

The School Food Reform Journey - much more than just eating healthily

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It is over eight months since the new standards for school food were introduced in England, a period that has witnessed great innovation, commitment, dedication and occasionally frustration amongst all those responsible for food in schools. But also a period that has seen the most fundamental changes to school food for over 20 years.

The reform agenda

When the School Food Trust was created by the DfES at the end of 2005, it soon became clear that initiating what was nothing short of a revolution in the provision of school food would never be an easy task for all schools and local authorities. With varying levels of infrastructure, trained staff, interested parents, committed councillors and engaged headteachers, there was never going to be a uniform response on the ground to the introduction last September (2006) of interim standards.

For those schools that had already gone some way to reforming their school meals the introduction of the standards has been relatively painless, with little impact on their day-to-day operations or viability. For others, the process has been a real struggle and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise.

2007 has, and will continue to be, a year of further improvements. The Trust has recently issued guidance to help schools meet the new standards for food other than lunch (vending machines, breakfast clubs, tuck shops

etc) which will become law in September 2007. We have also recently published a revised guide to the original standards which responds to the wide range of questions we have received from schools, local authorities and caterers. It also provides further practical advice on how to implement the standards, whilst maintaining a viable food service.

The final pieces of the reform jigsaw are the nutrient standards which will become mandatory for primary schools in 2008 and secondary schools in 2009. The Trust will be producing its definitive guide to these later in the year.

Cooking up success

Whilst implementing all the mandatory reforms is absolutely essential, the Trust is also determined to ensure that children learn about food and how to cook it. We know that if they are knowledgeable and interested they are more likely to choose a healthy diet. The Trust is seeking to create a national network of community cooking clubs which use the school as a hub for their activity. Our 'Let's Get Cooking' initiative – which at the time of writing is subject to a Big Lottery Fund application – will help to bridge the gap between the desire to cook and the skills required to make it happen. We are hopeful that this project will complement the Government's 'licence to cook' proposals which are rolled out in 2008.

State of the school food nation

In July 2007 the Trust will publish the first definitive picture of what has happened to take-up figures since September 2006. However, we already know from a variety of sources, including headteachers, that it is a mixed picture, with some schools enjoying increased demand and some suffering a fall.

The real divide appears to be between primary and secondary schools, with the latter facing the gargantuan task of pleasing increasingly savvy teenage consumers who are usually afforded the choice of leaving the school premises and seeking their physical and mental fuel elsewhere.

How we convince the Starbucks generation that they should eat in an environment which quite often feels Dickensian in contrast to their normal social arena is quite a challenge.

The answer is a mixture of reforming the school lunch hour to reduce queues, giving more time for socialising and sport; it is making the dining environment a pleasant place to be; it is ensuring those who qualify for free school meals do not feel stigmatised or alienated; and it is headteachers being brave enough to forbid forays into the High Street at lunch time, and saying no to pupils bringing in products from outside which undermine the healthy eating agenda.

The cost of school food could also have a bearing on demand. I think there is a real debate to be had about the relative cost of school meals and who and how we should pay for them. Whilst admitting that the cost of a two course school meal is relatively inexpensive for many of us – between £1.50 and £2 – it is nonetheless a hefty whack for a three-child family on a low income.

What we need is innovation and creative ways to develop loyalty amongst our children to the school food brand. A recent experiment in a school in York showed that offering free school meals for a week resulted in a sustained increase in take-up of over 17%. Our own research has also revealed that the two countries with the highest take up in Europe – Sweden (85%) and Finland (90%) – both have free school meals for all. Such findings could be an important consideration for policy makers when they determine how we really ensure children are eating healthily at lunchtime.

Conclusion – we are all in this together

Fulfilling our agenda sounds so simple when writing an article: produce and distribute some guidance here, disseminate some best practice there, and surely all the problems will be solved. Unfortunately, the reality is far different.

Delivering real and lasting change means that we all – children, parents, schools, local authorities, caterers and Government – have to work together.

This means allowing our children enough time to collect and eat their food. It means providing an environment that is interesting and enticing, not dull and depressing. It means providing training for cooks to ensure that food is delicious as well as healthy. It means getting school leadership to encourage, lead and inspire change. And it means reinforcing to parents and children that for their sakes as well as for schools' they should choose school lunches.

This final point is of huge importance if we are to create the demand that will mean an economically sustainable service alongside well-nourished children. So the Trust has decided to use its 'Eat Better Do Better' slogan to encourage parents and children to sign up for school dinners. Getting the message out there that changing your diet will benefit concentration, performance and attainment, as well as your health, could start a move in the right direction – towards eating better and doing better.

The School Food Trust is under no illusions that reforming school food will be a complex and challenging process. But we are optimists, because we know the rewards of improving our children's diet are so fundamental. We believe that together we can ensure healthier, happier and better educated children and young people. We hope that all Parliamentarians will support our activities as we continue to make changes to improve the health and potential of our children.