

## **The Work of the School Food Trust**

Few of us will forget the images of school food on Jamie Oliver's TV series, nor the challenges facing staff who were attempting to make changes in the absence of support. Since 2005, school food catering services have worked, flat out, to implement the new, mandatory standards that apply to the food provided - not just at lunchtime, but right across the school day.

Oliver's series was a catalyst for a wave of improvements, building on growing activity from the government and other food campaigners which predated the TV programmes. In September 2006, new food standards were introduced for all school lunches, banning crisps, confectionery, sugary drinks and chicken nuggets with low meat content, and limiting deep fried foods like chips to twice a week. For full details on the regulations go to [www.schoolfoodtrust.org](http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org)

The following year, similar standards were implemented for all food sold in schools other than for lunch. In September 2008, even more exacting "nutrient-based standards" were launched for primary schools setting out the required nutritional content of the lunches prepared in school canteens.

These standards divide school lunches into 14 nutritional elements, from carbohydrates to fibre, zinc and iron, and schools have to ensure that they provide each of them in an appropriate balance in meals across a menu cycle. And in September 2009 these nutrient-based standards were introduced for secondary and special schools. All of this ties in with the government's drive to address the nation's obesity concerns: on current trends, it is being predicted that half of the population of the United Kingdom will be obese by 2050 and developing healthy eating habits among the young is therefore seen as vital. The ultimate legal responsibility for ensuring that the standards have been met lies with the Governing Body at each school.

The School Food Trust has been supporting schools, caterers, parents and all involved in making the changes needed. In particular "Million Meals" has been specially designed to help schools make changes.

Spearheaded by the School Food Trust and supported by a range of well known organisations, 'Million Meals' was established to support schools in increasing the number of children eating healthy school meals in England.

Schools which sign up can access a range of free materials and benefits to assist them to increase take up.

When a school signs up to Million Meals, they pledge to support the four key principles:

1. Respect our pupils as customers
2. Give them time and space to eat
3. Teach them why good food matters
4. Promote school food to parents.

These principles underpin all the advice and support we give to schools. Children and young people do not have to eat at school and so unless their needs are considered, they will take their custom elsewhere – either by bringing in food with them or by going off site for lunch. We know from our in-depth work with young people that it is more often the whole lunch experience than solely the food that deters them from eating school lunch. Lunch needs to be a pleasant experience and children need the time and space in which to eat. Involving parents and ensuring children understand the importance of good food to their future health, wellbeing and success is essential too. Research by the School Food Trust has shown that a good lunch leads to children being more “on task” in the afternoon.

### **Are the regulations working?**

We have evidence of changing eating habits in primary schools. The School Food Trust has recently conducted a comprehensive survey of school food consumption in primary schools. This took place between February and April in 2009, over 5 consecutive days in each school. A nationally representative sample of schools and children were surveyed involving 136 primary schools (6696 pupils), and these results were compared with similar data taken from 151 primary schools (7166 pupils) back in 2005. All food and drink items offered for lunch were listed and portion sizes measured. In addition some pupils were selected at random by trained field workers, and the food and drink items that they took and ate were noted.

The findings were very encouraging. Almost three quarters of children (74%) now take vegetables or salad with their average school lunch. Children who eat school lunch are taking, on average, more than 2 portions of their ‘5-a-day’ with their meal and are eating 1.6 portions. The proportion of children taking water to drink has gone up by 21.8%. Levels of fat, salt and sugar were down in the average lunch. The amount of salt eaten in the average infant lunch was down by a third on 2005 levels – a remarkable achievement. However, sodium levels were still too high for the average meal chosen and eaten at infant-school age, so there is work to be done there.

Of particular interest is the fact that the overall amount of food that children are leaving on their plates hasn’t increased. This remained unchanged when compared with 2005, at 23%. This is of course too much waste, but challenges the sceptics who said children would not eat healthy food.

The survey also showed that primary school caterers have made very significant progress towards providing lunches which meet all the new standards. Where they failed to meet them, it was usually only by a small margin

We do know that significant challenges remain, including keeping the service affordable for customers and viable for providers. Analysis published by the School Food Trust earlier this year showed that take-up of school lunches is particularly sensitive to changes in price. For a 10% increase in price, we can expect to see a 7-10% decrease in take up – a sure sign of the direction we need to take to continue growing the number of children now accessing a well-balanced meal at lunchtime,

helping them to develop healthier habits to take them into adulthood. But keeping prices low by compromising on food quality is simply not the answer. The biggest down turn in school lunch take-up was at exactly the time that poor quality food was introduced. Good food is a crucial part of children's education.

### **What can you, as governors, do?**

- Eat lunch in the school as often as you can – to be an adult role model to pupils, and to assess the quality – if it's not good enough for you, why is it good enough for your pupils?
- Talk to parents and pupils about why they do or do not use the school food service.
- Ask staff what the take-up of school lunches is and what target they have set to increase this.
- Support school staff in making the wide ranging changes needed to get more children eating school lunch.
- Ensure the school has joined Million Meals, and ask to look at the website when you are next in school.
- Furthermore be sure that the catering contract/service level agreement requires the caterer to meet the standards, and gives them incentives to increase take-up. The more pupils you have eating school lunches, the more viable and sustainable the service will be.

Judy Hargadon – Chief Executive, School Food Trust

**{ We are delighted that Judy has found time to produce an article specifically for our Newsletter, alongside her work in such a senior position within the School Food Trust and gratefully acknowledge the work of the Trust in improving the diet of the children in our care. Thank you, Judy!! B.P. }**