

School Dinner Policy

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1.0 Summary Overview

Unlike other countries there is not a comprehensive school meals programme in the Republic of Ireland, entitling ALL school children to a school dinner, either free or paid for.

By caring for the nation's children and providing healthy, nutritionally -balanced school meals, the State would make an important investment in the future. The effective provision of school dinners has long-term consequences, not just in terms of the social and economic benefits and the health of the individual, but in fostering the ethos of a caring and just society, where the State acts for the common good.

Key Points of the School Dinner Programme

1. Funding of the programme would be from government income -, i.e. tax revenues, other sources of revenue and a small contribution from all parents not in receipt of State benefits.
2. A statutory obligation would be placed on local authorities to provide a school dinner scheme in their area.
3. The school day may need to be lengthened to give children enough time to have a proper 'sit-down' meal and also have time to relax and play afterwards. This may be of particular benefit for parents working outside the home.
4. Food would be sourced food from local farmers where possible, encouraging less dependency on imports of certain foodstuffs and the reduction of food mileage.
5. Food provided by schools would be prepared daily using fresh local produce and include vegetarian and vegan options, as well as foods from different ethnic cultures; menus would be well-balanced and sensitive to the traditions of different cultures and their proscriptions on certain foods, such as pork and beef. Children would also receive water and milk.
6. If schools did not have their own kitchens, school meals could be prepared and cooked in central facilities approved of by local authorities and schools. School meals could be transported from a central kitchen to school halls and canteens. Where

necessary school halls would eventually have to be built to be used as canteens for midday meals.

7. Staff employed in schools to supervise or serve meals would receive training. Teachers would not be school dinner supervisors.
8. Teachers would also be able to have a school dinner.
9. Parents would be entitled to allow their children to continue having a packed lunch instead of a school dinner.

Benefits of the School Dinners Programme

1. Improved Academic Performance - They would also help children to concentrate at school and reach their academic potential; and eventually help improve a child's job prospects and future participation in, and contribution to society.
2. Improved Well-being & behaviour - A school dinner programme would enable young people to be physically strong enough to participate in, and perform well in sports and physical exercise, which would be beneficial to their general physical and mental health. It would also prevent hunger or malnutrition from causing disruptive and antisocial behaviour at school.
3. Create Jobs - This initiative would generate hundreds of local jobs including farmers, food distributors, processors, caterers, food packaging companies, drivers, ancillary workers, catering and furniture suppliers, dining hall/ canteen supervisors etc.
4. Food Education - A repetitive school lunch consisting of, for example, cheese or ham sandwiches, can limit a child's experience of tasting different and interesting foods. Sharing the experience of eating a variety of foods which have been prepared for them, children can learn from each other to vary their diet and importantly, appreciate all kinds of food, including that of other cultures. School dinners would teach children lifelong healthy eating habits, social skills and encourage them to attend school.
5. Social Equality & Inclusion - The provision of school dinners (whether paid for, or free) to all school children, regardless of their background, or parents' income would help foster social equality and inclusion.

6. Save Parent's Time - School dinners would help all parents with the daily concern and responsibility of buying and preparing healthy lunch options. Also if a longer school day was required to provide a dinner during the day this would reduce childcare costs for parents working full-time outside the home.

2.0 Introduction

To quote educationalist Derek Gillard, who wrote an article entitled 'Food For Thought: child nutrition, the school dinner and the Food Industry (2003), the 'responsibility for children's eating habits is shared between parents, schools and the government'.

In 2014 there were approximately 889, 269 primary and secondary school children in the Republic of Ireland. Unlike Northern Ireland, the rest of the UK and almost all other thirty countries in the European Union and beyond, there is not a comprehensive school meals programme in the Republic of Ireland, entitling ALL school children to a school dinner, either free or paid for.

What exists at the moment is essentially a selective programme providing school breakfasts and dinners to children from disadvantaged homes or DEIS schools (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools). Private schools and of course boarding schools provide school meals.

