

School Nutrition: European Models

Helen Clark MA*

Associate Director at Royal Public Affairs, The Co-operative Group, Cambridge Assessment, United Kingdom

***Corresponding Author:** Helen Clark MA, Associate Director at Royal Public Affairs, The Co-operative Group, Cambridge Assessment, United Kingdom.

Received: November 03, 2017; **Published:** November 14, 2017

Child obesity is a world-wide problem and in Europe, awareness is well established and documented. In 2010, one in three children aged 6 - 9 years old were found to present as overweight or obese compared to one in four of the same age in 2008. There remains, in addition, the persistent issue of micronutrient deficiencies amongst many children throughout the European Union and other European countries.

“School lunch makes a substantial contribution to children’s total energy and nutritional intake. This has seen a reinvigoration of efforts amongst governments and international organisations to improve the nutritional values of school lunches” [1].

The European Commission’s Directorate General for Health and Consumers (DG SANCO) formulated a strategy of nutrition, overweight and obesity-related health issues [2] and established the multi-stakeholder Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health [3] and the High Level Group (HLG) on Nutrition and Physical Activity.

In 2014, EU Member States adopted an EU action plan on Childhood Obesity for 2014-2020 and in May 2014 the Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) set up a high level Commission on ending Childhood Obesity [4].

The formation and entrenchment of eating and physical activity habits occurs during the early lifespan and therefore, various national and EU level policy documents have pinpointed the school setting as a potentially promising target for positive interventions. In 2006, the WHO Europe produced a guidance paper to support the development of school nutrition programmes in the European Region.

The EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity (2014 - 20) provides a particular focus upon:

- Making the healthier option the easier option
- Restricting marketing and advertising to children
- Promoting healthier environments, especially in pre schools and schools.

It widens the responsibility remit from parents for consumption habits, to choices made by the food industry and thence it encompasses the wider food environment.

Many European countries have formulated policies to assist schools in the provision of meals that combine nutritious content with a reflection of the particular eating culture of the nations. Lunch is often eaten in a cafeteria-style setting whereby children receive food from a central service point as is the case in Finland, Sweden and Italy [5].

Finnish and Swedish school meals are fully financed by their respective governments and lunches designed to follow national dietary guidelines including the ‘plate model.’ An ‘example meal’ is supplied to guide children’s use of self-service. ‘Choice’ does not equate to letting each child take ‘pot luck’ with eating decisions.

Swedish schoolchildren are allocated a web evaluation tool and in France, each school lunch must include a main dish (based on

meat, fish, eggs, offal or cheese), a side dish, a dairy product and either a starter or a dessert. Nutritional standards are in place to regulate how frequently dishes are served in a 20 meal cycle. At least 10 cycle meals must be accompanied by cooked vegetables, 10 meals with pulses, 10 meals with starchy foods or cereals, and 8 meals with fresh fruit dessert. The nature of the dish and recipient age group determine portion sizes [6].

As the UK embarks upon Phase Two of the National Child Obesity Strategy, launched to widespread disappointment because of its lack of ambition in 2016, it might be opportune to visit these European models and consider especially whether or not the current school cafeteria arrangements in the UK are commensurate with children's eating behaviours in the 21st century. Could a web tool be explored to beneficial effect? Is there preparedness to trial such a product? Is there merit in devising a 'plate model' and what body or bodies should do this? Should the Government consider financing school meals in full at all stages instead of placing the present Free School Meal for the youngest school children under a state of constant threat? What attempts are being made to build and win consensus around these issues?

The obesity crisis will continue to entrench and beset this generation's children and their successors unless and until tinkering around the edges ceases and constructive and forward planning takes its place. It makes sense in both health and economic terms to put theorising to one side and begin this process now.

Bibliography

1. Nelson M. "The School Food Trust: transforming school lunches in England". *Nutrition Bulletin* 36.3 (2011): 381-389.
2. http://ec.europa.eu/health/archive/ph_determinants/life_style
3. http://ec.europa.eu/health/nutrition_physical_activity/platform/index_en.htm
4. <http://www.who.int/dirtphysicalactivity/end-childhood-obesity/en/>
5. School Food Trust. "The provision of school food in 18 countries" (2008).
6. <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000024614763>