



## Schools dipping into their own budgets to stop children going hungry

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**Faced with widespread hunger, food insecurity, and poverty, schools across England are dedicating significant time and resources to feeding hungry children.** In doing so, schools are drawing on their already over-stretched budgets and staff. Many have set up their own food banks and pantries to support vulnerable families.<sup>1</sup>

School Food Matters and other groups have highlighted that up to a million school children from low-income backgrounds are not eligible for free school meals<sup>2</sup>. This is because the eligibility criteria are so restrictive: a child's family must be in receipt of universal credit and have a total household income of less than £7,400 in a year to qualify<sup>3</sup>. Almost 3.5 million children also live in food insecure households.<sup>4</sup> Schools see the consequences of this every day: large numbers of children are coming to school hungry.

We at School Food Matters have published a new report highlighting the extent of pupil hunger at schools across England, the impact it is having on children's ability to learn, and the steps schools are taking to support hungry children. To collect this information, we surveyed 10,000 teachers across England through the polling tool Teacher Tapp. This report shows that large numbers of children are coming to school too hungry to learn.

**We believe that we can and should do better than this.** Every child deserves the good nutritious food they need to thrive at school. There are extensive benefits to providing quality school meals to pupils, including [improvements to children's education, health, equity, and well-being](#). Free school meals for all would be good for the economy too. A 2022 [cost-benefit analysis commissioned by Impact on Urban Health](#) revealed that for every £1 invested in school food for

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<sup>1</sup> Baker, W., Knight, C. & Leckie, G. (2024) Feeding Hungry Families: food banks in schools in England. *Bristol Working Papers in Education* 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10879984>

<sup>2</sup> <https://cpag.org.uk/news/800000-children-poverty-not-getting-free-school-meals>

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education (2024) Free School Meals: Guidance for local authorities, maintained schools, academies and schools.

<sup>4</sup> The Food Foundation (2024) Food Insecurity Tracker

all children, £1.71 would be returned. When wider benefits were considered, the investment would generate £99.5 billion for the economy over 20 years.<sup>5</sup>

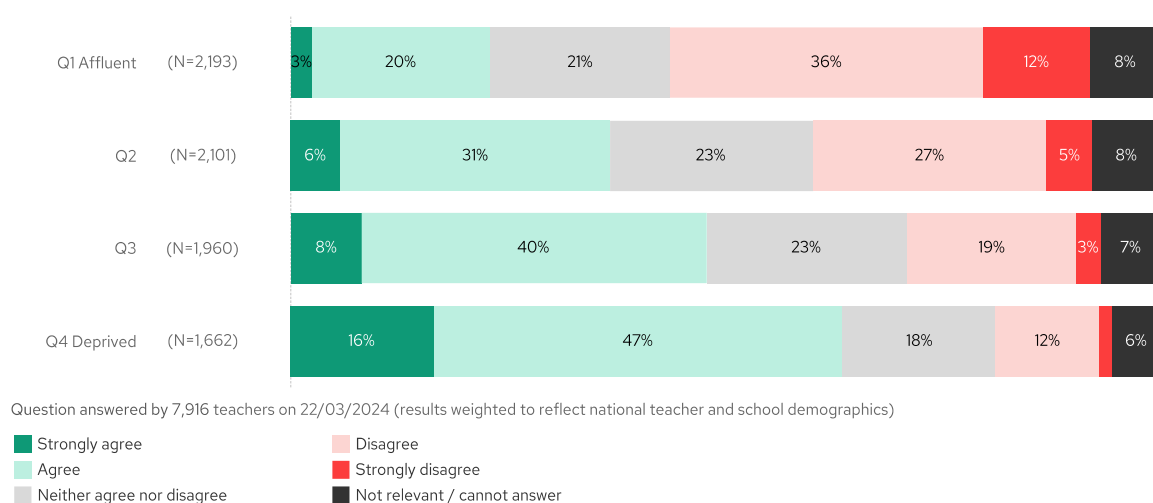
## Key findings

### 1. Many children are coming to school too hungry to learn.

38% of teachers reported that pupils in their classes were regularly too hungry to learn because they have not had enough food. Figure 1 shows, even more worryingly, dramatic differences in responses depending on school deprivation levels. In the most deprived schools, 63% of teachers reported that pupils in their school are regularly too hungry to learn because of a lack of food.