Provision of school meals to disadvantaged children, while essential, can set children apart from their friends and peers and stigmatise them. A comprehensive school dinner programme supported by local authorities and government would provide nearly 900,000 children, regardless of income or social background, with at least one nutritional meal a day.

In industrial societies, many women, especially since the First World War, have been part of the general workforce, possibly working an eight hour day, and school dinners have played an important part in helping parents to look after their children. Traditionally women in Ireland have been responsible for providing family meals but in post Celtic Tiger Ireland many too are now working outside the home and find that the time available to look after their families has become more restricted.

The provision of a school dinner enables a child, like his/her parents at their place of work, to have the opportunity to eat a nutritionally -balanced meal during the day. Many parents have to leave the family home very early in the morning to make long-distance commutes to work and many children too have to rise early and undergo a long day. School dinners

would help all parents to care for their children and not have the additional daily concern and responsibility of buying and preparing healthy lunch options. They would have the assurance that their child could enjoy a nutritional two-course meal, consisting of, for example, meat/fish/ other protein, starchy/ carbohydrate foods, vegetables and yoghurt or fruit, which would help sustain them over the course of a long day. It is understood that a school meal scheme would not prevent parents from providing their children with a packed lunch if they wish and certainly does not prevent parents from preparing another nutritional meal in the evening.

3.0 Why Have a Comprehensive School Meals Programme?

The introduction of a nation-wide school dinners policy, as an integral part of the school day for all children in the Republic of Ireland could help address the many problems which afflict the quality of life in Ireland today, for example: poverty, inequalities in educational attainment, employment prospects and ill-health. It would also foster inclusiveness and help eliminate discrimination amongst school children.

Other benefits include exposing children to a more varied diet and helping to socialise them. The school dining area would be a place for integrating and including all children and teenagers, providing them with an allocated safe, protected and relaxing place to sit and eat. Irish schools have allowed teenagers to go out of school during the school day to the nearest shops to buy their own lunch. Consequently young people have ended up eating while walking or standing in unclean and possible unsafe environments such as doorways, alleyways and streets. This is an unhealthy way to eat food and creates bad eating habits for life.

Belgium school food policy research conducted in 2005 by Vereecken, Bobelijn and Maes, from the department of Public Health at the University of Ghent, and published in the European Journal of Clinical Nutrition 2005, indicated that school food policy can have an impact on adolescent's food habits. Studies also by Lytle and Kubik in 2003, demonstrate the importance of environmental factors in influencing eating habits.

<http://www.readcube.com/articles/10.1038%2Fsj.ejcn.1602068>

Derek Gillard, speaking about school children in the UK says, 'many parents, through ignorance or through pressures of work and time, are not ensuring that their children get a decent diet. No responsible government can ignore the widespread development of unhealthy eating habits whose long-term effects on the National Health Service will be incalculable'. (Gillard D.2003, 'Food For Thought: child nutrition, the school dinner and the food industry').

In terms of nutritional content, notwithstanding all other benefits, the 1997 National Diet and Nutrition Survey in the UK found that children receiving a free school meal received a higher nutrient intake from their meal than those who paid for their meal. This would indicate that families who are in receipt of State assistance for school meals are in fact more likely to receive a daily nutritional meal than those of higher incomes who might opt for alternatives either at home and/or at school or for other reasons do not eat a nutritionally balanced meal.

'The Guardian' newspaper reported in 2014 that the UK Department of Public Health was calling for a national food policy including the introduction of a sugar tax as a means of tackling rising vitamin deficiencies and an increase in rickets - caused by a deficiency in Vitamin D.

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/30/child-poverty-link-malnutrition-rickets>

Two portions of meat or fish or other protein are generally considered the nutritional daily requirements and recently the UK government has recommended that people increase their intake of fruit and vegetables to at least seven portions a day. Given that many people find having five fruit and vegetables a day difficult to achieve, a school dinner would help to provide children with potentially at least half the daily recommendations.

