

Easy credit means children miss out – The Dominion Post, 9 February 2007

Easy credit might be partly to blame for families struggling to feed their children, a family budgeting service says.

The comments come in the wake of concerns that too many children are going to school hungry.

One analyst estimated that about 80,000 children go to school every day without eating breakfast. However, that did not differentiate between those choosing not to eat and those whose family could not afford to feed them. Study results issued in 2004 showed a third of Wellington primary schools had referred children to social workers or nurses in the previous year over concerns that they were regularly hungry.

Nearly 1500 children in the Wellington region were found to regularly attend without having had breakfast and a further 437 often did not take lunch to school.

New Zealand Family Budgeting Services chief executive Raewyn Fox said her clients struggled to feed their children overall, rather than necessarily at breakfast.

Over-stretched by fixed costs such as rent and power that their income barely covered, families found food was the only discretionary cost. "When the bills pile up, you skimp on food money."

However, easy credit was also a serious problem, with many families being lured into loans, credit card debt or hire-purchase agreements with little understanding of exactly what that entailed, Mrs Fox said.

"They are very, very readily and easily offered, in ways that people don't realise how much they are going to have to pay."

Gambling and cigarettes also soaked up funds in some low-income families, though high spending on alcohol was unusual.

"How do you tell a stressed parent to give up smoking?"

Meanwhile, political parties continued to squabble over the best way to deal with the problem.

National's plan to involve the private sector to help provide food in low-decile schools - rubbished as "Tory charity" by Labour - has been endorsed by United Future leader Peter Dunne.

The Green Party is calling for an extension of the fruit in schools programme to cover all primary schools and for the Government to provide free healthy breakfasts in all schools.

At present, only 268 of the 2662 schools with primary school-aged children had access to Fruit in Schools, Green Party health spokeswoman Sue Kedgley said.

Child Poverty Action Group had estimated it would cost \$25 million to provide free breakfasts in decile one and two schools.

The parents of one Porirua primary school pupil said a girl in their six-year-old son's class routinely turned up to school without any lunch, and the problem had become so bad that teachers and other parents packed extra lunch to feed her.

"We are not sure why her parents don't give her lunch to take to school. We don't ask," the boy's father said.

The father said his son took a sandwich, a pot of yoghurt, a bottle of water and an apple or banana to school every day. However, he said his son could sometimes be a fussy eater and would rather go without than eat something he wasn't used to.