

PROVISION OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC 2023/4

National Operational Programme Employment+ (Fund: ESF+, Managing Authority: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs)

INTRODUCTION AND THE CONTEXT

The EU Child Guarantee is a major EU policy initiative to ensure that every child has access to free education, health care, decent housing, and adequate nutrition. Each member state must provide children in need with free and effective access to at least one healthy meal each school day. School meals are one of the instruments supported by the EU to ensure that every child in need receives at least one free, healthy meal per school day.

Free school meals are part of the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee in the Czech Republic. Participation of schools in the Operational Programme Employment+ (OPE+) or similar programmes is voluntary. The programme is implemented in all 14 regions of the Czech Republic. School officials decide whether or not to participate. The participating school receives a financial contribution for meals provided to pupils who meet the eligibility criteria (most often from families “in material need”, i.e. receiving social benefits).

The free meals programme in OPE+ started at difficult times for Czech families, especially low-income families. Between January 2020 and March 2023, prices in the Czech Republic increased cumulatively by an unprecedented 33 %. Families faced first a sharp increase in energy prices in recent years and very high inflation in 2022, which hit family budgets harder than the covid-19 pandemic. The price increases led families to cut back significantly on energy consumption, and to cut back on food, which was practiced by more than half of families with children. Solo-parent families or families with more than two children were in a more difficult position, often having to cut back on spending on children's leisure activities and school meals, according to research findings.

The allocation for the school years 2023/4 and 2024/5: €12 MILLION¹

Total number of children supported	Region with the highest number of supported children (Moravskoslezský)	Region with the highest number of participating schools (Jihočeský)	Region with the highest average number of children per facility (Ústecký)	Percentage of schools supporting a maximum of 5 children
8,3 k	19 %	40 %	35 children	48 %

¹ The price of the meal allowance varies according to child age (i.e. €1,56 for children under 10 years in primary education, €2,4 for preschool).

BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT SURVEY

In the report, we present the experience and feedback of schools that provide free meals for children in need through their participation in Call 026 of the OPE+. The response rate of the questionnaire survey was 89%.

In addition, we surveyed schools that did not participate in the 026 OPE+ call despite having been involved in the previous OP for Food and Material Assistance (OPFMA). These schools were asked whether they provided free lunches funded by other sources and the reasons why they did not participate in OPE+. The response rate to this questionnaire was 73%.

In total, we contacted more than 1,400 schools that provide free school meal to around 11,000 pupils.

ACCESS TO FREE SCHOOL MEALS

Eligibility for free lunches is set on national level and the regional authorities may adjust some conditions according to their own needs. In all regions, the provision of free lunches is predominantly provided to children from poorest families receiving benefits of assistance in material need, e. g. that do not have enough income and their overall social and property relations prevent them from enjoying what the society accepts to be basic living requirements.

Only some regions (Central Bohemia, Pardubice or Karlovy Vary) applied more individual assessment of the social and economic situation by a third party (i.e., social workers, department of social and legal protection of children, director, etc.). The possibility of individual assessment or extending assistance to other families outside of material need appears to be important in the schools' comments. Schools feel that some families who do not receive material need benefits are still in need and would be grateful for assistance. The provision of free meals based on foster care benefits or foreclosures was minimal.

"Quite strict conditions, the minimum number of parents can reach them."

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"According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the child benefit is intended for low-income families. This suggests to us that these families have insufficient financial security. These families would also need to be included in the project."

"We have enough families who would be greatly helped by this assistance, e. g. single mothers / families in divorce proceedings / families with lower incomes, but who do not qualify for material hardship assistance, only for: housing benefit, child benefit or facing foreclosure/insolvency..."

FREE SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMME ADMINISTRATION

The majority of participating schools report that the OPE+ funded programme provides schools with a sufficient amount to cover the cost of school meals. For context, it should be noted that the unit costs paid to schools through OPE+ grants cover the cost of the raw materials used to prepare school meals. In general, the financing of school meals in the Czech Republic is such that all meals are partially subsidised - parents only pay for the raw materials. The wages and overhead costs of school canteen staff are financed by the state. The state sets financial limits on the amount paid for meals, depending on the age of the child.

In the case of funding, it should be added that the conditions for schools are not the same in different regions. The unit cost includes 7% for administration. Three regions keep the full amount, three regions keep a part (between 4 and 5%) and give the rest to the schools, and the remaining eight regions give the full amount to the educational institutions.

IDENTIFICATION OF ELIGIBLE CHILDREN

The programme defines the eligibility criteria for free school meals, but it is the school's responsibility to identify and reach children in the programme's target group. More than half of the schools (60%) relied on teachers to identify individual children in need. In addition, mass forms of outreach (parent-teacher conferences, leaflets, school websites, etc.) were often used.

13% of schools reported problems in identifying children in need, but it is likely that other schools face similar problems.

