

Chewing it over

Amid concerns that the quality of school meals is falling, charity programmes and initiatives at some schools are beacons of excellent provision, finds **Charlotte Goddard**



With one in five children now classed as overweight or obese by the time they start in Reception, it is clear

that schools have a crucial role to play in providing children with healthy food and promoting healthy eating habits. However, what that role should be remains up for debate and delivering on it is becoming more challenging as costs rise.

Ofsted sparked controversy this summer when it downplayed the contribution that schools could realistically make in tackling the childhood obesity crisis. Its July report *Obesity, healthy eating and physical activity in primary schools* also advocated a move away from a whole-school approach to healthy eating – given the risk of it

increasing staff workload – in favour of developing children's knowledge and skills in the classroom alone.

The expert panel advising Ofsted has claimed that the inspectorate has gone against its advice.

QUALITY

School meals have been under the spotlight since celebrity chef Jamie Oliver brought the infamous Turkey Twizzler to the attention of the nation in 2005. Mr Oliver's Feed Me Better campaign had a far-reaching effect, says Rob Percival, policy and campaigns manager at The Soil Association, which runs award programme Food for Life.

'Jamie's campaign resulted in the first legal minimum standards for school food, which were updated in 2015,' says Mr

Percival. 'In this period, school food noticeably improved.'

However, that may be about to change. 'Over the last year or so there has been a cocktail of pressures on school caterers: Brexit driving up ingredient costs, increases to the National Minimum Wage, the Apprenticeship Levy, and squeezed school budgets,' says Mr Percival.

He adds, 'In response, we are seeing what threatens to be a dropping back in the quality of food, a move from hot to cold service, and replacing healthier items with cheaper items.'

While the School Food Standards are mandatory, there is no monitoring of whether schools meet them. The Government recently published the second part of its obesity action plan, but a raft of school-related initiatives put forward in the



first plan in 2016 have not yet seen the light of day (see Work Matters, page 36).

'We've seen no sign of the Healthy Rating Scheme for primary schools, which was proposed in the first plan, and we're still waiting to find out what role, if any, Ofsted will play in rating schools on school food and pupil health and well-being,' says Mr Percival.

While there is no Government-run Healthy Rating Scheme, schools can sign up to the 'Food for Life Served Here' catering standard. Half of all primary schools display the logo, which guarantees the majority of food will be freshly prepared, free from trans fats, sweeteners and additives, cooked by trained chefs, and

use ingredients from sustainable and ethical sources.

Around 1,200 primary schools have also signed up to the wider Food for Life Schools Awards Programme. Criteria for a bronze award include the use of seasonal ingredients that are at least 75 per cent freshly prepared. Silver schools must use a minimum of 5 per cent organic food and local ingredients, while gold schools must meet standards that show the food served is healthy, ethical, animal- and climate-friendly, at least 15 per cent organic and 5 per cent free-range.

Food for Life supports schools to meet these standards. An independent evaluation shows that at such schools:

- children are twice as likely to eat all of their 'five a day'
- children are a third less likely to eat no fruit or veg
- children are 40 per cent more likely to report that they 'like' or 'really like' school meals.

CASE STUDY:

Hitherfield Primary School and Children's Centre, Lambeth, London

Hitherfield's Edible Playground is enclosed by a fence made of living apple trees, and

provides a cornucopia of fruit and vegetables: potatoes, pumpkins, rhubarb, tomatoes, radishes, cucumbers and all kinds of herbs and berries.

All the children in the school are involved in maintaining the allotment, and much of the food produced finds its way to the school kitchens – if it hasn't already been sampled straight from the ground.

'When we have a glut, the school kitchens are happy to take the produce,' says Yvonne Morris, higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) and Edible Playground lead. 'The children will clean the produce first, scrubbing up the potatoes and weighing them.'

This playground-to-fork approach not only provides the very freshest vegetables for children to eat, it also encourages them to try new things. 'Children were saying they didn't like carrots, but when they tried baby carrots straight from the ground they were eating them like sweets,' says Ms Morris.

Some of the food goes home with the children. 'When we had a glut of lettuce, I put it on a table outside and parents took what they wanted and left donations,' says Ms Morris.

Hitherfield, which has a higher than average number of children eligible for



Hitherfield's Edible Playground

EYFS best practice in schools

the Pupil Premium, has been awarded the Food for Life Gold Award for its school meals. The school also works alongside the local authority to run a healthy eating club, Ready Steady Go, for families aiming to improve their lifestyles.

KNOWLEDGE

A British Nutrition Foundation survey carried out in 2013 found 29 per cent of primary school children thought cheese

was made from plants, while 34 per cent believed pasta came from animals.

