


The origin of school meals in England lies in national vulnerability. Following the introduction of compulsory education via the Elementary Education Act 1870, teachers became aware of children living in poverty that were too hungry to learn. This became a national issue when many working-class volunteers were rejected for military service due to physical underdevelopment and severe malnutrition. As a result, The Education (Provision of Meals) Act 1906 was introduced which allowed local authorities to provide free or subsidised meals for children.

During World War II, improving the nation's health was recognised as a key priority and The Education Act 1944 was introduced. This meant that local authorities had to provide a nutritious school lunch and free milk for all children. The legislation set out strict, minimum nutritional standards that were designed to counteract wartime shortages. For decades, these standards were highly successful in reducing severe childhood malnutrition and drastically improving children's average height and physical health.

These statutory nutritional standards worked well and remained in place until they were abolished by the 1980 Education Act, under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. They removed the minimum nutritional standards and the requirement for local authorities to provide a nutritious school lunch. Together with The Local Government Act 1988, this forced schools to outsource their catering to private organisations through Compulsory Competitive Tendering. Without nutritional standards to meet, school food started to include more fried items, sugary drinks and processed meats.

By the turn of the millennium, children's health statistics were poor and the Annual Health Survey for England 2004 showed that childhood obesity had risen drastically over the previous decade, alongside a decline in nutritional intake. This led to a political U-turn and the government introduced the Education (Nutritional Standards for School Lunches) (England) Regulations 2006, which restricted deep-fried items and processed meat, and banned sugary drinks, crisps and confectionery.

Today, school food is governed by Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014, which are to be updated further in 2027. Over 22% of children leave primary school obese, childhood diabetes levels have doubled since the 1990 and generally, most children consume too much sugar and not enough fibre. Therefore, from September 2027, schools won't be allowed to deep-fry foods, and they will need to introduce more fruit, vegetables, pulses, higher fibre breads and wholewheat pasta to help improve children's diets. **To date, we're still waiting for the new school food regulations to be passed**