) meet pupils without sufficient food to eat during the school day.
- 89% of respondents said that they often (55%) or sometimes (35%) come across pupils without the correct or suitably fitting school uniform.
- Over three quarters of respondents (78%) say they encounter children and young people without books to read at home – with 55% saying they often do so and 23% saying this sometimes happens.
- Having access to a computer or internet at home is increasingly essential for school work, yet 74% of respondents say they often (32%) or sometimes (42%) see pupils without these facilities.
- Almost three quarters of respondents (74%) often (48%) or sometimes (26%) encounter pupils without the correct PE or sports kit.

- 65% of respondents often (43%) or sometimes (22%) encounter pupils without school equipment such as textbooks or stationery items.
- Over a quarter of respondents (27%) reported that they often (10%) or sometimes (17%) come across girls/young women without sanitary protection.

How often, if ever, do you encounter pupils/students without the following items which you would attribute to being a result of poverty? (862 answered)



Comments:

“Students can be unwashed and their clothes unkempt and dirty, they also lack PE kit and trainers that fit them. Their coats and school shoes are often broken or too small.”

“The cost of just getting a child a coat is now [a] decision between heating the house or buying a coat.”

“Issues with clothing such as too small or tight, shoes ill-fitting or not waterproof, no waterproof bag for books and no proper winter coat.”

"I have children who arrive without coats, jumpers and so on. I take my own children's clothes they have grown out of to put on children. I pay for bread and butter to make toast for the children. Children often arrive with inappropriate footwear (canvas shoes / sandals) in winter. I have organised a library for children and parents and ask for donations and look around charity shops to fill it."

"We have a system where we encourage parents to give us old uniforms for redistribution."

"We provide all our pupils with basic uniform, equipment and food throughout the school day, to mitigate the impact of poverty and ensure that no pupil has the additional burden of being asked to function without these things."

"A large proportion of my students do not have access to Internet at home. They do not have money to buy basic stationery and as a school we have to provide clean uniforms for our children."

"I feel awkward giving homework on [the] internet e.g. google classroom or maths watch etc. due to a significant number of students being unable to access it at home."

"A lot of the times children will have internet access through the phone of a relative, however, some activities and work are not accessible through these platforms (such as reading egg). This then gives children less of an opportunity to develop (in the case of using reading egg, they can't progress in reading development)."

"Homework is often not completed due to having no stationery, bits to make things, no computers, some can't complete homework because they have to do all the chores, looking after siblings. This is all in primary education."

Some pupils are missing out on enrichment activities but schools are doing their best plug the gaps

Not all learning takes place in the classroom. Children and young people gain a lot from their experiences on schools trips and extra-curricular activities (such as sports coaching, musical instrument tuition, choir, dance, drama clubs and so on).

But many children and young people from poor families miss out on these because their parents cannot afford the cost. We asked our survey sample to what extent they were aware of pupils/students from poor families in this position.

