

Why do we have school meals?

- 1 Mashed potato, gravy, custard. When British people hear the words “school dinners”, it’s not always great memories that come to mind. That’s not the case for everyone. Indeed France is known for its gourmet school lunches cooked by onsite chefs – bon appétit! But in the UK people have been complaining about school meals for a long time. Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver campaigned against cheap processed foods like “turkey twizzlers” in the early 2000s. And Margaret Thatcher, the UK’s prime minister in the late 1970s, was nicknamed the “milk snatcher” when she was education secretary because she stopped free milk for children in schools.
- 2 Free school meals have long been used as a measure of poverty. Children are eligible if they come from families with low incomes or if they receive certain benefits. The provision of free school meals has become particularly significant as levels of child poverty in the UK have risen. The issue of free school meals and school meals more broadly has also been the subject of controversy over recent years, with concerns raised about the adequacy of the meals provided and the nutritional quality of the food served.
- 3 But problems with school meals go back much further. In fact, they started when the government first began offering meals to school children in 1906. Back then, local education authorities decided whether or not to provide meals and they were only for children who showed evidence of actual malnutrition. It wasn’t until the second world war that the number of pupils who got school meals began to rise significantly. But even then, the meals weren’t great. Indeed, during this time, the government introduced rationing, which had a significant impact on school meals. 10, meals were often limited to basic, low-cost ingredients such as vegetables, potatoes and bread.
- 4 In the decades after World War II, school meals underwent significant changes. The introduction of new technologies such as electric ovens and refrigerators meant that schools could provide more varied and nutritious meals and menus began to include meat, fish and desserts. The 1970s saw a renewed focus on healthy eating and the introduction of official guidelines for school meals. These guidelines aimed to provide a balanced diet that included plenty of fruit, vegetables and whole grains.

- 5 But in the 1980s, things went downhill. The Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher introduced a policy of privatisation, which led to many schools outsourcing their catering efforts to private companies. This move was criticised by many who felt that these companies were more interested in making a profit than providing healthy and nutritious meals to children.
- 6 Since then, there have been several initiatives (including Jamie Oliver's) to improve the quality of school meals in the UK, including the introduction of strict nutritional standards and the promotion of locally sourced and sustainable ingredients. But concerns about the quality of some meals still remain. Indeed, many children continue to bring packed lunches to school instead.
- 7 Overall, improving school meals in the UK will require a multi-faceted approach that addresses funding, food quality and sustainability. Most importantly, we need politicians to take a long-term, historically-informed approach to policy-making, so that past mistakes can be learned from and this knowledge is used to inform decisions about school meals going forward. It's our hope that this research will go some way towards achieving better nutritional standards for future generations.

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