A strong approach to healthy eating tackles this lack of knowledge through a consistent 'whole-school approach', so the daily life of the school reflects and reinforces what is taught about food and healthy eating. Links with the community are also key, such as visits to farms, and the dining room can become an additional classroom. ▶

quantity: meeting rising needs

The take-up of school meals has risen from 38 per cent to 80 per cent since 2014, when all infants were offered free school meals, according to research by the Education Policy Institute. However, The Children's Society estimates one million children in poverty who would previously have been eligible will miss out on free school meals in the future as a result of benefit changes. The Government has pledged not to remove free meals from children who are already receiving them, but this will merely delay the negative impact of the policy, says The Soil Association's Mr Percival.

Earlier this year the Government announced up to £26 million investment to kickstart or improve breakfast clubs in at least 1,700 schools in the most deprived areas. The National School Breakfast Programme, funded through the Government's soft-drinks levy, is overseen by Family Action and Magic Breakfast. More than 150 schools have already signed up to the scheme, and 500 more have got in touch wanting to access the programme.

All food supplied at the clubs, such as porridge, bagels and cereal, meets School Food Standards. They are open to all children, but schools will be supported to ensure provision is accessed by those who need it most.

'The schools know their children and communities best and we encourage them to own their breakfast provision to make it effective for the long term,' says Nicola Vickery, programme manager for the National School Breakfast Programme at Family Action. 'Some schools like to run a nurture-focused provision, while some opt to add in educational activities. Children learn what a healthy breakfast looks and tastes like through lived experience and we support schools to encourage this through activities and dialogue with the children who attend.'

The need for such a programme is clear. 'Schools tell us that significant numbers of children are arriving at school either hungry or having had an inappropriate breakfast such as crisps or fizzy drinks,' says Ms Vickery. 'Independent research based on randomised control trials by the EEF [Education Endowment Foundation] show that children in schools with Magic Breakfast provision make up to two months' additional academic

progression in comparison to pupils at schools with no provision.'

The holidays can be a difficult time for children who receive free school meals. In Scotland, North Lanarkshire has committed £500,000 a year to ensure that children who need them have access to good-quality meals during the weekends and school holidays, as well as in term time. Other Scottish local authorities are also funding holiday meals and activities: Glasgow City Council recently committed £2 million for holiday provision, for example.

In England, the majority of local authorities deliver some form of summer holiday provision, while hundreds of voluntary organisations also run holiday clubs including meals. However, research from Northumbria University found provision was piecemeal.

Earlier this year the Government launched a £2 million Holiday Activities and Food Research Fund to explore the best ways to support the most disadvantaged children with healthy meals during the 2018 summer holidays. Work testing the effectiveness of interventions is set to be followed by a targeted pilot programme in the 2019 Easter and summer holidays.

Charity Feeding Britain is running holiday clubs across eight pilot areas over the summer, through local networks. Most children attending are aged between four and ten. The clubs are presented as fun holiday schemes offering sports, craft and other activities, alongside a free meal. While they are located in areas of deprivation, they are open to all, to ensure they are not stigmatising for those attending.

'We try to make sure we have healthy, nutritious meals that meet School Food Standards, but also have healthy eating activities – getting the kids to try new kinds of food, involving them in growing or cooking the food, doing fruit and veg sculptures, making fruit kebabs,' says Rosie Oglesby, national director at Feeding Britain.

CASE STUDY

Wallington Primary Academy, London Borough of Sutton
Wallington's Magic Breakfast club, funded by the National Breakfast



Programme, opened its doors for the first time last term, and more than half of its pupils are already attending on a regular basis.

With a higher than average percentage of families eligible for the Pupil Premium, and higher than average levels of obesity among the children, the school wanted to ensure children had a healthy and relaxed start to the day, to set them up ready to learn.

'As a leadership team new to the school, we noticed a number of challenges that needed to be addressed,' says head teacher Nicola Wright. 'There were low

levels of punctuality and attendance, low concentration levels in class and children reporting that they were hungry, having not had time for breakfast, or nothing being available to eat at home.'

Some early years children share breakfast with their older siblings at the school's bagel bar, while others eat with their peers, in class. 'We use it as an opportunity to develop early personal, social and emotional development skills, so that children see that mealtimes are a social time and that it is good to sit and interact while we eat,' says Ms Wright.

The club is already having an impact. 'Fewer children are reporting feeling hungry throughout the morning, and teachers have reported that individual children are showing increased levels of

concentration – particularly in the later stages of the morning as we near lunch break,' says Ms Wright.

'Parents who have previously struggled to get their children into school on time are reporting that their children cannot wait to get into school to have breakfast with their friends.'

