
The Guardian

Kelly Serves up 50p Pledge on School Meals

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The government today promised £220m to bring the minimum spent on school dinners to 50p.

The education secretary, Ruth Kelly, also promised to reintroduce guidelines on nutritional standards in school meals for the first time in 20 years.

The announcements came as the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, promised to make education Labour's "number one priority".

The three-year funding package was given a cautious welcome today by the television chef Jamie Oliver as he left Downing Street, where he had presented Mr. Blair with a 271,000 signature petition to improve school meals.

Oliver's high profile campaign to improve school dinners has focused unprecedented attention on what children are eating at school, and was being heralded as the motivation behind Ms Kelly's announcement of new money and regulations.

The total funding for school meals will now add up to £280m; £220m will go directly towards the food on pupils' plates, with a minimum of 50p being spent on primary school pupils' meals and 60p on secondary pupils'. Oliver found that the London borough of Greenwich, where he took over catering for some schools last year, spent just 37p on meals for each pupil.

A further £60m will be spent on a School Food Trust to offer support to schools on improving their food. Minimum nutritional standards will be developed by an expert panel and made mandatory by September 2006.

Ms Kelly also wants parents to become more involved in what their child's school is serving and has ordered a "toolkit" for parents on how to get involved in the new trust, to be published in May.

However, today's announcements acknowledge that a promise made last week to rebuild school kitchens is part of the existing Building Schools for the Future programme, under which every secondary school and some primaries will be rebuilt or refurbished over a period of 15 years.

Moreover, Ms Kelly refused to go so far as saying junk food would be banned in schools - the main proposal made by Oliver in his campaign - but the School Food Trust would be able to make such a recommendation.

The education secretary said on GMTV this morning: "I think in primary schools, for example, there is a very strong case for restricting choice. But what they need to know is how to cook healthy food, which is far more difficult than just banning junk food."

"There's significant money but there's also training and kitchen facilities and staff going into schools who will be able to cook freshly prepared ingredients. They will be able to prepare vegetables, they will be able to serve it to children, and we will see a really dramatic increase in the quality of food in school dinners that are served, particularly in those areas where they are not currently serving good school dinners at the moment."

Ms Kelly acknowledged that there was "bound to be some waste" while schools brought in new menus and found out what children "will or will not eat".

"It will take money in the initial stages to transform what happens in our schools but of course it's about raising the quality of catering staff and professionalising their service, as well, and that's what they want to see."

Oliver welcomed Ms Kelly's announcement but vowed to remain "the voice of the dinner lady". The chef said, outside No 10: "The response from the public and parents and kids and teachers has been phenomenal.

"I think I am going to stay very much removed from the government, or any government, and I'm going to try and remain the voice of the dinner lady and the parent - but it is certainly very positive."

Mr. Blair, the education secretary and ministers are today expected to emphasise their party's education policies in advance of the coming election, which is widely tipped to be announced next week.

Ms Kelly was speaking today at a Fabian Society event, where she will defend her government's record on improving opportunities for pupils from the poorest backgrounds. The schools minister, Stephen Twigg, is speaking at the National Association of School Masters Union of Women Teachers' conference in Brighton.

In a speech, Mr. Blair will say: "Education is New Labour's first priority and will continue to be the cornerstone of our programme for government.

"We are determined to increase the personal prosperity of hard-working families across the country. This determination drives us to raise standards in every school, for every child.

"The sustained investment and reforms we are putting in place are designed to help pupils, parents and teachers to achieve at their best.

"Our ambition is for this generation to be the best educated and trained in our country's history - with every child stretched to the limits of their ability, no child written off or left behind."