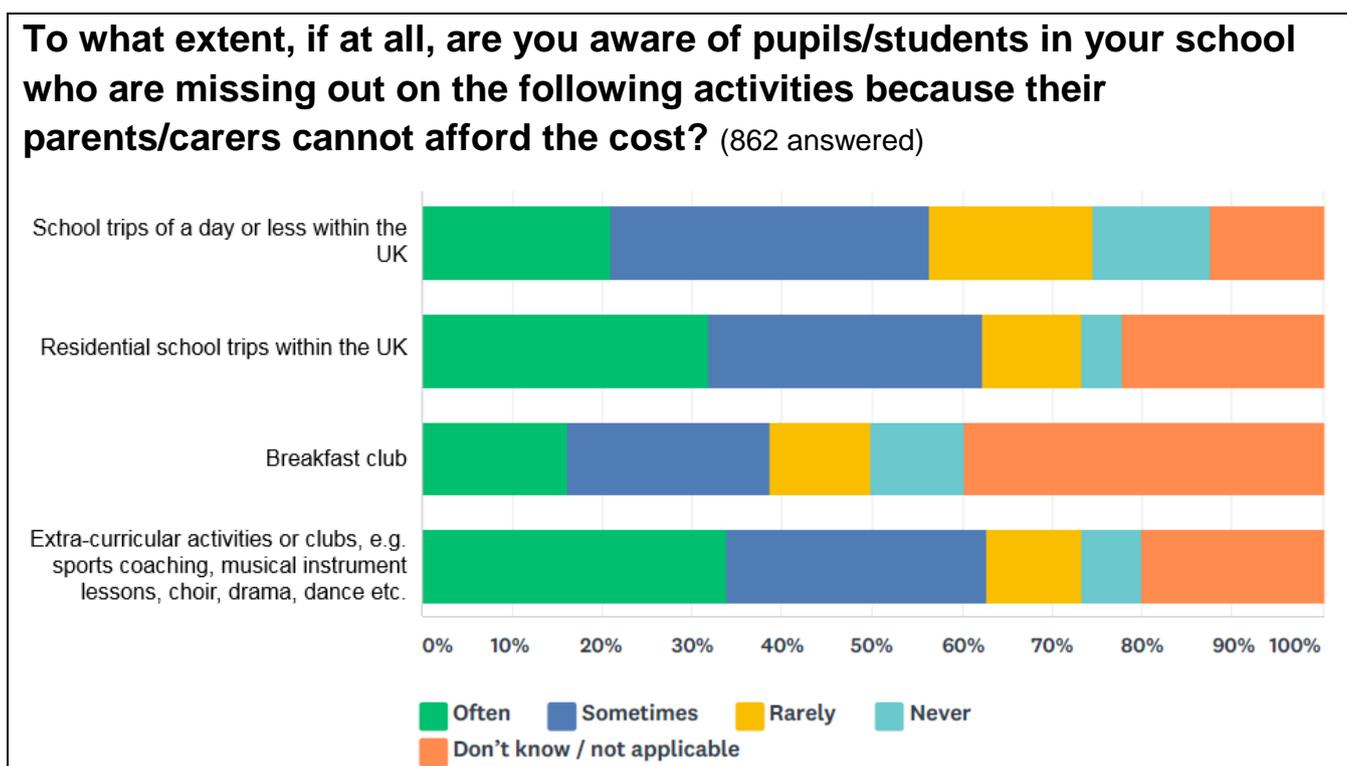
- 56% say they often (21%) or sometimes (35%) know of children and young people missing out on day trips because of poverty; and 62% say they are often (32%) or sometimes (31%) aware of them missing out on residential trips.
- 63% often (34%) or sometimes (29%) know of children and young people missing out on extra-curricular activities.

- Breakfast clubs can be a lifeline for working parents but 39% of respondents often (16%) or sometimes (23%) know of children who can't access these because their parents can't afford them.

However, it is also clear from our survey that schools are doing everything they can to ensure children from poor families do not miss out on a full range of within and out-of school educational activities.

Many schools are fully funding or subsidising pupils/students to take part in activities where their families cannot afford the cost. For children who qualify for free school meals or have in the previous six years, Pupil Premium funding is helping schools to offer this support. However it is clear that a wider group of families are in financial difficulty and schools are providing many more students with support.

- 79% of respondents said their school fully (42%) or partially (37%) met the cost of day trips for children and young people from low-income families.
- 61% said their school fully (19%) or partially (42%) helped with the cost of residential trips within the UK.
- Half of respondents (50%) said their school fully (29%) or partially (21%) met the cost of participation in school sports teams or clubs.
- Half (50%) also said their school fully (28%) or partially (22%) met the cost of extra-curricular activities.
- 37% said their school fully (18%) or partially (19%) met the costs associated with specialist subject options or equipment for courses.



Comments:

"Pupils often won't attend trips or activities which cost; even if the entry fee is a pound."

