

LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE BACKS MANIFESTO PLEDGE FOR UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS FOR PRIMARY CHILDREN WORTH £25 PER WEEK FOR A FAMILY WITH TWO CHILDREN

It's a fact that well fed and nourished children are healthier and healthy children behave and learn better say GMB President

The Labour Party conference today carried a motion from GMB which called for the Labour Party to ensure that there is a manifesto commitment to introduce universal free healthy school meals for all primary school children. If implemented this would save a family with two children at school £25 per week. See text of speech by GMB President Mary Turner moving the motion in notes below.

GMB earlier this week published details on numbers of children in every area of the country who are eligible for free school meals. The full details are on the press section of the GMB website www.gmb.org.uk dated 28 September 2009. The overall figures are as follows:

In England as a whole 558,590 nursery and primary school pupils take up free school meals while the figures for those entitled in Scotland is 62,058, for Wales 44,083 and for Northern Ireland it is 26,996. The percentage eligible in England is 16%, for Scotland it is 17.4%, for Wales it is 17.1% and for Northern Ireland it is 17.3%. Overall nearly 800,000 nursery and primary school children are eligible for free school meal in the UK. See Note 1 for the source of the data and Note 2 for eligibility for free school meals and the situation in Scotland.

Free school meals in nursery and primary school in the UK - January 2009

		number of pupils taking free school meals	% known to be eligible for free school meals
	England	558,590	16.0%
	London	130,350	23.7%
	North East	36,020	20.1%
	West Midlands	73,860	18.7%
	North West	92,570	18.6%
	Scotland	*62,058	17.4%
	Northern Ireland	*26,996	17.3%
	Wales	*44,083	17.1%
	Yorkshire & the Humber	58,670	15.9%
	East Midlands	38,700	12.8%
	South West	34,790	11.3%
	East	41,420	11.1%
	South East	52,210	10.1%

Paul Kenny, GMB General Secretary speaking from the Labour Conference said, **“There are five good reasons why universal free school meals should be introduced for all nursery and primary children. First, healthy food is needed to fight obesity. Second, a hot meal at lunch time helps pupils learn better in the afternoon. Third, a universal service would remove the stigma poor children face. Fourth, it would provide much needed help for hard pressed family budgets. A family with two children could be supported to the tune of £25 a week which is the current cost of school dinners. Fifth, providing free school meals for all would create jobs in the middle of this severe recession.**

The pilot schemes have been very popular with parents, children and teachers. The Labour Party needs to put popular measures in the next manifesto to get the core voters back voting for the Party.

The cost of providing universal free school meals at £500 million could be funded by closing down the tax havens and clamping down on tax evasion.”

Ends

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Notes to Editors

This is the text of the speech given by Mary Turner, GMB President moving the motion.

“Conference, Mary Turner, GMB. Proud to be moving the contemporary issue on school meals.

I want to start by thanking everyone, especially in the CLP’s who have supported

this crucial issue. I also want to congratulate our Labour government for being the champions of children and families and for taking the bold step of piloting healthy free school meals in Newham and Durham and extending the provision In Wolverhampton. Conference now is the time to go all the way. Be bold!

Since 1980 when the Tories scrapped Free school meals and opened up the school meal service to a constant diet of pizza’s, hot dogs and burgers we have been warning that this would damage our children’s health. Now our children are suffering record levels of diabetes and obesity. We’ve campaigned passionately about this because it’s so important for our children’s education and well being.

It’s a fact that well fed and nourished children are healthier and healthy children behave and learn better. Compare a well balanced, nutritional hot school meal with burgers from a chip van or, as we sometimes see, just a chocolate bar, or just a packet of crisps. Or the child who says they have no lunch at all. Often, a school

lunch is the only decent meal a child gets. Too often, it's the only meal at all. The current free school meals system is good. However it's historical link, as a safety net for poorer families only, has led to almost one third of a million of children, who are entitled to them, don't claim them. It's the children who lose out first. It's the family that suffers. It's the country that loses in the long run.

That's why we must have free healthy school meals for all. And those authorities that are trialing universal free school meals are loving it. It is socially right. It's popular with parents. It's a doorstep winner. Just the right sort of policy for operation fightback. Our critics will ask about the cost. I don't see a cost. I see an investment in our children's health and education because that's the difference between us and the Tories. The Tories, who looked at the pilot in Newham, said free school meals for all was great for kids and families. It clearly led to a better diet, happier and more content children in the class room, improved learning and better behaviour but then went on to say they wouldn't support it, because it costs money. So an old story, Tories put children after their wallets and the Lib Dems are of the same view. They scrapped the successful free school meals that Labour had introduced in Hull.

Exactly what price do the Tories and the Lib Dems put on the health of our children? Because in our party, the Labour Party, we care about our children's future and where we can do something to help we step in investing in the health of our children today brings massive dividends for the future of our nation.

Conference please support universal free healthy school meals."