The Children Rights Alliance reported in 2010 that three hundred thousand children in this country were obese or overweight. The Oireachtas Committee 'Food Poverty Report' produced in 2012, showed that ten per cent of the Irish population was suffering 'food poverty' - a contributing factor to obesity.

According to the UK organisation SUSTAIN, which is an alliance of many public interest bodies campaigning for better food and farming practices, 'Food poverty can be defined as the inability to obtain healthy affordable food. This may be because people lack shops in their area or have trouble reaching them. Other factors influencing food access are the availability of a range of healthy goods in local shops, income, transport, fear of crime, knowledge about what constitutes a healthy diet, and the skills to create healthy meals'.

The Economic and Social Research Institute reported that 1/14th of the Irish population (about two hundred and eighty five thousand people) were affected by food poverty. And

more surprisingly, research conducted for the World Health Organisation by NUI Galway stated that food poverty did not just affect the poor but also affected people from the middle (16%) and higher social classes (15%).

A government- subsidised and co-ordinated school dinner programme would help address inadequate nutritional intake amongst children from all social classes. It would help all children to reach their academic potential by providing them with the nutrients they need to grow physically and mentally.

Another benefit of a comprehensive school dinner scheme would be for teachers and other school staff who could have a school meal in their place of work. While there is much concern about children's health, the health of all people employed in schools should be taken into consideration, entitling them to facilities and services which can benefit their health and well-being.

Stephen Donnelly, a Wicklow TD, drew attention to the lengthening queues, at the Capuchin day centre in Dublin, where people are going to collect food parcels (Dail Eireann, Debates, 6th June 2012, 34). Growing unemployment and falling living standards, has increased the weekly food collection queue at the centre from fifty people in 2008, to one thousand four hundred people, including school children, in 2012. Fear of stigmatisation might affect a family's uptake of free school meals, or maybe the child does not attend a DEIS school where at least they would be eligible for a school lunch. Alternatively, the parents might not be aware that they could avail of a school meal for their child.

In most, if not all thirty European countries, and indeed in other parts of the world, there has already been government funding and provision of school dinners. Recent growing concerns about increasing levels of obesity amongst children has led international organisations to investigate the possible causes. In 2014 the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations (UN) and the European Commission commissioned a report into school food policies with a view to introducing new strategies to deal with a major public health concern: that is, the prospect of increasing levels of premature deaths due to environmental and nutritional factors. Already many European States have implemented a national plan in relation to school food and physical exercise.

<https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/default/files/lbna26651enn.pdf>

According to the Belfast Education Board, the benefits of a school meal service are:

- Social opportunity to eat with others
- A freshly prepared hot nutritious meal
- A local team of staff
- Value for money
- Ability to cater for special diets
- More convenient than preparing a packed lunch

We recognise our role in influencing the eating habits of young children whilst in school. A menu that encourages the children to eat the right food will certainly help them to continue a healthy pattern as they grow up. The benefits of healthy eating at school include

- Healthy growth and development
- Better health and fewer infections
- Improved concentration
- Better sports performance
- Better behaviour”

<http://www.belb.org.uk/hqservices/catering.asp>

A French school’s response to Karen Le Billon’s question, why the French put so much effort into healthy lunches, is because it makes sense—socially, economically, and nutritionally:

“Mealtime is a particularly important moment in a child’s day. Our responsibility is to provide children with healthy, balanced meals; to develop their sense of taste; to help children, complementing what they learn at home, to make good food choices without being influenced by trends, media, and marketing; and to teach them the relationship between eating habits and health. But above all else, we aim to enable children to spend joyful, convivial moments together, to learn a ‘savoir-vivre’, to make time for communication, social

exchange, and learning about society's rules—so that they can socialize and cultivate friendships.

