
The Guardian

Kelly Stays Vague on School Food

March 22, 2005

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Retrieved 03/30/05 from

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/schoolmeals/story/0,15643,1443146,00.html>

Providing school meals on 37p a day was tough, the education secretary Ruth Kelly admitted yesterday, as she promised reforms, but so far no extra cash, to improve their quality.

Denying that she was climbing on the back of a bandwagon launched by chef Jamie Oliver, who has pushed the issue into the limelight with his TV show, she revealed that on her first day as education secretary she demanded action to improve school meals.

But at the launch of Labour's mini-manifesto for children yesterday, she faced scepticism about the timing of her announcement.

She will find extra money for schools to raise the quality of school meals, she said. But neither the sum nor when it will be announced was revealed.

And she was unable to announce any extra cash to improve the nutritional quality of school meals, apart from admitting that she did not think the current average funding was adequate.

Referring to the sum spent on ingredients per child in Greenwich, the London borough featured in Jamie Oliver's series, Ms Kelly acknowledged: "It is difficult to produce a high quality school meal for 37 pence." She added: "Many schools of course already spend more than that. All have the powers to do so."

She expected schools and local authorities to "look at this situation carefully". But she indicated that government cash help would be in the form of support through better training for dinner ladies and funding for the new school food trust.

The careful wording of the education secretary's announcement suggested that it will be for schools or local education authorities to decide if future extra cash will be spent on meals.

She pointed out that schools already have the powers to spend more on school meals than they currently do, but that it is for parents and governing bodies to set priorities.

Ms Kelly confirmed that by September this year the government aims to raise the nutritional standard of schools by introducing standards on fat, sugar and salt content. A school food trust, first announced by Ms Kelly in February, will advise on how to improve nutritional standards.

But the promise was dismissed by Charlie Powell, campaign coordinator for the children's food bill in parliament.

He said: "It is very sad that a high profile TV series backed by a major celebrity and an imminent general election are required to get the government to focus on school meals."

Pointing out that in France schools spend between £1.50 and £4 on the cost of meals, Mr Powell claimed: "Current standards are so weak they are not worth the paper they are written on."

For their part, both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats criticised what they characterised as a cheap election stunt.

Soil Association policy director Peter Melchett said: "If they are not prepared to bring in proper nutritional standards, they are condemning children to a continuing diet of food that damages their health."

He added: "It is a scandal that they have not listened to what parents and Jamie Oliver are saying."

At yesterday's press conference, Ms Kelly repeated the government's threat to legislate to ban advertising of "junk food" by 2007 unless self-regulation in the advertising and broadcast industries worked.

The Food Standards Agency is currently working on detailed nutritional guidelines, so that the broadcasting watchdog Ofcom can in the meantime open talks with the food industry on a new voluntary code.

Without the guidelines, Ofcom would be open to legal challenge in the event of specific advertisements being banned.

The new guidelines will be ready by next year, giving Ofcom a year to decide whether they work.

As part of a range of promises which are intended to convince parents that Labour is working to help them, the government also promised tougher rules which would put out of business any shops that were found to be selling cigarettes to children.

Trading standards officers will have powers to serve fixed penalty notices on any retailers who are found to be breaking the law on sale of cigarettes.

The election co-ordinator, Alan Milburn, said that the Labour party remained committed to the principle of halving the number of children in relative low income households by 2010-11.