

School food policy in secondary schools in England and its impact on adolescents' diets and dental health: the FUEL multiple-methods study

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Plain language summary

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Plain language summary

Why have we done this research?

We wanted to find out how well secondary schools meet the school food standards in England and how these standards influence the dietary intake and dental health of pupils. We also wanted to explore how secondary schools provide other ways of supporting pupils' healthy eating.

What did we do?

We compared schools that are required to meet the school food standards with those that are not required to meet them. We looked at school food, menus, and eating environments in 36 secondary schools and did surveys with 151 staff/governors. We asked 2453 secondary school pupils about their diet and dental health. We held interviews with 21 staff/governors and focus groups with 137 pupils at four schools. We gathered their views on school food and healthy eating.

What did we find?

On average, the schools met 64% of the school food standards, regardless of whether they were required to meet them. Pupils in the schools required to meet the standards had lower intakes of sugar and calories at lunchtime than pupils in the schools not required to meet them; however, they ate less fruit and vegetables. Pupils in the schools required to meet the standards ate more confectionery during the school day and drank more sugary drinks overall. There were no differences in the dental health of pupils in the two school groups.

School staff told us that some standards were difficult to meet. Catering staff had to think about pupil preferences and financial considerations, as well as the school food standards. Some pupils felt that school food did not meet their needs and preferences. Some pupils disliked the lunchtime experience. Healthy-eating education was not very visible within the curriculum.

What does this mean?

Secondary schools are struggling to meet the school food standards and implement actions to support healthy eating. We found no evidence to show that the school food standards have improved dietary intake in secondary school pupils.

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