"On occasions, we have provided for pupils from low income families to attend school trips abroad. These children have sometimes arrived for the trip with no luggage to take with them for the week."

"None of our children in poverty access music lessons as there is no way it can be funded by parents or school - I know many who would love to."

"The school provides a free breakfast club (sponsored by a business) and free after school clubs where snacks are provided. Fruit is provided throughout the day. Before we did this older boys in particular were violent, disruptive and could not concentrate in class."

"We have magic breakfast at school to combat the lack of breakfast given at home. For pupil premium children we subsidise uniform and PE kit so this is not affecting the children."

"Some activities are subsidised from the school budget, set aside by governors (this may have to change again due to budget constraints) some by parent fundraising. Most extra-curricular activities are free and run by staff."

"My school provides free breakfast club, after school clubs and often provides subsidised clubs."

"We have a very well attended free breakfast club. Extra-curricular things like Duke of Edinburgh are heavily subsidised and further means tested so the whole year group can go."

"As a school with an extremely high proportion of pupil premium children we ensure students can access extra-curricular activities by funding them."

"All teachers and teaching assistants run after school clubs and the children have to attend one a week. They are free for all children."

"[My] school funds breakfast club and teachers buy bread/biscuits for pupils."

"My school is fantastic paying for all trips students go on. We also have a free breakfast club and all extra-curricular clubs are free too (including music lessons held by external providers which many of our poorest children attend). Sadly, I know this wouldn't happen if the families had to pay."

School funding cuts are jeopardising this support

However, worryingly many respondents mentioned in their comments that some of this support was now being removed due to school budget cuts.

"We heavily subsidised trips and clubs. However we are unable to continue doing this due to our budget which is a real shame for our pupils."

“Our school provides a discounted breakfast club. But also as a result of cuts we can no longer afford school trips. We can only go to places if they're free. I work at a primary school.”

“Children who are from very low income families have the cost of these trips etc covered by pupil premium funding. Those whose families are hard pressed but not on a low enough income to qualify for pupil premium are more likely to miss out. The school does its best to fund them too from general resources but our budget has been cut dramatically so this is unlikely to continue now.”

“Due to cut backs with extended schools we have to ask parents for more money to run our clubs. Many parents we have simply don't have the money. We are in an area of very high deprivation (top 10% deprived areas in Northern Ireland).”

“[The] school in financial hardship too”.

Secondary schools ensure most students don't miss out on subject choices

NEU members working in secondary school settings were asked if they knew of students who were missing out on their preferred subject /course options because their families couldn't afford the costs of specialist equipment such as arts materials, musical instruments, sports gear, computers or cameras.

A fifth of secondary respondents (20%) said they often (9%) or sometimes (11%) know of students in this position.

However it is clear from the survey comments that schools are also bending over backwards to try to ensure that no young person loses out on their subject choices because they are poor.

Yet at the same time, school funding cuts are jeopardising this approach.

Comments:

“Children are unable to provide themselves with the materials they might need to make their work and achievements even better. However our school would provide these children with whatever they need for their education.”

“We have to provide this for them. Reduction in funding is hitting them hardest”.

“In my experience, parents very rarely contribute to the funding of Art and Design Technology as they expect the school to provide the resources which, due to the ever diminishing budgets in creative subjects, is not possible. This applies to the majority of parents regardless of social/economic status. Those entitled to Pupil Premium support are provided with the required materials.”

“Teachers will go the extra mile to provide learners with what they need.”

“At our school we are aware of these things so school provides cameras for photography, ingredients for food tech, instruments (and music lessons are free for GCSE music students too), art materials provided for Art. Of course this doesn't stop kids buying their own if they want but I'd say that as a school we are pretty good at not letting money get in the way of kids doing stuff they want to do!”

