

Free meals are appetising idea

LAST week Croydon's Labour Party promised to provide free school meals for every primary schoolchild in the borough if it wins May's council elections. NIKKI JARVIS looks at what parents, teachers and the Tory opposition think of the idea.

It sounds an appetising proposition to any parent - Labour promising to save mums and dads £350 a year by providing free - and healthy - school dinners.

Their plan is to bring in an "enticing" school menu, available to 20,000 pupils at Croydon's 75 primary schools.

It will cost £3.5 million a year - an expenditure taxpayers without children may find hard to stomach.

But local Labour leader Tony Newman says it will benefit everyone in the long-term by improving children's behaviour, health and educational performance.

They are sentiments shared by Mark Ducker, headteacher of Gonville Primary, in Thornton Heath.

"This is potentially great and would guarantee more people taking up food that schools provide," he said.

"About 60 per cent of kids take up school dinners at the moment but the more you eat them the better because they are so good for you now."

"The meals have come a long way since I've been head here and it's all thanks to the Jamie Oliver campaign about five years ago and now they are healthier than ever."

"I remember my school dinners were terrible - you had to psyche yourself up to eat them."

Mr Ducker's school already values the importance of kids eating healthily and hosts a breakfast club.

"A decent breakfast and lunch does have an impact on how children perform in the mornings and concentration is much better if they've had a good start to the day," he explained.

"Healthy meals mean they are not lethargic or tired and fill them with the energy they need to learn."

The financial benefits of such a pledge will not be lost on many of the parents of children at Gonville.

Mr Ducker added: "This is potentially a huge amount of money that could be saved for families - especially those who only just do not qualify for free school dinners."

Free meals for all could have saved a lot of worry and stress for one mum.

Tracey Peters, 25, temporarily pulled her two daughters out of Castle Hill Primary, in New Addington, after they were denied the free lunches they were entitled to for three weeks, after a benefits mix-up.

"Free school dinners would have completely solved my problems," she said.

"I think it would mean a lot to parents and change a lot of lives for people who have trouble finding the money for

Numbers to digest

- School meals served each day in Croydon - 10,700
- School meals paid for each day - 6,890
- School meals given away free each day - 3,820
- School meals served in Croydon every year - 1,865,119
- Cost of a primary school meal - £2
- Cost of a secondary school meal - £2.20
- Kitchen staff preparing dinners in Croydon - 427

packed lunches."

But for some taxpayers, the pledge may not be so welcome a change.

Customer service advisor Catherine Cooke, 29, of Lattimer Road, Croydon, does not have children.

She said: "I absolutely understand why some people may not be in favour of this because child benefits are there for parents to feed their kids with so why should we pay for other people's school dinners?"

"But at the same time I like the idea because I know what it's like to be at school and it's horrible having to ask your parents for money every day."

"Some kids would have really nice packed lunches and others wouldn't so this is bound to make things more equal among pupils."

If Labour wins the election, the free school dinners will be available from September 2011.



HAPPY CUSTOMER: Cameron Vandepuyse enjoys his school dinner



TUCKING IN: Children enjoy their school dinner at Gonville Primary



WHAT DO YOU FANCY? School dinner is served up at Gonville Primary

Photo by: COR/130110a0014 by Simon Turnbull

On the menu

A typical menu if the free healthy meals are brought in:

Monday: Tuna salad wrap, pork sausages in gravy with mashed potatoes or sweet and sour vegetables. Peach crumble with custard.

Tuesday: Salmon fishcake with baby baked potatoes, spaghetti bolognese or vegetable nuggets with baby

baked potatoes. Rice pudding with fruit.

Wednesday: Fish fingers with boiled or roast potatoes, roast lamb with potatoes or vegetarian chili with rice. Chocolate and mandarin slice with chocolate sauce.

Thursday: Jacket potatoes with tuna and sweetcorn, barbecue chicken with vegetable rice or cheese and

tomato pizza. Apple sponge with custard.

Friday: Lemon sole with new potatoes, cottage pie or cheese flan with new potatoes. Strawberry ice cream.

■ Different vegetables would also be served with each main course. Menus would vary every week on a four-week cycle.

People's thoughts on free school dinners

Alexis Conway, headteacher of Forestdale Primary School

"I think it's a great idea - we have children who don't eat a healthy breakfast and some that don't have breakfast at all before school so at least this ensures they are getting one hot meal."

"School dinners are so wonderfully varied today and eating such healthy food as a child will lead to society being much healthier in general."

"It's a life-changing idea especially as some kids who would have the dinners can't because of how expensive they are and in the current climate it will make a huge difference."

"If you are hungry at school you can't concentrate and while some packed lunches are wonderful, others perhaps aren't full or nutritious enough."

Gill Reeve, parent of two children at Atwood Primary School

"My kids go to school with packed lunches because cost is a factor - my husband and I both earn but we're not prepared to spend £4 a day on school meals."

"If the dinners were free I would certainly be more likely to take it up but not every day because my son



COME AND GET IT: All primary school children would get free school meals under Labour's plans

is quite fussy."

"If there were only extremely healthy things on offer he may not eat them and go hungry."

"It's different at home because I can shovel it down him and he doesn't have a choice."

"But it's definitely a fantastic idea in the main and I'm sure there will be a big take-up."

Mike Fisher, Croydon Council's Tory leader

"Around 20 per cent of pupils in Croydon are already entitled to free school dinners as it is and extending them right across the borough is not targeting resources at people who need them."

"I think if Labour wants to spend £3.5 million on children and schools they should spend it in the classrooms on things that will help students attain things."

"I don't know where all the money is coming from to go through with all the promises they have made, and they've got it wrong again with this one."

"We have spent a great deal on school improvement over our four years in power and in that time Croydon has made it into the top eight boroughs in the country in terms of children's attainment - I think that is what parents care more about."