



Position statement on school food and attainment

16 September 2013

Public Health England recognises that the diet of children and young people does not meet current recommendations. We know that there is more to do to promote better eating habit together with the knowledge and skills to live healthier lifestyles. This includes promoting the importance of schools food including the wider school ethos in this area.

We also recognise that there is widespread belief that nutrition and diet may have a part to play in raising attainment of children at school.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) published a systematic review of the literature on school food and attainment in 2006. This review concluded that there was insufficient evidence to identify any effect of nutrition, diet and dietary change on learning, education or performance in school aged children in the developed world. It noted that much of the available evidence is confusing or contradictory and many studies lacked rigorous measurements of the issues they were investigating.

Following the APPG meeting in June a rapid review of the literature was undertaken to update the earlier FSA analysis. This rapid review took the same search strategy used in the earlier systematic review in order to identify additional papers published between 2006 and 2013. Included studies were primary studies reporting empirical research from controlled trials, included exposure or interventions focusing on nutrition or diet and educational performance (using validated methodology and nutritional or dietary exposure achievable through the normal diet) for children aged 4-18 years, undertaken in a developed country, with sufficient duration to have reasonable benefit. The search was supplemented by personal communication to identify further studies. A copy of the rapid review is attached for your information.

Although the search identified 39 potentially relevant publications, on further investigation many did not achieve our stated criteria for inclusion. This was because they did not include empirical research, were not peer reviewed, were not specifically addressing the topic, or did not have relevant, sufficient or validated measurements, or were duplicate papers from the same authors/studies.

The four remaining publications included an evaluation of the Free School meals pilot in England, an Australian study assessing a range of behaviours including breakfast consumption, an analysis from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, and an evaluation of a free school breakfast programme in St Joseph, Missouri. Three of these studies identified promising associations between diet and academic attainment while the fourth study was unable to identify a benefit of a free breakfast club on academic performance at one year.



Although three of these studies suggest positive effects these could not be disassociated from the impact of other activity taking place in the schools at the same time. Similar confounders identified in the papers from the FSA 2006 analysis therefore apply to the literature published since 2006.

It is interesting to note that in studies involving breakfast clubs, the impact on school level attainment may be impacted by the improved attendance and punctuality associated with the provision of such clubs, and in some cases a switch from consuming breakfast at home to consuming at school. As such, even without a direct impact on learning these findings support a useful role for these interventions regardless of any direct effect of the food consumed.

We do know, however, that the diet of children, particularly teenagers, is less than ideal with many eating too much salt, saturated fat, and sugars and with between one in three and one in six being overweight or obese. These patterns of dietary intake and overweight are associated with poor health now and in the future.

Helping children achieve and maintain a healthy diet as visually shown in the eatwell plate (www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/eatwell-plate.aspx) will have lasting health benefit regardless of any potential impact on attainment. We believe the key messages for children and young people's diet is related to the promotion of health and well-being. This will be the focus of our work to support schools, including the commitments within the recently published School Food Plan.

Having completed a rapid review of the literature, building the systematic review published by the FSA in 2006, the available evidence remains insufficient to demonstrate any impact of diet or dietary intervention in school directly on attainment.