Schools' perceived barriers to identifying children in need:

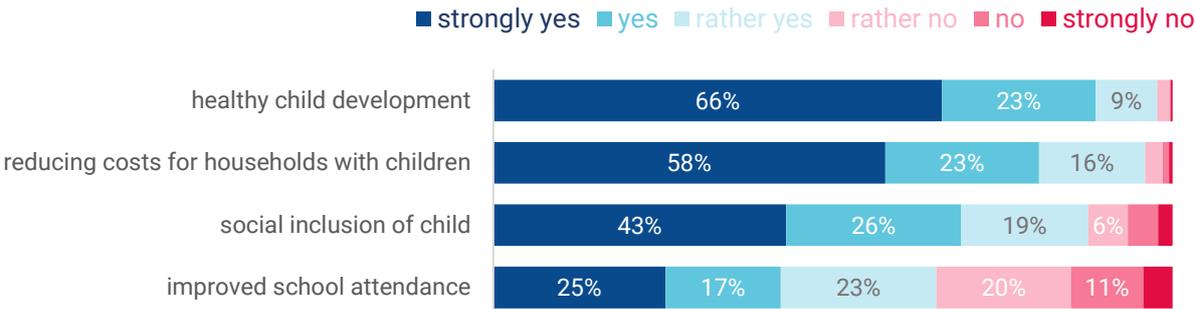
- Parental shame, refusal to seek help, fear of withdrawal of material benefits;
- Parents were unable to provide the necessary documentation;
- Strict eligibility criteria - primarily focused on non-working families receiving material need benefits, but other groups are also in need (working parents in difficult social situation without receiving material need benefits, Ukrainian refugee families);
- Lack of cooperation between the school and the employment office – schools do not know exactly who is receiving material need benefits.



School principal: "We cannot correctly identify the children receiving Job Centre benefits. It would be good if this initiative came from the Job Centre. It is sad when we identify children and then find out from the office that they are not eligible, and we have to tell them this again."

PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS

Schools assessed the benefits of providing free school meals in four areas: healthy child development, reduced costs for households with children, social inclusion of the child, improved school attendance. Healthy child development is perceived as a benefit by vast majority of schools, with 66% of respondents strongly agreeing, 23% agreeing and 9% somewhat agreeing. Overall, there was a lower perception of the benefit in improving attendance (reported by 62% of schools). However, the rating varies according to the type of school. For kindergartens, the perceived benefit in improved attendance was highest, at 80%.



Comments suggest that for some disadvantaged families, paying for meals is a barrier to their child's attendance at nursery. If this barrier disappears through the provision of free meals, there will be a positive effect on attendance for children from these families (see comment below).



"The biggest benefit is that children from socially disadvantaged families are attending kindergarten regularly, because it used to happen that parents really didn't put their children in kindergarten because they couldn't pay for lunches and snacks. Thanks to this support, the children stay until the afternoon because they have their afternoon snack paid for. My opinion is that it is good that these children are in nursery for as long as possible because it is certainly a better environment for them than many children have at home."

"The eating habits of the children and pupils are very poor, so I am pleased that we can offer free lunches to the children, so at least one proper meal a day."

"The main benefit, in my opinion, is that the children are not hungry at school. Maslow's pyramid works. A fed child is calmer, more focused, more efficient."

"Thanks to the lunches, they can stay in school after school and attend tutoring, after-school clubs and other activities offered by the school."

In the area of free lunch provision, we can identify two important areas that need to be addressed, namely, how to identify children in need and the conditions that determine which children are eligible for assistance. Both areas are not set uniformly from a national level. While the conditions for eligibility for free lunch are set out in the framework of the appeal, it is up to the regions to select only certain target groups according to their own preferences. The method of finding children in need is then entirely up to the schools and depends on their active approach. Whereas in the previous programming period schools obtained a list of children eligible for free lunches in cooperation with the Labour Office, no methodological procedures are now laid down.

CHALLENGES OF PROVIDING FREE SCHOOL MEALS

The questionnaire included open-ended questions on the reserves of the free lunch programme as well as on the problems and obstacles schools face. Most respondents did not perceive any reserves or barriers in the program or did not indicate them in the questionnaire. Approximately 15% of schools reported their experiences, offering thoughts or suggestions for improvement.

Participating schools perceive weaknesses in the programme mainly in the following areas:

- the conditions of the programme - obligation for parents to sign out lunches, too strict eligibility criteria, lack of flexibility, unclear rules;
- the administrative burden on schools;
- the need for schools to identify children in need;
- (some) parents' attitudes to support, low appreciation of the support provided;
- suggestions for extending and promoting the programme.

PREVIOUSLY INVOLVED SCHOOLS NOT PARTICIPATING IN OPE+

Schools that participated in the previous programme (OPFMA) and did not continue in the follow-up project were asked if they offered free meals under any programme and what their reasons were for not participating in OPE+.

Almost half of the 395 schools still provide free meals, serving more than 2,600 children. These schools use other subsidies – mainly from the programme of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (projects of the NGOs Women for Women and Patron of Children) or from the programme of the City of Prague – Assistance to Prague Residents from the Solidarity Fund as part of measures to mitigate the effects of inflation.

The main reason given by schools for not participating in OPE+ was the concern about double funding (41%). Other common reasons were the administrative burden of OPE+ and restrictive eligibility criteria for children.

Almost half of the schools not offering free meals (47%) replied that they had no children who met the eligibility criteria for free meals. Just under a quarter cited low parental interest as a reason for not offering free meals, and a fifth were put off by the administrative burden (21%). An even smaller proportion of schools considered restrictive eligibility criteria for pupils to be a problem (18%).

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