School provision of anti-poverty services

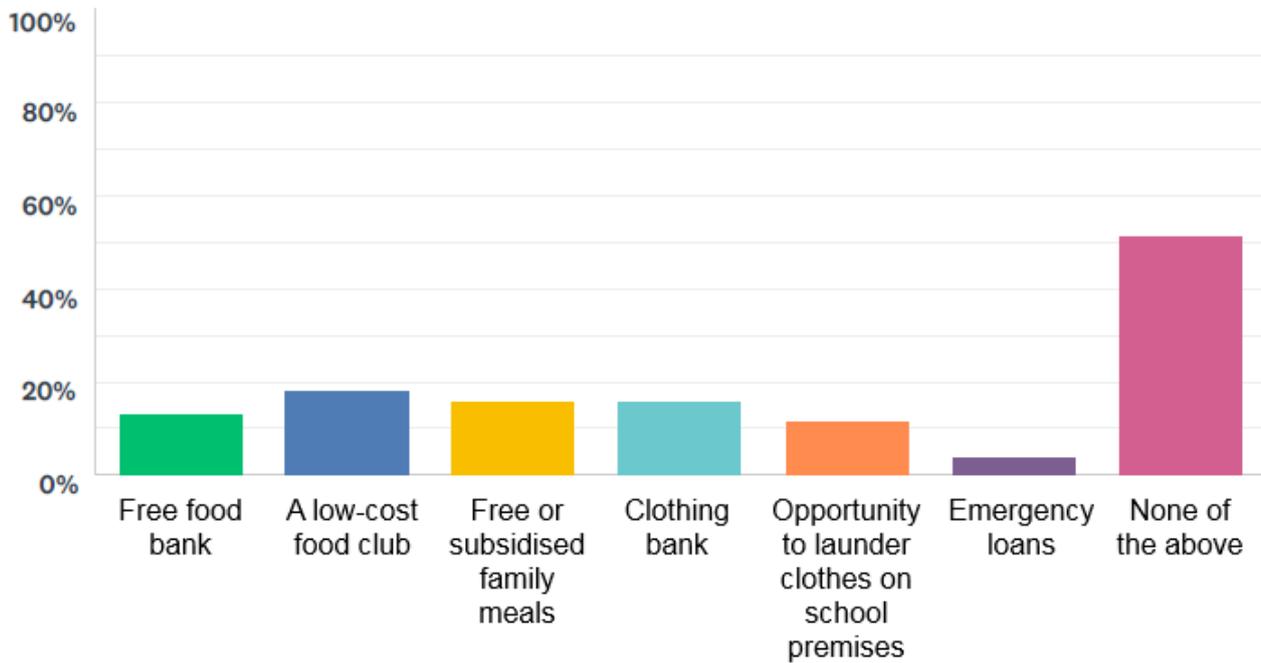
With cuts to both statutory services, such as those provided by local authorities, and to the voluntary and community sector which has often been a lifeline to poor families, schools are now stepping in to ensure poor families don't fall through the cracks.

Almost half of the schools in which NEU survey respondents work are directly providing essential services to low-income families. These include the provision of:

- A low cost food club (18% of schools);
- Free or subsidised family meals (16%);
- A clothing bank (16%);
- A free food bank (13%);
- Clothes laundering facilities on school premises (12%); and
- Emergency loans (4%).

Among schools providing one or more of these services, a third said demand had increased since 2015.

Does your school provide any of the following additional support for low-income pupils/students or their families? (813 answered)



Comments:

“We have increased our pastoral team twice since 2015, employing two family support workers who previously worked for Sure Start. Their knowledge and contacts have allowed school to be able to intervene in cases of poor housing, debt, hunger, domestic violence, refugee status...Their input helps the whole family and so the children of those families come to school with less worry and more capacity to focus on learning.”

“We arrange debt counselling, liaise with housing associations etc.”

“[We are] providing shoes, providing emergency money for electricity card.”

“School shoes [are] provided to those who cannot afford them. Subsidised payments [are available] for essential equipment. School pastoral team also support with housing applications to ease the burden on travel to school. Arrangement of multi- agency working is facilitated by the pastoral team.”

