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Breakfast scheme brings benefits

A free breakfast scheme in Blackpool has been deemed to be a success by Northumbria University academics.

A team of developmental psychologists, nutritionists and statisticians from Northumbria University have been evaluating a scheme which, since January, has seen all Blackpool primary school children entitled to free breakfast and milk under a pilot scheme to improve the health and well-being of the town's young residents.

In excess of 11,000 breakfasts have been delivered daily in 33 schools, with children having the opportunity to have a drink and two items from a

selection of malt loaf, bagels, fruit, chopped fruit, raisins, yoghurt and smoothies. Some schools have also chosen toast and cereal on certain days.

Dr Greta Defeyter, Director of Healthy Living at Northumbria University, said: "Blackpool's Free School Breakfast scheme is one of the largest school breakfast schemes operating within the UK. The overall findings of the evaluation presented in the current report are very positive and, based on these findings, I strongly recommend that the scheme continues."

The researchers discovered that, overall, children who attended the club ate significantly healthier items for breakfast than non-attendees and reported feeling happier and more alert. There was also considered to be potential benefits for punctuality and classroom performance while the universal element of the scheme prevented stigma.

Cllr Simon Blackburn, Leader of Blackpool Council, said: "Across Blackpool children were coming to school hungry and struggling to concentrate. As a council it was not a situation we could allow to continue. I am proud of the bold decision we made to trial this scheme, a move that no other council has made, and I'm even prouder today to see the results of the research that shows we are improving the lives of our most vulnerable residents."

Neil Hodgkins, Headteacher of Devonshire Primary School, said: "The free breakfast scheme has been a very welcome initiative and has confirmed that there was a need in our school communities for this provision. Children who had previously had nothing, or very little, to eat first thing are now enjoying a nutritious start to the day and presenting themselves as being livelier, more alert and ready to perform better in class.

"Although it is still early days to be quantifying this in terms of academic results or attainment value, we are seeing other benefits such as improved punctuality and attendance, the development of social skills at breakfast and the good habit of indulging in healthy eating at what many consider to be the most important meal of the day. I do hope that the findings of reports and evaluations will encourage the Council to make a commitment to continue providing this much-needed service for our children."

The Northumbria researchers suggested that the location, start time and nutritional intake of the breakfasts should be carefully reviewed. They also recommended staff training and an evaluation of long-term educational

attainment and short time cognitive performance.

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