Figure 1

**There are pupils in my class who are regularly too hungry to learn because they have not had enough food.**



### 2. The number of children coming to school hungry is reported to be increasing.

Our data shows that the challenges associated with pupil hunger at school appear to have worsened. For example, 22% of teachers reported that the number of children too hungry to learn had increased since the beginning of the academic year.

It is the most disadvantaged pupils in the most disadvantaged schools who are most likely to come to school hungry. In the most deprived quartile of schools, 35% of teachers reported that the number of children who are too hungry to learn has increased this year. This is significantly higher compared to schools with more advantaged intakes. However, even in the most affluent schools, 15% of teachers reported that the number of pupils coming to school hungry has increased during this period.

### 3. Schools are taking a wide range of measures to tackle hunger amongst pupils.

<sup>5</sup> <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/insights/reports/expanding-free-school-meals-a-cost-benefit-analysis>

The evidence is clear: schools are adopting a wide range of measures to mitigate pupil hunger. This is consistent with a growing body of evidence that schools are having to dedicate significant resources and time to support children and families with food<sup>6</sup>.

Figure 2

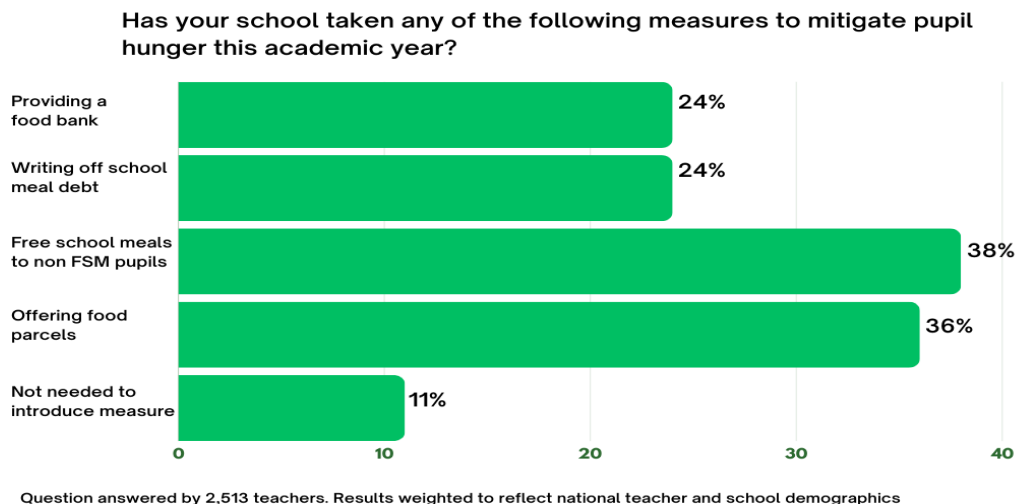


Figure 2 shows the extent to which schools are supporting families and pupils with food. The most common measure to mitigate pupil hunger was providing a free school meal to pupils who are ineligible for free school meals (38%) followed closely by offering food parcels (36%). Almost a quarter (24%) of school leaders<sup>7</sup> responded that their school has provided a food bank this academic year and also written-off school meal debt.

The data shows that responses to mitigating hunger are broadly similar between primary schools and secondary school. More notable differences emerged when school leaders were asked if they provided free meals to ineligible pupils: 34% of primary school leaders and 44% of secondary school leaders reported doing so.

#### 4. Demand for these support measures has increased in the last year.

A striking finding is that there has been a significant increase in demand for food support measures at school during this academic year. This is clearly shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

<sup>6</sup> Baker, W. (2023) Schools and food charity in England. *British Educational Research Journal*, 49(6), 1387-1402. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3931>

<sup>7</sup> In the Teacher Tapp survey, for some of the questions school leaders (e.g. headteachers) were the main respondents rather than teachers. They are typically best placed to know the steps their schools take to mitigate hunger.