<http://karenlebillon.com/french-school-lunch-menus/>

4.0 History of School Meals in the Republic of Ireland and Other Historical Examples

The Urban and Gaeltacht Schemes for school meals were introduced in 1914 and 1930 respectively. But where at least thirty eight urban local authorities are still participating today, with Dublin Corporation accounting for the largest participant, the Gaeltacht scheme was gradually discontinued from 1991.

The School Meals Programme now operated by the Department of Social Protection helps finance the provision of food services for disadvantaged school child through two schemes:

The statutory 'Urban School Meals Scheme' for primary schools, which is operated by Local Authorities and part-financed by the Department of Social Protection. This scheme is operated through legislation: Section 273 to 279 of the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act, 1981 enabling County Borough Councils, Urban District Councils and Town Commissioners to arrange for the provision of school meals. There is however, no legal obligation on Local Authorities, as in the UK, to provide school meals.

The non-statutory 'School Meals Local Projects Scheme' which provides funding directly from the Department of Social Protection to primary schools, secondary schools and local groups and voluntary organisations which operate their own school meals projects.

Currently the Department of Social Protection takes a back -seat role and has no function in the provision and organisation of school meals. It merely approves children's 'eligibility' for meals, reimburses expenses and provides funding. Local authorities who can recoup 50% of expenditure and 100% of administrative costs in providing meals to 'eligible' children. The 'Local School Meals Projects Scheme', receives Department funding for parents, teachers and voluntary organisations that provide meals to 'eligible' children.

<http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/School-Meals-Programme.aspx>

In the late nineteenth century, educationalists in England observed that children could not concentrate on school work and learn easily while feeling hungry. In 1879, authorities in Manchester starting providing free food to poor, hungry children. Pressure began to be

applied on government to encourage all education authorities to provide meals and eventually in 1906 legislation allowed, but did not oblige, local authorities to provide school meals. (Gillard D. 'Food for Thought: child Nutrition, the school dinner and the food industry', 2003)

In 1933 an enquiry by the 'Save the Children' organisation into unemployment indicated that mass unemployment affected children's nutrition. They continued to campaign for children's rights to adequate nutrition until legislation for the provision of school meals and milk was introduced in 1944

<http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/about-us/history#sthash.X6lSqqwq.dpuf>

In Belgium, at the beginning of the 20th century, the government, noticing that rickets and other deficiency diseases were increasingly endemic amongst young children implemented a school dinner programme.

<http://www.readcube.com/articles/10.1038%2Fsj.ejcn.1602068>

In Finland, school dinners have been provided since the Second World War and indeed used by the government in the 1980's to introduce a new dietary plan to address, and help successively reduce, the high rate of heart disease and subsequent mortality amongst the Finnish population.

5.0 Economic Benefits of Having State Provision of School Dinners

Are there economic gains to be made by serving healthy food at school? The provision of school meals raises questions about costs of producing school meals and how much revenue is needed. It is equally important however to consider the long term benefits to the society as a whole in terms of the health and social aspects and the incalculable savings which can be made, for example to the Department of Health, as a result of having a healthier population and workforce, which would be less of a financial drain on the public purse.

The procurement of locally produced food for the provision of school dinners would create a larger market for local farmers and thus would be of considerable economic benefit to the agricultural sector in Ireland. This country could become more food-secure and self-sufficient (like France), in terms of its own food production and supply, whilst maintaining its present food export activity.

Being an island, Ireland is geographically and economically vulnerable in terms of its dependency on air and sea transportation. It is also very dependent on food imports. By being more 'food secure', Ireland would be better placed to resist external or unplanned- for challenges which would have severe economic, social and political consequences. Widespread hunger could follow drastic interruptions to Ireland's food supply. The growing of local food for a school dinner industry would contribute to food security, cut down unnecessary food mileage, whilst also helping to protect children from hunger.

A school dinner industry would provide the local economy with many other types of full and part-time jobs. Parents, who wish to work part time while their young children are at school, would have an opportunity to get employment in this sector even for example within the schools their children attend.