“Sometimes a grant is used via social services for transport, food, clothing, bedding and furniture. The school pays monthly for a scheme of surplus food clearance. Usually boxes of cereal, biscuits, tins etc. These are given out to children, some parents make use of the food.”

“We do give out information on the local food bank and do collections for it. We also help parents fill in forms for grants or benefits that they can get.”

“Our students are provided with free ingredients if they take a food GCSE resulting in a meal they can take home to their family. Free breakfast (porridge) is available every morning at the school cafe to everyone including staff.”

“Breakfast and fruit [are] usually available for teachers to give to low-income pupils, [the] school supports families to access local food bank and children's centre, [and] second-hand school uniforms [are] available (donated by other parents).”

“[We offer] use of the school phone and cookery classes for parents.”

“My school is in a rural location; we have had to pay for bus fares and arrange school funded transport for some of our pupils to get to school.”

“We allow pupils whose parents haven't paid meal or trip debt to continue eating and participating fully despite [the] impact on school finances.”

“We have strong links to the food bank and give vouchers. We offer a holiday scheme with a charity which feeds families three times a week.”

“[Our school offers] uniform and equipment funds. Free school meals [are] frequently provided beyond government-funded entitlement.”

“We provide free breakfast, loan of uniform items, free uniform items, washing of clothes when need arises, food when need arises.”

“[We have] links with a church who provide family meals.”

“[The school provides a] shower so child can wash.”

“[We provide] shower facilities for one of our parents who is rough sleeping.”

“[We] have occasionally picked food up from food banks and delivered it to parents who were unable to go themselves. [We] have occasionally organised purchase, pick up and delivery of white goods for parents. [The school] will occasionally pick up children and bring [them] to school when parents unable.”

“We have approached a local supermarket for hampers prior to Christmas.”

“[The school offers] help with Christmas presents.”

Education staff are personally supporting students from low-income families

School staff are personally supporting children and young people living in poverty to a significant extent. Respondents were asked whether they ever personally supply any of a number of essential items to their pupils/students because their families can't afford these, and if so, how frequently they do so.

- Over half of respondents (53%) say they personally supply school equipment (such as books and stationery) at least on a termly basis to students whose families can't afford these items, and of these, 30% are providing them at least once a week, with 11% supplying them at least once a month.
- Over a third of respondents (34%) said they personally supply food to pupils/students at least on a termly basis, and of these, 12% said they did so weekly and 10% said this happened at least once a month.
- Over a fifth of respondents (22%) are supplying PE games/kit at least termly, of which 11% are doing so once a week and 5% at least once a month.
- 15% provide essential clothing such as coats and shoes at least termly.
- 14% provide toys and play things at least termly.
- One in ten teachers (10%) supplies sanitary protection to students at least once a term and of these 3% do so weekly, and 4% do so at least once a month.
- One in ten (10%) supply other personal hygiene products for their students at least once a term.

Comments:

"Teachers and support staff regularly purchase clothing, food, supplies etc for students and their families."

"Our school cannot even afford pens so I buy toast and breakfast bars out of my own money to feed them."

"I have personally set up a social interaction games club after school for 1.5 hours every Monday and Friday, due to funding I do this voluntarily and provide all the equipment myself. This club now has 28 attending students and a waiting list of 20! Parents from low income households cannot afford to provide such activities for their children, I've heard stories from children who have NEVER played a board or tabletop game, one who only had half a domino set and others who have said their parents can't afford to pay for the travel for them to see friends. It's heart breaking!"

Groups more likely to be living in poverty

Respondents were asked whether in their experience particular groups of children were more likely to be living in poverty than others. Answers reflected the different contexts of school cohorts, as summed up by the respondent who said: *"It really depends on whether the school is in a depressed rural area or a former industrial urban area. Each area presents different problems associated with poverty."*

- 44% said children who are refugees and asylum seekers.