The most positive benefit is in social skills, says Ms Wright. 'Children are building their communication and language skills; families are mingling with each other; and parents are able to talk to a number of staff before the school day, developing home/school relationships in a very relaxed environment.'

Children now understand what a healthy breakfast looks like. 'Parents are reporting that their children are asking them to buy bagels for home, but are not happy when they don't buy the "healthy ones" or "make them like Mrs Goldsmith does"!'.

Breakfast club is just one of the initiatives Wallington has put in place to promote healthy eating. The school also offers healthy eating workshops and its caterers have ensured all recipes are reviewed to meet new Government guidelines for sugar intake.

'It has been a challenge for some children, adapting to the change in taste, but more are starting to eat the reduced-sugar puddings and more are choosing fresh fruit,' says Ms Wright. 'Children are, in general, choosing healthier options when eating school meals than they would have had in a home-prepared packed lunch.'



Children at Washingborough Academy prepare, taste and serve some muffins

EYFS best practice in schools



Tending the beehive and scarecrows at Washingborough Academy (see case study)

The Food for Life Awards encourage this whole-school approach, and a number of other organisations are promoting an increased understanding among children of where food comes from.

In May, farmer and BBC *Countryfile* presenter Adam Henson launched a campaign, Please Sir! Feed Me Truth, encouraging schools to explain to children the journey taken by the food on their plate. Midcounties Co-operative is funding the development of resources that will provide curriculum support and arrange field trips and school visits.

Catering firm ISS runs Food Education Event Days (FEEDs), an annual Green Fingers gardening week, and pupil and parent cooking clubs, to engage families and communities with the farm-to-fork journey. Meanwhile, in Havering, the borough's in-house catering service has developed an app to help children understand the benefits and rewards of healthy eating in school.

Local children were involved in the development of the Veggie Run app, which has been designed to appeal to four- to 11-year-olds. It includes a game in which children dodge unhealthy foods and earn rewards by collecting fruit and vegetables. Users are also able to view their weekly school lunch menus, and parents can purchase school meal credit via app links.

CASE STUDY: Washingborough Academy, Lincolnshire

Children in Washingborough Academy's Reception class are tasting and smelling different foods. They look at each other's tongues while their teacher explains how tongues taste the food.

'We put food education at the heart of our learning ethos,' says head teacher Jason O'Rourke. 'The knowledge that determines someone's future food preferences happens not at a logical level but through the senses. To be able to truly know a food and decide whether you like it or not, you need to have interacted with it.'

During 'flavour school', children try ingredients their parents say they would not try at home, such as blue cheese, salmon and beetroot. The school also runs 'food days' devoted to a particular food such as potatoes: teachers plan a range of lessons around the topic of the day.

Food education is not limited to the classroom, however. Washingborough boasts a kitchen designed for children, where they can learn food preparation techniques. In the grounds are vegetable beds for every class, an orchard, a poly-tunnel, three beehives, a herb garden and a wood-fired pizza oven. Children create their own pizza toppings from produce grown in the school grounds.

MORE INFORMATION

- **Evaluation of Food for Life** by the University of the West of England (2016). This report shows the impact that the Food for Life programme has had on children's consumption of fruit and vegetables, <https://bit.ly/2wLVNau>
- **Childhood Obesity: Time for Action** by the Health and Social Care Committee (May 2018), <https://bit.ly/2snxIDV>
- **Havering's Veggie Run app**, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.mct.veggierun&hl=en>
- **Ofsted's report Obesity, healthy eating and physical activity in primary schools** – a thematic review of what actions schools are taking to reduce childhood obesity, <https://bit.ly/2oFrBJA>
- **'Ofsted's report on obesity slammed for ignoring experts'**, www.nurseryworld.co.uk

The school has a healthy snack shack, run by the older children, who order ingredients themselves as well as using produce from the school gardens. Snacks such as sweet potato and chilli muffins, frittata and home-made crumpets with fruit couli are sold for 50p.

'The profits provide the ingredients for the following week and help with utensils and other cooking equipment we need, therefore not impacting on our whole school budget,' says Mr O'Rourke.

Washingborough Academy holds the Food for Life Gold Award. 'Support from Food for Life has been very good, the structure they give and the challenges they provide,' says Mr O'Rourke. 'There are not that many people doing things like food education so you have to make it up as you go along.'

Lunch is a harmonious time, with music playing to create a pleasant atmosphere. Older children eat with younger pupils to promote good behaviour and manners, and also don a uniform and act as salad servers and 'aqua sommeliers'.

Ofsted highlighted the school's approach to healthy eating in its most recent inspection, rating the academy Outstanding for early years and personal development and welfare.

Overseas schools have also shown an interest in Washingborough's approach: visiting heads from China were so inspired by the school's growing areas that they have developed a similar approach in their own school grounds. ■