



Evidence for free school lunches: The bigger picture benefits

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Summary

Associate Minister of Education, David Seymour, has claimed there is no evidence to support Ka Ora, Ka Ako, the Healthy School Lunch Programme and wants to reduce spending by half. The programme received \$323.4m in 2023 and fed more than 230,000 learners in 998 schools.

In addition to published findings from Ka Ora, Ka Ako evaluations, there is ample international evidence about the value of school lunch programmes in other Western countries. This includes lifelong educational and health benefits to recipient children, economic gains for their households/families, better school learning environments, job creation in the community, and increased food system resilience. **In this, the first Briefing in a three-part series, we outline some of the key expected outcomes, impacts and evidence at these different levels.**

While a careful review of the evidence around outcomes from the investment in the Aotearoa NZ programme is required, a narrow definition of cost-benefit needs to be avoided.

Since the programme has been in place for a relatively short period (piloted in 2020 with expansion to reach 25% of schools at the end of 2021), it is still too soon to evaluate the wider benefits. We therefore reviewed the global evidence base on the outcomes and impacts of school food programmes to extend what is already known locally about Ka Ora, Ka Ako.¹ The outcomes and potential impacts of Ka Ora, Ka Ako extend through five interlinked levels - child, whānau, school, community, and food system.

What do we know so far?

NZ Treasury has commented on the impact of Ka Ora, Ka Ako on Vote Education, noting no improvement in either school performance or attendance.² However, changes in school performance have in fact never been evaluated against school lunches, and chronic poor attendance figures measured previously (between 2020 and 2021) are more likely explained by COVID-related factors and increasing cost of living issues. A supplementary analysis of attendance data in the previous evaluation—released last week—shows an improvement in attendance for the most underserved learners. This amounted to three additional days of school per year, on average, for these kids.³

Commissioned evaluations have been able to measure effects like reduced student hunger, higher self-reported physical functioning and mental wellbeing, and improved alertness and capacity to learn.^{4,5} Moreover, a Kaupapa Māori evaluation has noted “identifiable shifts in behaviour, attitudes, attendance and intellectual engagement during class” for Māori learners.⁶ An independent study collecting perspectives of students, whānau and school principals across four Ka Ora, Ka Ako schools in Hawke’s Bay has found evidence of improved food security, enhanced equity, increased appreciation of healthy food for students; reduced financial hardship and stress for families; opportunities for nutritional learning, and enhanced mana (wellbeing) for all.⁷

Connecting short term observations to wider gains

While hungry kids are getting a lunch, all kids participating in Ka Ora, Ka Ako are in fact eating more healthily at school and showing improvement in a number of health metrics.⁴⁻⁶

Strong international evidence tells us that over time this improvement in diet quality and broader taste preferences through exposure to new foods translates to improvements in children's mental health, dental health, and reduced risk of chronic diseases later in life.^{8,9}

Parents in Ka Ora, Ka Ako say school lunches relieve the family food budget in a cost of living crisis.⁷ An average family with two kids is saving about \$62 per week – over \$2,000 per year.¹⁰ A US study estimated that free school lunches saved families about 5% on their monthly grocery bill, improving food security over time.¹¹ Evidence also shows that children receiving healthy school meals influence their families' eating, and household diet improves.^{7,12}

In 2022, 2,361 jobs were created or retained through the programme – employment paying at least a living wage.¹⁰ In Scotland, local sourcing and partnerships to provide free school meals was credited with boosting local economic development.¹³ A Social Return on Investment study of the programme – considering environmental, economic, and health factors among others – estimated a return of £6 for each £1 (NZ12.50 for each NZ\$2.00) invested in the programme.¹³

Although changes to overall daily attendance have not yet been detected, a study on the long-term impact of universal primary school lunch provision in Sweden over a decade found that kids stayed in school for longer, which improved their lifelong earning potential.¹⁴

There is always room for improvement

Some areas within the programme need further attention to achieve optimal results, for example, ensuring the quality of food to reduce waste, providing more ways for children and parents to engage with the food programme, and addressing challenges to integrate Ka Ora, Ka Ako more effectively with mātauranga Māori.^{6,7,15} We also know that plenty of hungry kids are attending schools where the lunches are not provided.¹⁶

Universality is key to achieving maximum benefits

Targeting the programme to feed 'only the hungry' within low advantage schools would cut costs. However, it would have major downsides and undermine the overall benefits of the programme. Overwhelming international evidence shows this stigmatises recipients making them less likely to accept the food, and will increase waste. Such targeting of lunches has been linked to lower self-esteem and poorer academic performance, as well as more behavioural incidents (eg bullying and violence).^{9,17-22}

A universal model where free lunches are provided to every child in the school creates a level playing field.^{14,23,24} Research from middle schools in New York City found that extending free school lunches to all students, regardless of income, improved academic performance (math and English test scores) for children of all economic backgrounds.²⁵ Studies from Norway also suggest the act of eating the same meal together results in increased wellbeing and improved dietary habits for all kids involved.^{26,27}

Finally, most countries that have school lunch programmes (France, Italy, US, India, Sweden, Finland, Scotland and Wales) feed all learners at the school and they run the programme at all schools. Many have differential charges where the wealthy parents pay more for their kids' lunches than others, but this is not obvious to the kids and there is no 'stigma' of being needy.

Conclusion

We think there is ample local data and international evidence to support continued investment in Ka Ora, Ka Ako at the present level. We also think there is some potential to extend the programme to cover other hungry children, and that models exist in other countries to do this while controlling costs.

What's new in this briefing

- We present the global evidence base on school lunches to fill the gaps in local evidence for the Ka Ora, Ka Ako programme. It is either too soon to measure locally, or these have not yet been considered as relevant outcomes as they fall outside the Government's narrow view of Education.
- Benefits are highlighted at multiple scales: to the child, their household/whānau, school, community, and food system.

Implications for public health

- Strong international evidence suggests there is a ripple effect of benefits increasing over time at a widening scale.
- Given the high potential for Ka Ora, Ka Ako to contribute to multiple beneficial outcomes – for children and families, schools and communities, and the broader food system – continued investment *and expansion* of the programme is warranted.

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Competing interests

The authors are part of a research programme that is evaluating Ka Ora, Ka Ako

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