

## WHAT WORKS WELL IN SCHOOL FOOD

Dear Headteachers,

We know how busy schools are. The idea of turning round your food service – or merely nudging it from good to great – may seem daunting. So we want to make it as easy as possible for you. We've spoken to dozens of Headteachers to compile their top tips for you:

- Lead the change: In every school with a good food culture, the head teacher has led the change.

- Create a taskforce to help you. Many of these actions can be shared across the school. Some are best done by the school cook, business manager, senior management team, or your external catering company, or even volunteers
- Together, assess your current set up honestly, and draft a list of priorities that you want to resolve. Better is possible.

We're right behind you  
The Chefs in Schools team



## CONTRACTS & PLANS

Get the right contract – drawing up a new contract is a risky time for your school food service, but also a moment of opportunity.

Don't draw up a new contract alone – lots of other schools have done this before you, and found ways to get a good deal. Find a local school who does food well and ask for mentoring.

Make it a contractual requirement for your caterer to achieve a certain standard of

quality, as judged by an external organisation – e.g. Food for Life Partnership

Ask your caterer to draw up a clear, written plan for increasing take-up over a set period. It is the key to everything: increased nutrition for your pupils and a bigger catering budget.

Get specialist help. Sign up for our newsletters, check our website, contact us. We want to help you improve your food.

## GET YOUR KITCHEN TEAM ON BOARD

If you look after them, you've won half the battle. Here's how:

- Break down the glass door between the school and the kitchen. Get to know your chefs, cooks and lunchtime supervisors better, and treat them as part of your team, on a par with teachers and business managers.
- Include your kitchen team in staff meetings. Enable them to enter and leave by the same door as the rest of your staff. Invest in training and development, as you would all staff. Get to know each of them by name and encourage the whole school to do the same.

- Bring your chef or cook to parents' evenings – not to serve the food, but to answer questions from parents about their children's eating habits.
- Take them around the classrooms and introduce them to all the children at the start of the year.
- Give them proper uniforms for service: chef's jackets or service aprons and caps instead of hairnets.





# THE WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

The Whole School Approach is a simple idea, but an important one. It means treating the dining hall as an integral part of the school, where children and teachers eat lunch as part of the school day the cooks as important staff members and food as a vital element of school life. It means joining up the children's food education with what they eat, in order to broaden and enrich their understanding of food. It means focusing on the needs of the children.

The checklist that follows include of all the things we have seen working well at schools that can be a shared responsibility with your taskforce: specific actions that improve food culture in schools and increase take-up of school dinners. It is designed to be printed out and pinned up in your Headteacher's office, in the office of your business manager, your staff room and in the school kitchen.

## FOCUS ON THE CHILDREN'S NEEDS

### A FOOD

- Eat in the canteen often. Look at a plate from a child's eye view. Ask yourself whether the food looks appetising, smells and tastes good.
- Be sure there is a mix of familiar and new foods for the children, cooked using different methods, and that the catering staff encourage children to experiment.
- Use local and seasonal suppliers, and make a song and dance about it. Children and their parents find the idea of local produce exciting (especially when it comes from the school garden), and are more likely to try it.
- Stand by the bins so that you know what is being thrown away. Small shifts in what you offer can reduce waste – and therefore cost – significantly.

### B FOOD EDUCATION

- Teaching cookery is compulsory to the age of 14. Joining up what pupils learn to cook and the food they eat at lunch is very powerful. Involve your chef or cook in their cookery lessons, or get local chefs in to teach in your school. Chefs can share their passion for food better than anyone else.
- Make sure children get consistent messages about nutrition in lessons and at lunchtime.
- Choose classroom rewards that are not sweets.
- Use cooking and growing as an exciting way to teach subjects across the curriculum – from history to maths, science to enterprise, technology to geography.
- Make a project/ topic to plant, grow, cook and eat your own ingredients.

- Offer after school cooking lessons for parents and children.

### C HEALTH

- Manage children's choices to ensure they get a balanced meal, instead of stuffing themselves full of bread rolls. Offer a cheaper 'set menu' meal require children to fill their plates with options from different categories or simply put vegetables on their plates.
- Do not give seconds to children unless they have finished their whole plate of food, including the vegetables.
- If possible, do not serve puddings to children at the same time as main courses. It can work well to have trays of puddings walked around by mid-day supervisors, and give to children once their plates have been cleared.
- Make sure packed lunches are not a 'better' option. Unpack them onto plates to reduce their appeal. Ban sugary drinks, crisps and confectionery, or offer prizes and other incentives for bringing in a healthy lunch. Some schools phase out packed lunches outright. If you want to do this, try starting with your newest intake (pupils in Reception or Year 7). The phase out will then apply to all the years that follow them, until it extends to the whole school.
- Watch what gets served at mid-morning break. Many children eat their main meal at this time. Too often, that means filling up on pizza, paninis or cake.
- Ensure tap water is widely available at all times, make it the drink of choice across the school and encourage all children to keep well hydrated. Jugs of water can be flavoured with lemon, orange or cucumber slices.

## D ENVIRONMENT

- Look around your dining hall. Is the room clean and attractive? Does it smell good?
- Keep queuing times short. Try staggering lunchbreaks; introducing more service points; serving food at the table, family-style; and reducing choice.
- Have a cashless payment system. This shortens queuing times, enables parents to go online to see what their children are eating, and prevents FSM children being stigmatised.
- Replace prison-style trays with proper crockery & plates. Food at lunchtime is an educational experience, and part of that education is learning to eat as adults do

## E SOCIAL LIFE

- Have a stay-on-site rule for break and lunch time.
- Allow all children to sit together – don't segregate those with packed lunches.
- Structure the lunch break so there is sufficient time for eating as well as activities or clubs. This may mean making the lunch break longer or timing the clubs differently.
- Give special consideration to the youngest children, who might be intimidated by the noise and rush of lunch break.

## F GET THE PRICE RIGHT

- In secondary schools, consider subsidising school meals for year 7 at the start of term, to make them cheaper or free. Children who start eating school lunches often carry on, even once they have to pay.
- Offer lunch discounts for parents with more than one child at the school, or whose children eat a school lunch every day.
- Make lunch free for teachers. Eating as a whole school community improves manners, breaks down barriers and enriches the food culture.

## G IMPROVE THE BRAND

- Make menus available online in advance to children and parents.
- Offer samples of the food for children to taste.
- Encourage teachers to eat in the dining room with the children. It may require a cultural or logistical shift, but it cuts to the heart of success. It has a unifying effect on the whole school, and raises the status of school meals.
- Hold themed events – such as World Cup day, or international food day – to get the children excited.
- Organise a group to represent children's views on school lunch, such as a School Food Council.
- Give children opportunities to prepare, cook or serve the food.
- Give parents, carers and grandparents the opportunity to taste school food and eat with the children at lunchtime and/or parents' evenings.
- Invite family members to help with cooking or gardening clubs.
- Seek out partners in the community who can help with cooking and growing activities, e.g. local restaurants, food producers, allotment growers. Invite a local chef to come and teach the children to cook.
- Share best practice with other schools, and visit schools who do a good job with their food to get ideas and share resources.