- A similar number (41%) said disabled children or children/young people with special educational needs.
- One in five (20%) said BAME children and young people.
- 12% named other groups, including children from single-parent households; those from eastern Europe; children from Roma families; white working class children; and children living in hostels and domestic abuse shelters/ refuges.

Comments:

“Students with physical disabilities suffer disproportionately from poverty simply because being disabled is expensive. Everything costs more for disabled people - transport, building adaptations, adjustments, paying for carers, assistive technology, wheelchairs, etc.”

“[There is an] extra cost of bringing up children with disabilities.”

Free School Meals

Eligibility

Asked whether they think FSM are currently available to the right number of children, over half (55%) of respondents say that not enough children are currently entitled to receive them and that there are many others who are not eligible yet whose families struggle to afford the cost of school meals.

Take up

A majority of respondents (60%) thought that that generally children in their school who are eligible for free schools meals are receiving them. However, over a fifth (21%) thought some of those eligible were not doing so; and a further 4% thought the number missing out on their entitlement was significant.

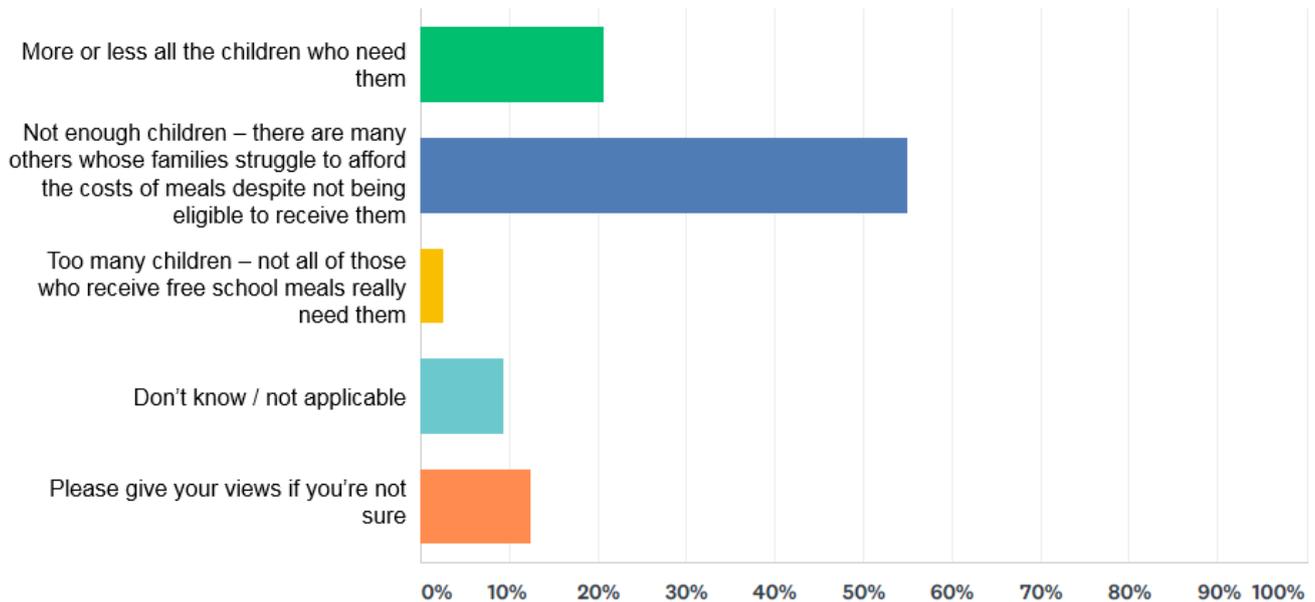
Barriers

Where children are missing out, respondents identified a number of obstacles to ensuring those children eligible received a free school meal:

- Over half of respondents (56%) think parents are too embarrassed to claim.
- 52% think parents don't realise their child may be eligible.
- 46% think that the process for claiming is too bureaucratic or complex.
- 38% think that language barriers are a problem.
- A quarter (25%) think many parents prefer their child to eat a packed lunch.

