

Fuel up

One project is feeding children while teaching sustainability. By **Meredith Jones Russell**

A gas outage at Richmond Hill Primary School in Leeds in 2014 led a head teacher to embark on a campaign to combat hunger and poor nutrition. Nathan Atkinson says his 'lightbulb moment' for Fuel for School came on the first day back after the half-term holiday, when children were given sandwiches and crisps because the kitchen was out of action.

'Their behaviour all afternoon was terrible,' he explains. 'My philosophy is that behaviour is a form of communication, so I sat down with the children and asked what was going on.'

'Usually on the first day back after holidays, we give them a roast dinner. They said they were used to getting a roast, but all they had been given was sandwiches and crisps, and they were disappointed.'

'We talked about it and I realised a lot of them hadn't had breakfast, or eaten anything at all since the evening before, and they were just waiting to eat lunch. I went back to my office, wrote "hunger" on the wall and vowed to do something about it.'



NATHAN ATKINSON
Former head teacher; Fuel for School founder

A UNIVERSAL OFFER

The school – now Richmond Hill Academy – already provided a breakfast club, but Mr Atkinson wanted to provide a universal offer, so began by buying a toaster for every classroom.

Inspired by a trip to China where he saw a school with a 'coffee classroom,' he also turned a room into a café. Faced with the need to stock it with enough food for all 600 pupils at no cost, he started to research surplus food.

Mr Atkinson approached the Real Junk Food Project, a movement aiming to abolish food waste by intercepting food destined for landfill and redistributing it through 'pay as you feel' offers.

'We discovered that our surrounding area was officially defined as a food desert, where families couldn't access fresh food without a bus or a car. But we managed to get 27 surplus boxes of



Above right: The Real Junk Food Project prepares deliveries; and (bottom right) the market stalls at a participating school

bananas and ten boxes of cucumbers from nearby wholesalers for Leeds Market. We set this up on tables in the playground and let families pay whatever they felt they could. After the success of this, we started to run market stalls outside the school gates three times a week.'

Richmond Hill Primary School ran a hunger awareness day across Leeds, feeding 10,000 children breakfast in one morning using only surplus food. When several of the schools involved expressed interest in running a similar initiative more regularly, Mr Atkinson set up Fuel for School, an educational sustainability project.

case study: Christ Church Academy, Shipley

Christ Church Academy was the first school in Bradford to adopt the Fuel for School programme. Deputy head teacher Richard Ireland says, 'We heard Nathan Atkinson speak at a conference about hunger as a barrier to learning and it rang true with us. We had had a few incidents of alarming behaviour, and when the children had calmed down and come out of crisis we spoke to them and discovered they often had not had breakfast.'

The school ran a survey and found that up to 45 per cent of children were not eating breakfast every day. Staff then did a sponsored Three Peaks Challenge in 2016 to raise the £2,600 to buy into Fuel for School. Since then the programme has

been one of the core elements of work at the school, with attendance rising by just over 3 per cent and teachers reporting improved punctuality.

'We made sure parents were part of the discussion,' says Mr Ireland. 'Sometimes it came down to a choice between eating breakfast and being on time for school, and sometimes both were a problem. We removed that barrier by providing breakfasts to all children within the first 15 minutes of the school day. They know what to expect and appreciate both the structure and the nurture this gives them. We have provided 80,000 breakfasts over three years and I can't remember the last time we had an issue with behaviour.'

FUEL FOR SCHOOL

Fuel for School offers participating schools in Leeds, Bradford, Durham and Wigan a weekly delivery of food, access to an education programme, training sessions, workshops for children and parents and a school assembly to introduce the initiative.

Mr Atkinson, who now works as a consultant as well as running Fuel for School, explains, 'Hunger is a barrier to learning. With the best teachers and the best school in the world, if children are not well-fed, well-rested and feeling safe, the efficiency of education is reduced. We need to be giving children the best chance to learn.'

'Hunger is not just about poor



children. There is also unconscious neglect, which leaves more privileged children just as vulnerable. Families are busy, and it's easier to grab a bag of crisps and run out the door. Even with all the money in the world, children can still be undernourished.

'There are areas in the UK where poverty is very high but obesity [is] also high. That dispels the myth that obesity is about overeating; it can be about eating the wrong things. People also think it is cheaper to eat rubbish and we wanted to prove it is affordable to eat well.'

KNOWHOW

The project's education programme is based on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, a set of 17 targets aiming to create a more sustainable world by 2030.

Mr Atkinson explains, 'We want to educate children in a fun and funky way and create a culture around food. If you look back through history, it is when you can create a culture that you can make an impact. The branding of the Goals is very colourful and engaging so they are a great place to start.'

'We realised if you tell people to eat more fresh fruit and vegetables because they're good for you, it has very little impact as they've heard it all before. But if you tell them they can do it for a greater cause like the

environment and to improve outcomes for generations to come, they are more likely to make changes. For example, one of the UN Development Goals is about clean water and sanitation, so we ask children to look at their water footprint. The amount of water it takes to produce chocolate is significantly more than carrots, for example.

'We try to highlight these issues and let children make their own informed choices. You have to respect children's voices, because the response you get is much better than when you go in heavy-handed. Our activities are empowering and engaging and children want to be a part of them.'

UNEXPECTED BENEFITS

Fuel for School has resulted in other educational projects and brought unexpected benefits.

Improved attendance 'One of our schools has been looking at the UN goal that focuses on industry, innovation and infrastructure, and has been piloting hydroponic growing, without soil,' says Mr Atkinson. 'This has improved attendance significantly as children want to see how it progresses.'

Social enterprise 'We've also had schools set up food stalls as a kind of social enterprise, with families paying what they can through an honesty box.'

Community cohesion 'One school built a stall which a member of the community used as a base to provide ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] lessons. In a very diverse community, with 48 different languages spoken at Richmond Hill Primary School, there can be tensions, but people come together through food. You can use food to create community cohesion.'

SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

In the 2016-17 academic year – Mr Atkinson's last at Richmond Hill – 62 schools were signed up and the programme provided 200 tonnes of surplus food to 15,000 children per week. In September, Fuel for School will launch in West and East Sussex and Lincoln.

While the programme is used up to Year 6, engaging children in Reception and Year 1 is a priority. Mr Atkinson says, 'There's a very strong opinion that if you want to make real changes to culture, you have to start with that age group.'

'If children are not well-fed, well-rested and feeling safe, the efficiency of education is reduced'

Cookery corner

10 min | 1

CRAZY CAR

A snack that will appeal to the most reluctant of eaters is this Crazy Car sandwich.

Ingredients

- 2 large spoons of cream cheese or hummus
- 1 slice of bread
- 1 cherry tomato
- 2 raisins
- 1 stem of spring onion
- 2 slices of cucumber

Method

1. Cut the shape of the car from the bread and cut out two windows.
2. Spread the cream cheese over the bread.
3. Cut the tomato in two to make the people.
4. Add the two slices of cucumber for the wheels and add the raisins in the middle.
5. Cut the spring onion and use the green to make the bar and the exhaust.

Variations

Try creating other types of vehicle – such as a train, bus or emergency vehicle – and using other ingredients; slices of tomato, kiwi fruit or egg would all make great wheels.

→ The recipe is courtesy of the Wellbeing and Nutrition team at the Early Start Group, London, www.earlystartgroup.com

→ MORE INFORMATION

- www.un.org/sustainable-development/sustainable-development-goals
- www.richmondhilleeds.co.uk/fuel-for-school
- http://fuelfor-school.info
- <https://therealjunkfoodproject.org/fuel-for-school>

