PAVEE POINT
TRAVELLER AND ROMA CENTRE

Submission to the House of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Youth as part of the Committee's *Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme*.

Executive Summary

The School Meals Programme is a critical component of Ireland's approach to addressing child poverty, food insecurity, and educational disadvantage. The programme can positively influence children's nutrition, wellbeing, and capacity to engage in learning. However, its impact is currently limited by inconsistent quality, insufficient portion sizes, uneven access, logistical challenges for schools, and limited consultation with families and school communities.

This submission highlights particular implications for children from Traveller and Roma communities, who experience disproportionately high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and food insecurity, and for whom culturally appropriate, inclusive, and accessible provision is essential. Key recommendations include improving meal quality and quantity, extending universal access, strengthening cultural inclusion, ensuring long-term sustainable funding, enhancing governance and consultation, and embedding the programme within a whole-school, health-promoting framework.

Introduction

This submission is made to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth as part of its evaluation of the impacts of the School Meals Programme in Ireland. It draws on two consultations with Traveller and Roma parents, observations of their children's experiences with the programme (conducted in collaboration with Pavee Point and Donegal Travellers Project), teacher perspectives, and relevant research evidence[1] on nutrition, wellbeing, programme delivery, and implementation. Given the high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, food insecurity, and educational marginalisation experienced by Traveller and Roma communities, the School Meals Programme constitutes a vital intervention. To achieve its full potential, the programme must be delivered in a manner that is equitable, culturally appropriate, and inclusive of community participation.

1. Resources and Delivery

Schools serving disadvantaged communities, including those with significant Traveller and Roma enrolment, report substantial logistical challenges in delivering hot meals. These include limited storage facilities, staffing constraints, time pressures, and waste management issues. Such challenges risk undermining equitable delivery and place disproportionate strain on schools already operating under resource constraints.

Teachers report limited involvement in the selection of providers and minimal flexibility in ordering systems or menus. This lack of local autonomy reduces schools' ability to adapt provision to their specific context and student population, including schools with high numbers of Traveller and Roma pupils.

2. Nutrition and Wellbeing

Hot school meals are generally perceived as aligned with national healthy eating guidelines, incorporating

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[1] Katie Garvey, *Exploring the Perspectives of Irish Primary School Teachers on Food Education in Schools* (Master's thesis, University of Galway, July 2025).

carbohydrates, protein, and vegetables. However, evidence indicates that nutritional compliance alone does not ensure positive outcomes. Children's acceptance of meals is influenced by taste, familiarity, cultural relevance, and time available to eat.

Some children, including those from Traveller and Roma backgrounds, do not consume the meals provided due to unfamiliarity or lack of cultural relevance, resulting in persistent hunger during the school day. In such cases, parents often feel compelled to continue providing packed lunches, undermining the programme's intended role in reducing food insecurity. Wellbeing benefits are most evident when meals are both nutritionally appropriate and acceptable to children, and when the programme is integrated into a broader whole-school wellbeing approach.

3. Access and Inclusion

Access to the School Meals Programme is currently available to all primary schools; however, participation is not mandatory, which may limit its effectiveness as an anti-poverty and inclusion measure. A universal rollout across all primary and secondary schools would help reduce stigma and ensure that Traveller and Roma children, along with other children from disadvantaged backgrounds, can access meals without being singled out or marginalised.

Cultural inclusion is a significant concern. Schools serving diverse populations report that menus do not sufficiently reflect cultural food practices, contributing to low uptake and increased food waste. Inclusive menu planning, informed by consultation with families and communities, is essential to ensure equitable participation.

In addition, digital and literacy barriers present additional challenges. Families with low literacy or digital literacy, including some Traveller and Roma families, experience difficulty navigating the programme's application systems and online platforms. This creates unintended exclusion.

4. Sustainability

The long-term success of the School Meals Programme depends on stable and adequate funding. Insufficient funding compromises meal quality, portion size, and consistency across providers, and places additional pressure on schools. Sustainability must also encompass environmental considerations, including reducing food waste and excessive packaging through improved planning and child-centred meal design.

5. Governance and Coordination

It is perceived that the rollout of the School Meals Programme has largely followed a top-down model, with limited structured consultation. Teachers report inconsistent communication with providers and limited opportunities to provide feedback or influence service delivery.

Parental consultation, including engagement with Traveller and Roma parents, has been minimal. This represents a missed opportunity to build trust, improve cultural relevance, and increase children's acceptance of meals. Stronger governance structures and inter-agency coordination are required to ensure accountability, consistency, and responsiveness.

6. International Evidence and Best Practice

International evidence demonstrates that effective school meal programmes are universal, adequately funded, culturally responsive, and integrated with food education and broader child wellbeing strategies. Best practice highlights the importance of community engagement, local flexibility, high nutritional standards supported by quality control, and strong links between school meals, health promotion, and educational outcomes.

Value of the School Meals Programme

For Traveller and Roma children, the School Meals Programme is not solely a nutritional intervention but a mechanism to promote educational participation, wellbeing, and equality. More broadly, the School Meals Programme plays a vital role in promoting nutritional equity, reducing food insecurity, and supporting educational participation. The programme has particular significance as part of a broader strategy to address persistent structural inequalities and improve health and educational outcomes.

Key Challenges Identified

- Inconsistent implementation and meal quality
- Insufficient portion sizes
- Administrative and logistical burdens on schools
- Limited consultation with Traveller and Roma parents
- Cultural inappropriateness of some meals
- Food waste due to low uptake
- Capacity constraints within schools

Recommendations for Action

1. Improve the quality and nutritional value of meals, with reduced reliance on processed foods.
2. Increase portion sizes to ensure children are adequately nourished throughout the school day.
3. Extend the programme to all primary and secondary schools.
4. Ensure menus are culturally inclusive, reflecting the diversity of school communities, including Traveller and Roma children.
5. Provide sustained, long-term funding to ensure consistency, quality, and environmental sustainability.
6. Simplify and improve accessibility of application systems for families with low literacy or digital literacy.
7. Strengthen consultation and participation of schools, parents, and communities in programme design and delivery.
8. Increase flexibility in ordering systems and menu planning to reflect local capacity and needs.
9. Reduce food waste and packaging through improved planning and child-centred approaches.
10. Embed the School Meals Programme within a whole-school health, wellbeing, and food education framework.

Conclusion

The School Meals Programme is a necessary and highly valuable public policy intervention. With targeted reform, informed by evidence and inclusive of Traveller and Roma experiences, the programme can more effectively fulfil its role in promoting child wellbeing, educational engagement, and social equity across Ireland.