

# ENOUGH ON THEIR PLATES?

The chips are down – but most teenagers still aren't getting what they need at lunchtime, which is why further regulation for school canteens is the way forward, argues Judy Hargadon...

**T**eachers often tell me that school food's 'not my job'. But it is – because the choices pupils make at lunch can have such an impact on you being able to do your work in the afternoon. Those who *can* learn are those who've fuelled up to do so.

In other words, when pupils eat better, they do better. When they enjoy a healthier lunch in a pleasant environment at school, they are more focused with their teachers in the classroom afterwards. In fact, the School Food Trust, of which I am Chief Executive, has done studies in secondary schools showing that 'on-task' behaviours increase by around 18% after a good midday meal.

That's why our new research, on the early impact of compulsory nutritional standards for the food that >



teenagers eat at school, is so encouraging. It's the first national study to measure the effectiveness of the legislation that was phased in from 2006, so it's an important milestone.

Pleasingly, the proportion of pupils on school meals who have chips for their lunch is down from 43% to 7%. Almost three quarters of students on school meals are now having at least some fruit or veg as part of their midday meal. Nearly all schools have ditched the sale of chocolate, sweets and crisps completely since the introduction of the legislation (although close to three quarters of students having packed lunches are still bringing these types of foods into school), and the average school meal now contains around a third less saturated fat, fat, salt and sugar than it did in 2004.

However, as the number of secondary school students having school meals continues to rise, the research also shows that schools need to do even more to encourage them to fuel up well for their afternoon lessons. Despite huge improvements to what's on the menu, teenagers are still not routinely choosing food combinations that will give them enough energy and nutrients to stay alert for the rest of the day. Whilst the number of pupils having fruit, veg or salad with their lunch has doubled since the legislation came into force, this needs to increase much further; and teens are still not getting enough of their 'five-a-day' at school.

We plan to set out recommendations on how to tackle this; because the key thing to remember here is that it wasn't voluntary guidelines that got us this far. All those years ago, teachers and heads knew that food standards were deteriorating. Many weren't at all happy, but schools are busy places with lots of plates to spin, not just the ones in the dining room. Plenty of cooks wanted to improve their food – and were already doing great things – but making big changes to menus is tough if you're a lone voice. To achieve the impact for all pupils, regulation was what was needed. It created a level playing field for schools, making sure that every caterer, of any kind, was working with the same principles – ones that we know give pupils a healthy menu to choose from.

The voluntary guidelines that were in place before compulsory standards made no difference to what children were eating; in fact, they saw things get worse. The legislation has made things better. It's not rocket science. In fact, I think it's what they call evidence-based change.

## PLATE TIME



-  FRUIT & VEG
-  STARCHY FOODS  
E.G. BREAD, RICE  
POTATOES & PASTA
-  MILK & DAIRY  
FOODS
-  FOOD & DRINKS  
AND/OR HIGH IN FAT  
AND SUGAR
-  MEAT, FISH, EGGS  
& BEANS (AND  
OTHER NON-DAIRY  
PROTEIN SOURCES)

HAVE YOUR STUDENTS SEEN THE 'EATWELL PLATE' FROM THE FSA, SHOWING THE ELEMENTS THAT SHOULD MAKE UP A HEALTHY DIET?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JUDY HARGADON IS CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE SCHOOL FOOD TRUST. SHE WAS AWARDED AN OBE FOR SERVICES TO CHILDREN'S WELLBEING EARLIER THIS YEAR.

## OLIVER'S TWIST

**Sure, you can take a teenager to a plate of veggies – but can you make him eat them? We asked the man who took on the Turkey Twizzler back in 2005 (and has tirelessly campaigned for better school meals and food education ever since) for his thoughts**

"I do think that there are a lot of people who feel that once kids get to secondary school, then their eating habits are harder to change; but it's not impossible. When we did School Dinners in 2005, I saw that some teenagers were pretty clued up about food – if you made the dining hall an interesting environment to be in, and the meals attractive, then the students would be more inclined to stay on site and not go down the High Street. It's all about capturing their imagination and inspiring them to want better.

Research shows that the younger you start to provide food education, the more likely you are to influence food choices later in life, which is why we're developing our kitchen garden project for primary schools. Food education is needed at an early age if there's to be any hope of seeing true social change. But there's a wider discussion to be had here, and it's about practical cooking skills classes in secondary schools. At the moment, we've got hundreds of schools doing the home cooking skills course ([jamieoliver.com/homecookingskills](http://jamieoliver.com/homecookingskills)) that I developed with Edexcel a couple of years ago. The feedback from teachers and kids has been amazing; Helen Rusling of the Lilian Bayliss in Kennington, South London, explained recently in the Observer Food Monthly that some of the students in her class were at their most attentive when cooking, and I believe that's because for those kids, clearly maths and English – important though they are – just don't inspire them. Cooking does.

Even more importantly, I believe that every child should leave school with the ability to cook a few nutritious, simple meals, so that he or she can go out into the world with that crucial life skill and, most likely, a love of good food. As I've said many times, you aren't going to die if you don't do your geography homework; but if you live off junk food because you don't have the skills to eat well, then sooner or later, you're going to be in trouble."

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

**More tasty findings from the School Food Trust's research:**

- + In 2004, only 59% of secondary schools had veg or salad on the menu every day. Now, almost all do (98%). Nearly three quarters of students now have at least some vegetables, pulses, fruit or fruit juice as part of their lunch. However, the average number of portions being taken with lunch across all pupils is just 0.8.
- + More than three quarters of schools (77%) used to offer starchy foods cooked in fat or oil (e.g. chips, Yorkshire puddings and garlic bread) every day – this is now down to 53%.
- + Chips are on the menu far less often (17% of days in 2011 compared with 80% in 2004) – and most are being cooked in healthier ways. + Potatoes cooked in oil were on the menu on 59% of days in 2011 compared with 89% of days in 2004. This is much better, but still too often.
- + Cereal bars, often just as high in sugar as confectionary, are still being served when they shouldn't be on offer – something that needs to be made clearer to caterers.
- + Almost all schools (98%) now offer water as a lunchtime drink option, compared with 68% in 2004.