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## **Thousands more children to benefit from enlarged school meals scheme**

**– Mary Coughlan Minister for Social and Family Affairs**

More than 5,000 extra school children could be receiving a daily meal or snack under the new revised school meals programme in the coming school year.

The expansion of the scheme - which has had its funds doubled by Social and Family Affairs Minister Mary Coughlan - will take place in the coming school year after up to 100 schools expressed their interest in joining the scheme.

Last year the Minister doubled funding for the scheme to €4million and revised the scheme to allow secondary and primary schools throughout the country participate in the scheme.

The new scheme targets disadvantage – and ends the ban limiting it to primary urban children. Following discussions between Minister Coughlan’s officials and the Department of Education post primary schools with pupils most at risk of early school leaving and their feeder primary schools were targeted to encourage a take up of the expanded scheme.

“This expression of interest by so many schools from all around the country is very encouraging and makes me optimistic of an enthusiastic take up of the scheme, “ said Minister Mary Coughlan today.

”Obviously it is too early yet to say what the final take up will be –however, the signs at this stage are encouraging as most of these responses to my doubling the funding available came from the schools in response to a targeted and limited mail shot.

”Up to June of this year a total of 147 projects received funding – benefiting 15,700 children. This new expanded scheme could see an increase of up to 40 percent in the numbers of children in both primary and second level



schools receiving a snack or a hot meal, “ said Minister Coughlan.

”This scheme has huge potential, and having worked with the Department of Education in prioritising schools with disadvantage I’d be optimistic that with the funding I have now made available, that most of these schemes would be up and running in the coming school year.

”I have seen at first hand how these schemes can work and have spoken with teachers who have told me how they have seen the benefit of the provision of a breakfast or lunch for children who might otherwise go to school hungry because of their family circumstances and may not eat until the school day is over. I have to say that I have been impressed by the commitment of teachers to the extension and improvement of this scheme, and to the local communities who provide the support and put the schemes into place, “ added Minister Coughlan.

Earlier this year the Minister published the first review of the ninety-year-old schools meals scheme. International experience has shown that a school meals scheme proved a positive force for children at school, and in areas of disadvantage helped children concentrate consequently limiting disruptive behaviour, and encouraged children to attend school.

Schools currently provide a variety of services for children, either a hot meal cooked on the premises, a light snack or a breakfast.

“I am open to how the funds in this scheme are spent – whether on hot meals cooked on the premises in kitchen facilities, airline type food trays that need only be microwaved in the school, or nutritious cold meals such as fruit, milk and sandwiches, ” added Minister Coughlan.

**ENDS**  
**29<sup>th</sup> August 2003**