

FEEDING THE KIDS

Hone Harawira

My apologies for not being able to attend the **POLITICIANS LUNCH FORUM** at the **2012 PHA CONFERENCE**, the theme of which is **EQUITY FROM THE START - VALUING OUR CHILDREN**

I was glad to be able to make it to the powhiri and to hear the presentations yesterday morning from Dr Cindy Kiro and the Minister of Health for Samoa, Dr Tuitama. I took particular note of some rather strong words that Dr Tuitama used when describing the state of wellbeing for NZ Pacific children, and I thank him for the challenge that he lays before us all.

I note too that this year's conference is about taking action rather than just meeting to talk about the issues, so my contribution is a bill to follow up something I talked about during the election campaign last year.

It's official title is the **Education (Breakfast and Lunch Programmes in Schools) Amendment Bill** but really it's nothing more than a simple proposal to make sure that kids in our poorest schools get something to eat every day.

Yes, I know it's true that feeding children is really a parent's responsibility but the truth is that a lot of people have been so poor for so long that they struggle to make the right choices and often end up making the wrong ones. And our kids are still hungry ...

And I've heard a lot about changing society, and upgrading our housing, and increasing employment opportunities and improving access to health, and developing better educational pathways ... and all of that is true, but all of those things take a long time to happen. And our kids are still hungry ...

Folks – I don't want to argue about the merits or otherwise of other people's initiatives, because everything I have heard from the Children's Poverty Action Group, the Children's Commissioner and the multitude of health promotion agencies at this conference, all the way up through various advisory groups to the World Health Organisation's report on child health makes a whole lot of sense to me.

All I want to do with this bill is make sure that as we work through all the details of these other wonderful initiatives, that our kids are getting fed.

Anyway, here's the Explanatory Note to the bill. It pretty much says it all.

This Bill amends the Education Act 1989 to provide for the introduction of fully State funded breakfast and lunch programmes into all decile 1 and 2 schools and other designated schools in New Zealand.

The meals will be available to all enrolled students in these schools free of charge, and will be required to meet Ministry of Health nutritional guidelines.

Growing levels of poverty in New Zealand have resulted in too many parents being unable to afford to provide their children with breakfast before school and/or lunch at school, or being unable to afford to provide their children with sufficiently nutritious meals before and during school. Research conducted in New Zealand and overseas has demonstrated the positive benefits to the school attendance, learning achievement, and health of children and young people when nutritious meals are provided by schools.

The introduction of State led and funded food in schools programmes in low decile schools has been recommended by the Child Poverty Action Group in their 2011 report Hunger for learning: Nutritional barriers to children's education, and by the Children's Commissioner's expert advisory group on child poverty in their 2012 discussion paper Solutions to child poverty in New Zealand as a key measure to address child poverty.

Charitable organisations, businesses, and parent and school volunteers currently running or supporting food in schools programmes will be encouraged to continue to support schools in providing nutritious meals for students, and contribute to the success of the policy.

The State led and funded breakfast and lunch programmes in schools policy will bring certainty to decile 1 and 2 schools, other designated schools, and the families and students that attend them. Reliance on charity is often risky and uncertain, especially in times of economic downturn.

In conjunction with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education will develop a plan to monitor schools at least once every 12 months to ensure they are providing meals each day they are open for instruction and that the meals follow nutritional guidelines. An evaluation of the breakfast and lunch programmes will be conducted within the first 3 years to further develop and improve their effectiveness.

Enjoy the Conference everyone. Share what you do well with others. Learn what you can from others. And go home refreshed for the challenges ahead.