There are indications that school attendance can be improved by children having access to school meals. Indeed the UK's present idea to offer universal free school meals is not only with the intention of improving children's diets and health, but also their behaviour and

academic performance. The school can be the place where a child feels assured of getting fed. A child or young person who could be severely, or just marginally undernourished, can be helped by having school meals, to grow and be healthier. A school meal can therefore enable him/her to concentrate more and do better academically. In the long run that child has a better chance of reaching his/her potential in life. A society where people have a sense of achievement and are happier in them, is a good society. By fostering and harnessing human creativity and production the whole society benefits economically. Educational attainment and above all good health amongst all children should be the aspirations of an equal and just society.

Of course, depending on the parent's income, children might not be entitled to a free meal, but the amount parents might have to spend on each child each day, for a school meal (if it were approximately €2.50), might be much less than the cost to them of shopping frequently for nutritional and varied foodstuffs and drink to make a packed lunch which they have to prepare each day. There are hidden costs, not always considered, such as the difficulty of getting to the shops or the difficulty of finding a place to park and deciding to make do with what is already in the fridge; daily washing of plastic sandwich containers and flasks or buying tin foil or greaseproof paper to wrap sandwiches. There are costs too in disposing of sandwich packaging. It is often the case that because parents are often rushing to do many things children end up eating variations of the same thing each day for lunch and do not get any nutritional variety in a packed lunch. Other not so- easy- to- see costs and savings are the possible differences in children's behaviour at school, or even outside school and how tired they might feel at the end of their school day. Often children snack unhealthily on the way home from school because they are hungry. This is extra expense on a family's daily food budget.

6.0 Funding, Costs and Finances

Of immediate concern in implementing a school dinner programme is how to pay for it. As most parents work and pay income tax we could look at the how much income -tax revenue and other sources of revenue come into the State coffers and see how much each government department is allocated. A proportion of that allocation would be given to the local authorities for school dinners. We could compare the amount for example the UK is prepared to spend on free meals for its population of approximately ten million school children and we could look at how much is spent in Northern Ireland. From this we could get an idea how much money we proportionally could have to allocate, or what ideally we should allocate, for school meals. Finland for example, spends eight per cent of its education budget on high quality school food (The School Food Plan, 2013 Dimbleby and Vincent)

The present economic climate and the consequent decline in people's incomes and living standards, puts stress on public expenditure and affects how any government has to prioritise how much it spends and on what services. Government expenditure is naturally dependent on the amount of revenue (or loans) which can be raised and this in turn is dependent on the levels of taxable employment.

In 2013 Irish Tax revenue was €37,825 million and non-tax revenue was €2,561million.

According to the Irish Government Expenditure Report in 2014, Government figures show a total expenditure of almost €53 billion was allocated to government departments, with approximately a third of public expenditure being spent on helping people and protecting families. The following figures show how much is allocated to Departments which are linked directly or indirectly to children's welfare. The following are the allocations for 2014:

*Expenditure in the Department of Education and Skills will be €8,759m.

*Current expenditure under the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine will be €1,203 million

*Expenditure under the Health Group of Votes will be €13,660 million

*Expenditure under the Department of Social Protection will be €19,650 million.

*Expenditure under the Department of Children & Youth Affairs will be €451 million

*Expenditure by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government will be €766 million

An extra €6.7 million has been allocated to support the reform of child welfare and protection services

<https://www.google.ie/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=irish%20government%20expenditure%20report%202014>

Potentially the European Social Fund grant, which in 2011 was €112 million, could be used at the outset for training catering staff. Other areas of funding could come from the National Lottery and parents payments.

In several countries such as Sweden, Finland, the Czech Republic and Estonia, school dinners are free and currently in the UK there is debate about giving all children free meals regardless of their parent's income. The UK government estimated costs for providing free school meals to all ten and a half million school children would be approximately £2.4 billion. According to Dimpleby and Vincent ('The School Plan' 2013) if economies of scale are applied with increased take-up of the free school meals, then the figure would be nearer £1.9billion, which they argue is a 'sensible use of taxpayer's money'.