Thinking about entitlement to free school meals, do you think that free school meals are currently available to:

(781 answered)



Comments:

“Students feel embarrassed to claim free school meals.”

“Some parents believe that it’s cheaper to buy food for a packed lunch than paying for school dinners. However they don’t realise that school dinners are much healthier. Many parents don’t speak English and therefore would struggle to apply for free school meals.”

“The bar has been raised, so some families who would have received FSM no longer do.”

“Children not having tried/access to a healthy/balanced diet at home and so will not eat them.”

“Some parents feel their child will be seen as a statistic and perhaps even stigmatised or bullied. Some students feel ashamed to be on FSM. That’s why FSM should be available to all. Packed lunches are often discarded. Lunchtimes have been shortened and eating is rushed. Many children don’t learn how to eat together. In the military you get four huge meals every day yet children don’t get that level of nutrition at the most important developmental stage in their life. The school day is also very demanding.”

Overcoming barriers

When asked how some of these barriers might be overcome, many respondents answered that they thought the process for claiming FSM should be made simpler or that FSM should be provided to all pupils in order to remove the stigma and the bureaucratic hurdles associated with claiming them. As one respondent stated, free school meals should become “a normal part of school life”.

Comments:

“Make the process more accessible for parents/carers.”

“Give everyone free school meals!”

“Remove the bureaucracy. The government knows which households qualify. The children should automatically receive funding without application.”

“[Require] all students to eat a “healthy choice” - which is a requirement for FSM.”

“[There should be] an easier process for claiming free school meals. [We need] a government that is more open/supportive and contacts families that are entitled, rather than leaving it to them to realise in the hope that they do not claim them.”

“Don't make parents claim them, make it automatically available.”

“The idea that these children are a ‘burden on society’ is so engrained in opinion by the media etc that the stigma desperately needs to be tackled firstly. The process of claiming meals is ridiculous also; an opt-out system whereby children are told that they get free meals from the start would be more fit for purpose.”

“Highlight that this is a normal part of school life.”

Other comments

“[It] breaks my heart every day to see kids needy in so many different ways.”

“During a puberty talk about periods at school one of my pupils asked if she could keep her demonstration sanitary towel. The school nurse was shocked and said nobody had ever asked her that before. A few of my girls said they knew their mummies couldn't afford to buy them.”

“Poor quality or unclean clothing. Very poor quality shoes. Broken shoes not replaced. Lack of equipment. Lack of “good coat” - these are common. Pupils who have been evicted several times this year - not unusual. [There is a] pupil in [the] form who has never been on holiday - not even a day trip to the seaside. Many who have not been to the seaside. Many have never been to a theatre or live performance not even a panto. Pupils who will be at home alone (secondary) during the holidays - common. Pupil with poor teeth who has not

been taken to the dentist. Girl who has grown out of trousers but no new ones bought. I am thinking of specific recent examples but these are common, not rare. Pupil who has no heating at home because the gas has been cut off. These issues [are] raised with pastoral and where necessary help arranged.”

“The school collects for the food bank in the staffroom. But this is a big problem and it breaks my heart.”

“Parents are in crisis and not managing their children's emotional or physical needs as they are so stressed about money. The support we need to provide for these families cannot be underestimated.”

“[There is a] lack of equipment - pens, bags, new shoes and trainers for PE. Shoes are often falling apart and sometimes school has provided them. [We face the] inability to run school trips because students cannot afford anything much above £15.”

“If children did not have access to free school meals I would worry they'd not have access to proper hot food.”

“I should say that I work in a maintained grammar school, where most pupils come from a better off background. However, we do have some cases which are quite marked: one 6th former we had was keeping his family by holding down three jobs in addition to school.”

National Education Union

www.neu.org.uk

Child Poverty Action Group

Charity number 294841

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