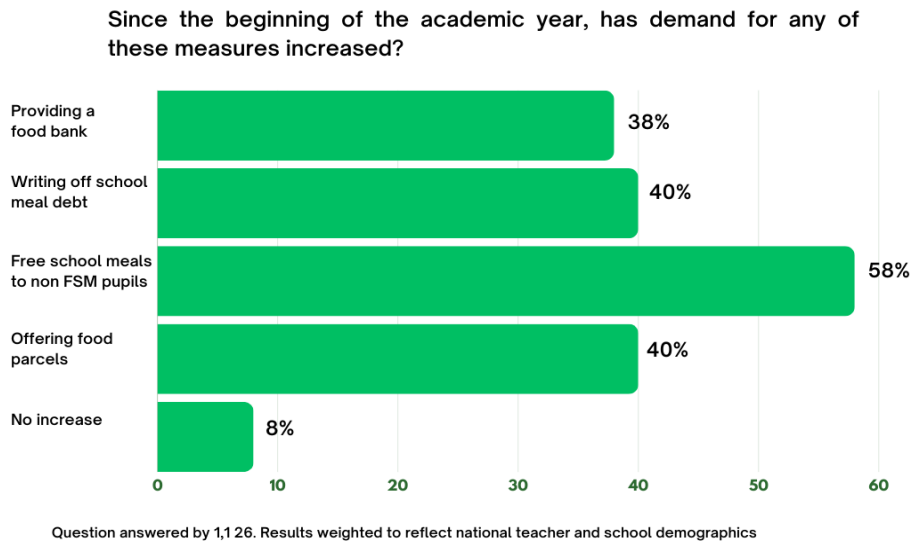


Figure 3 shows that demand for school-based food banks (38%) and offers of food parcels (40%) has substantially increased. The largest surge in demand in measures to mitigate hunger is through providing a school meal for free to pupils who are ineligible for free school meals (58%). There was a small number of significant differences between primary and secondary schools. Nearly half (45%) of primary school leaders reported increased demand for providing a food bank compared to 31% in secondary schools. Also, 63% of school leaders in secondary schools reported that there had been an increase in demand to provide free meals to pupils who are ineligible for free school meals.

##### 5. There is strong agreement amongst teachers about the benefits of free school meals and nutritious school food.

The teachers surveyed were also asked about their views about the main benefits of a child having a nutritious meal. An overwhelming majority of teachers (97%) reported that there are widespread benefits of pupils having a nutritious meal, including improving behaviour, attainment, and attendance. Less fatigue (65%) and more attentiveness in class (70%) were identified as the primary benefits of nutritious school meals. A majority of teachers (71%) consider the introduction of universal free school meals at primary and secondary schools to be a worthwhile investment in children’s education.

### Summary and recommendations

**The findings outlined in this report are deeply troubling.** Teachers and school leaders are reporting that large numbers of children are coming to school too hungry to learn - a situation we know is damaging for children’s educations and lives. Schools are now adopting a wide range of strategies to support hungry children and families, including running food banks, providing school meals for children not eligible for FSMs and offering food parcels. Unfortunately, a fifth of schools are reporting that the number of children too hungry to learn has increased in the last year. This situation is likely creating significant pressures for schools who are having to commit significant time and resources to deal with hungry and food insecure children.

Every child, no matter where they grow up, should be able to access a hot, healthy and nutritious meal at school. The government has so far resisted calls from a coalition of school food campaigners, children's charities, headteachers, public health experts and unions to expand the eligibility criteria for free school meals.

The eligibility criteria must urgently be extended to those who are most in need of the benefits that a healthy school meal offers. This is crucial a first step. However, the government must also invest in long-term sustainable solutions to hunger, food insecurity and poverty to give the country's children the future they deserve. This means providing all children with delicious, nutritious and sustainable school meals, fully funded, no matter where they grow up.

School Food Matters, May 2024