As already mentioned, the present school dinner system in the Republic of Ireland, is funded by the Department of Social Protection operating through two schemes for disadvantaged children. Children have to be eligible (i.e. disadvantaged) for a meal.

1) The Statutory Urban School Meals scheme for primary schools operated by Local Authorities which is partly financed by the Department of Social Protection.

2) The non-statutory School Meals Local Projects Scheme provides funding directly from the Department of Social Protection to primary schools, secondary schools and local groups and voluntary organisations which operate their own school meals projects.

Present funding under the School Meals Local Project Scheme is based on a rate of payment per meal, per child, per day, which at recent (2014) rates are:

*€0.60 cent for a breakfast meal of cereal, toast, scone, yoghurt and milk

*€1.40 for a lunch meal of filled sandwich, soup and roll, milk, fruit and yoghurt

*€1.90 for a dinner of meat, potatoes, vegetable and drink, chicken curry/spaghetti bolognaise

*<http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/School-Meals-Programme.aspx>

In Northern Ireland the Education and Library Boards are responsible for the organisation of school meals in schools which are not run by Boards of Governors or Trusts. The school food initiative and policy is overseen by the Department of Education (DE), the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Public Health Agency (PHA). Every school child is eligible for a meal but some children have to pay while others are entitled to a free meal depending on parent's incomes and if they are in receipt of social benefits etc.

A meal of, for example of roast chicken with stuffing and gravy, carrots and parsnips, roast and creamed potatoes, flake meal biscuit and milkshake/fruit costs £2.30 (nursery), £2.40 (primary), £2.60 (post primary) £3.10 (adult).

An average meal in a French school consisting of a starter of grapefruit, followed by grilled chicken with green beans, a cheese course and rice pudding for dessert, plus a tangerine snack, costs approx. €3.50/€4.00

<http://karenlebillon.com/french-school-lunch-menus/>

In Finland parents can check their children's weekly school meals in the local newspapers. In Belgium, a month's menu is sent to parents so they can plan their family meals around what is on the school menu and prevent duplication of meals.

7.0 Job Creation Potential

A school dinner programme would require many different types of employees and different areas of expertise subsequently giving rise to thousands of new jobs and employment across the nation.

With approximately one hundred and twenty schools in a county like Wicklow, at least six hundred catering staff could be employed. Nation- wide the figure could be at least eighteen thousand people employed directly or indirectly in the school meals industry. Approximately seven hundred people are employed in the Northern Ireland school catering service in Belfast alone, providing meals to one hundred and sixty one hundred and sixty schools in the city of Belfast. All school catering staff receive induction training in food safety, food hygiene and skin care, food preparation, use of equipment and the use of chemicals etc. illustrating that the training of school catering staff is an important area of employment.

The farming sector would become a key component in the programme as the Government would have to procure food from farmers. It would be hoped that more young people who do not own farms or land could have the opportunity to find employment as farm assistants or even be able to rent farms to help grow the extra fruit and vegetables needed.

At central and local government level there would be those responsible for food and services procurement, nutritionists, dieticians, catering managers, health and safety officers, in addition to various other kinds of administrators.

Food processing factories, distributors and packaging and waste companies alongside transport and ancillary companies would also be required. Catering personnel such as chefs and kitchen staff would also be needed, in addition to designers, creators and suppliers of canteen and kitchen furniture and equipment, and of course builders of school canteens and kitchens. Last, but no means least, would be the army of 'dinner ladies' (or gentlemen) needed to serve and supervise children during their lunch break.

8.0 How a Universal, All-Inclusive School Dinner Programme Can Be Achieved.

Initially legislation would have to be passed making it a statutory obligation on the local authorities to provide a school dinner scheme in their area. As in Northern Ireland it would make sense for several government departments, (especially the Departments of Health, Education and possibly Agriculture) to co-operate together and implement the school dinner policy. They could oversee their own budgetary contributions to its funding.

