

## European School Fruit Scheme Response to the European Commission Consultation

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Given the soaring rates of obesity and related health problems, it is imperative that the current eating habits of children are changed and, in particular, that they eat more fruit and vegetables. So we would certainly welcome an initiative from the EU that would help bring about such a change. It is crucial, however, that the scheme that is adopted should be one that is demonstrably effective in changing children's diets. Otherwise it will just waste valuable resources and will not be sustained by member states in the long run.

One option frequently put forward is simply to make fruit and/or vegetables available "free" to young children at school in the hope that this will be sufficient to get them to change their habitual and often long-standing avoidance of these foods.

Unfortunately there is now a great deal of evidence that shows that this approach, in itself, does not work in the longer term. This is the conclusion of evaluations of the *School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme* in England, the biggest such intervention ever attempted (see Wells and Nelson, 2005; Ransley et al, 2007), and also of other related studies (Horne et al, 2004; Lowe et al, 2004; Horne et al, 2008). It should also be noted that though one recent evaluation of the English scheme in the North East of England (Blenkinsop et al, 2007) found an increase in children's consumption of fruit and vegetables, the authors made it clear that it was NOT produced by the Schools Fruit and Vegetable Scheme but by other factors.

In spite of claims that such interventions might achieve some increase, the evidence clearly shows that by far the most effective way to bring about large and long-lasting changes in children's diets is to focus specifically on helping them learn to like the taste of fruit and vegetables. Certainly, any strategy that consists simply of making fruit and vegetables available to children without first winning their hearts and minds, is a course that is unlikely to succeed except on a very small and limited scale. The substantial investment that schemes of this kind entail could be used to achieve much more significant improvements if it were directed instead at the more focused issue of changing children's tastes so that they *wanted* to eat these foods.

If we are to take the available evidence seriously, there are two ways forward:

1. Provide "free" fruit and vegetables at school over the long term, supported by a programme, such as the *Food Dudes*, designed to ensure that children learn to enjoy eating these foods and continue to do so indefinitely. It is important, however, that their increased consumption of fruit and vegetables should not be confined just to school, but should extend to the home environment also. This is very much the focus of the *Food Dudes Programme*, which, in Ireland, has been shown to bring about substantial improvements in children's eating habits both at school and at home, and not just in the children themselves but also in their parents. These parents have reported considerably increasing both their consumption and purchase of fruit and vegetables.

2. The second, less costly, but perhaps more efficient, way of boosting consumption of fruit and vegetables is for member states not to **supply** free fruit and vegetables to school children over the long term, but instead to focus resources on changing **demand**. That is, concentrate on influencing children and their parents to want to eat these foods, so that in the long-term it is parents and children who will go on to choose and purchase them for themselves. This is the approach taken by the Irish Government, who introduced the *Food Dudes* scheme to their primary schools in September 2005. In Ireland it is the practice that children bring their own lunches to school. In order to enable the Food Dudes Programme to get going therefore, the Irish Government had, for a while, to supply free fruit and vegetables to the children. They did so for only 16 days, however. Thereafter the focus was shifted from school provision to home provision. Parents are expected to provide much more fruit and vegetables in their children's lunchboxes and the children are expected to eat them. Evaluations of this scheme indicate that it has been hugely effective, and it has won high praise from parents and teachers.

Another variant of this approach is provided by the example of England. Here lunchtime food is provided by school canteens and schools are now required to make fruit and vegetables available daily. In theory this solves the supply problem (though in practice schools might welcome additional resources to increase their provision of these foods). In England, and in other member states that have similar provision, the key issue then becomes how to ensure that children eat the fruit and vegetables provided at school lunch. In the wake of the Jamie Oliver exposure of poor eating habits in English schools, the English Government set up the School Food Trust to improve the quality of food available in schools. They have made considerable strides in doing so and we are now working with them to help introduce the Food Dudes Programme to ensure that English children learn to like the fruit and vegetables that are now more readily available.

### **Conclusion:**

If a substantial amount of EU resource is committed to improving children's diets, and we do hope it is, then the initiative it adopts must be effective and evidence-based. The key to success is the children themselves and their families. To be effective, programmes must recognise the need to help them learn to like fruit and vegetables and resist the enormous pressures from mass marketed foods which, consumed to excess, are harmful to health. By adopting the Food Dudes Programme nationally, the Irish Government has shown that this can be done very successfully and cost-effectively.

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## References

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