

A checklist for head teachers

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. What follows is a checklist of all the things we have seen working well at schools: specific actions that improve food culture in schools and increase take-up of school dinners.

This checklist is designed to be printed out and pinned up in your office, in the office of your business manager and in the school kitchen.

Lead the change

- In every school we went to that had a good food culture, the head teacher had led the change.
- Obviously, not all of these actions are your responsibility; they 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.
- 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. Use an expert to help you draft it.
 - Ask your caterer to draw up a clear, written plan for increasing take-up over a set period.
 - 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 or Children's Food Trust.
- Get specialist help. For details of organisations that can help you with contracts, cookery lessons, gardening or any other aspect of this checklist, go to: www.schoolfoodplan.com.

Concentrate on the things children care about

A. Food

- Eat in the canteen often. Ask yourself whether the food looks appetising and tastes good.
- Be sure there is a mix of familiar and new foods for the children, 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. When serving fish, avoid the most endangered (Marine Conservation Society red list), and promote the best (MCS green list, which includes Marine Stewardship Council certified fish).
- 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.
- Make sure packed lunches are not a 'better' option. Ban sugary drinks, crisps and confectionery, or offer prizes and other incentives for bringing in a healthy lunch. Some schools ban packed lunches outright. If you want to do this, try starting with your newest intake (pupils in reception or year 7). The ban 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.

B. Environment

- Look around your dining hall. Is the room clean and attractive? Does it smell good?
- Keep queuing times short. Try staggering lunch breaks; 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.

C. 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.

D. Get the price right

- In secondary schools, consider subsidising school meals for year 7 pupils, 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.

E. Improve the brand

- Make menus available in advance to children and parents online.

- 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 *every single* good school we visited did this. 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 nutrition action group (SNAG) or a School Council.
- Give children opportunities to prepare, cook or serve the food.
- Get the community involved
 - 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.
- Get local chefs in to teach in your school.

Adopt a 'whole school' approach

- This 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.
- Treat your cooks and lunchtime supervisors as part of your team, on a par with teachers and business managers. Do they come to staff meetings? Do they enter and leave by the same door as the rest of your staff? Have they received training and development recently?
- Bring your school cook to parents' evenings – not to serve the food, but to answer questions from parents about their children's eating habits.
- Make sure children get consistent messages about nutrition in lessons and at lunchtime.
- Choose classroom rewards for children that are not sweets.
- Grow food in your school, and use some in the school lunch.
- Use cooking and growing as an exciting way to teach subjects across the curriculum – from history to maths, science to enterprise, technology to geography.
- Offer after school cooking lessons for parents and children.