Legislation might need to be examined in relation to some of the constraints sometimes imposed on dealing with, or in relation to children, which result in negative interaction, for example concerns about children running in school playgrounds and falling over. Maybe parents would have to enter some contractual relationship with a school to prevent unreasonable litigation processes that might result from a child having a small accident in the school's dining hall.

Legislation would have to be in place regarding food standards, nutritional content, hygiene etc.

At the outset, a whole new mindset has to be embraced and government ministers, other agencies and all interested parties must be prepared to be patient, co-operative and inventive. Essentially the scheme can only work with good organisation, training, expertise and skills. Planning and co-ordination would be essential prerequisites for introducing a nation-wide programme. Vans with food provisions cannot keep breaking down en route to school, and chefs have to have a replacement if they do not turn up for work.

A lot of work has to be done but it can be done gradually, bit by bit, over a few years, with the long-term goal the major incentive: i.e. achieving a universal school dinner programme giving all children in the State the right to a school meal. The DEIS school initiative, which is already in existence, could initially be built upon and gradually rolled out over the whole country to eventually be transformed into a universal school dinner scheme.

In the meantime schools and other bodies such as local community kitchens could be consulted about ideas how to best implement this scheme in local schools until such time that proper canteen and kitchen buildings are constructed and are prepared. Neighbouring schools could share cooking premises and staff. Meals can be prepared in one place and delivered to several schools in an area. One school with a small school hall or refectory could have several sittings for lunch. Schools adjacent to each other (for example a primary feeder- school to a secondary school, sharing the same grounds) could pool their resources and maybe share a kitchen, dining hall or storage space.

Schools in other countries which already have school meals and maybe have more than a thousand children in one school to feed, are highly organised with, for example, two or three sittings to accommodate all the children having dinner; or canteen facilities are provided for older children to queue up for their dinner rather than sit down to be served.

In some places meals are cooked by large catering firms in large central kitchens and then delivered and kept warm and served on the school premises. Some schools even allow children to occasionally cook their own meals and have some input along with their parents into the menus and the kinds of food they like.

One of the major hurdles in implementing a universal school dinner scheme in the Republic of Ireland is the shorter school day. Most jurisdictions start school either at 8.30 or 9am and continue until 3.45pm /4pm for all ages, with one hour (or two hours in France) allowed for the midday break. As more parents in this country are now working and commuting long distances, their working day could possibly be as long as ten hours, and it is possible that a future government will have to look at the length of the school day in relation to the average working day of most parents and try and find some solution to their difficulties in juggling work obligations and school timetables.

Many other countries have already dealt with the fact that both parents might not be able to collect their children at 2pm or 3.40pm and would have started work by 8am, so there are 'garderies' open from 7am until 7pm attached to the schools where children are looked after before and after school until their parents can collect them. In Belgium for example, this is another area of childcare which is highly regulated and organised by the State and indeed

is where children get fed a late afternoon snack after a nourishing three course school dinner of, for example, celery soup, steak 'Parisian' with chicory and boiled potatoes and yoghurt.

If some children are in receipt of free meals and others pay, a system of payment has to be in place where there is discretion. In Northern Ireland children use swipe cards to 'pay' so that other children do not know if parents can or cannot pay for the meal.

9.0 Conclusion

Edmund Burke, the 18th century Irish Philosopher, made two quotes which could be applied to a school dinners policy:

‘good order is the foundation of all things’ and ‘the revenue of the state is the state’. By caring for the nation’s children the State makes an important investment in the future and this investment will reap benefits. To implement a successful school dinner scheme requires organisation and order.

Childhood is the time when the foundations for an individual’s life are set down. How children are treated by the society in which they live determines the kind of future society they will live in or create. If they are cared for and well looked after as children, they will grow up thinking it normal to care for the welfare of others.

The effective provision of school dinners will have long-term consequences not just in terms of the health of the individual but in the promotion of the ethos of a caring and just society, where the State acts for the common good.