

Improving the dining experience for your pupils – resources available

It is now generally accepted that delivering a successful school meals service is about much more than just the food being offered. It is about providing an efficient, well-managed, stress-free, interesting and highly enjoyable dining experience for pupils.

Adopting some/all of the following strategies will help you to achieve this. To assist you, support and resources can be provided in all the areas highlighted. If you wish to access any the support available, please contact X:

1. Clearly Define Your Service/Establish a Code of Conduct

Delivering consistency plays a major part in the success of commercial businesses. Be it a high street burger bar or an up-market tea room, their customers know exactly the type of environment, service and product they can expect. As far as they are able, schools should adopt the same approach. Work with your stakeholders – pupils, parents, catering, dining room and teaching staff - to identify the optimum levels of service that you can consistently provide. Create a shared vision of what a pleasant dining environment should be like:

Define for example:

- How pupils can be expected to be treated by your dining room staff – where the ‘disciplinary’ and ‘educative’ aspects of their role end and their ‘customer care’ role begins. Make sure that your staff are then sufficiently informed and receive appropriate and sufficient TRAINING to deliver your agreed approach.
- The processes that pupils will be subjected to in order to receive their meal
- What they will be expected to take/consume – are they expected to eat or just try everything that they take? Or is it acceptable for them to take everything and then discard it uneaten? How will pupils be treated if they react badly when asked to complete their meal?
- How the dining room will be presented.
- What the seating arrangements are.
- The protocols in place etc.

Share this information with your users. Consider the mediums best able to get your message across.

It is important to remember that the presentation and physical quality of any PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS used gives a direct impression of the quality of the actual service that you provide. Your PRINTED or DIGITAL MENUS for example, should work equally well as both a source of information and a sales tool. In order to stimulate interest, the language used to describe each of the dishes should be carefully considered. The document should contain a range of promotional and useful information e.g. food-sources, accreditations achieved/strived for, provision for special diets etc. Ultimately, it must be designed to generate both interest and action from existing and potential customers.

The page on your WEBSITE, devoted to your catering service must be user-friendly and aim to achieve the same objectives.

Use attractive FREE STANDING TABLE TOPPERS and WALL-MOUNTED FRAMES to remind pupils of the agreed code of conduct. Describe what they should do to get help from dining room staff, policies on leaving the table etc. Take care to present the information in a format that is appropriate to its target audience. To avoid the ‘wallpaper effect’, change and rotate the designs frequently.

2. Create a Welcoming Environment

Poor quality environments have been found to be one of the biggest barriers to children's uptake of school food.

Most school dining rooms are dual use. This makes the creation of a pleasant, stylish dining environment more difficult but far from impossible. Again, consultation with your stakeholders will help you to focus your activities on the most beneficial areas.

A NAME AND LOGO could be created for the venue and this included on all PROMOTIONAL AND WRITTEN MATERIALS, WINDOW TRANSFERS etc.

A bold and cohesive colour scheme or an innovative THEME (perhaps linked to the local area and which could be extended to the service counter?) would instantly improve appearance. This could be introduced in wall colour, curtains and perhaps WIPE-CLEAN TABLE CLOTHS. If at all possible, use subtle colours – bright colours tend to get shabby and date more quickly.

Use VINYL OR TRANSFERS to add colour and cohesiveness to any plain or mis-matched furniture, service trolleys and equipment. Where a fixed servery or service hatch is in place, BRAND this up with your logo and design to create further interest and to compliment your overall scheme.

Pupils really care about not being asked to eat in a cluttered environment. Through necessity, it is likely that some equipment will need to be stored in the hall throughout lunch. These items should be evaluated to ensure that they take up as little space as possible. The agreed storage system should then be shared with all appropriate stakeholders. FREE STANDING MOBILE SCREENS could be used to disguise the storage areas.

Where space permits, such screens can also be used to break up large open areas. If designed carefully, they can be used to support the agreed brand and colour scheme and perhaps assist in absorbing noise.

Similarly, pupils are put off by grubby tables and litter on the floor. Ensure that you've got the basics right – cutlery should be checked for food debris. If it is the case, explain to pupils that the dishwasher leaves water stains but the cutlery is actually clean. Post smart NOTICES giving this information over the CUTLERY STAND. To avoid unsavoury smells, ensure that all trays are dried thoroughly before being stacked. Ensure dining room staff are appropriately trained and that staffing levels, job descriptions and rotas are such that hygiene levels can be maintained throughout service.

3. Manage Noise Levels

Most pupils interviewed by advisors consider noise levels to be a major issue. Spending social time with friends is one of the things that they most value about lunch. They are often told by their teachers to 'save any chatter' until lunchtime. They then feel aggrieved when their conversations are interrupted by dining room staff demanding lower noise levels or even silence.

Often, most of the noise is not caused by rowdy or poor behaviour, it is simply a consequence of normal conversation by a large number of people within a 'hard' area. Any mechanisms that can be introduced to naturally suppress noise levels should be given serious consideration.

The introduction of low level – elevator-style music can help. So can the addition of further curtains, BAFFLE PLATES, CEILING-HUNG BANNERS OR PADDED WALL PANELS.

Mix up the traditional RECTANGULAR TABLES with round versions wherever possible. ROUND TABLES provide a better social experience and can further help to reduce noise levels.

4. Make your dining room efficient and user-friendly

Walk through the processes that your pupils are subjected to in order to determine where the problem areas lie. At each point, make sure that you have the correct equipment for the job. Do pupils, having spent time queuing for their meal, once collected, then have to stop again in order to pick up their cutlery and glassware? Do they spend a long time at the salad table because they are struggling to serve themselves with dessert spoons rather than tongs? Are long queues forming in order to scrape plates?

Many companies now provide BESPOKE EQUIPMENT for school dining rooms. SPACE-SAVING POSEUR TABLES, SALAD BARS, WASTE DISPOSAL STATIONS, AND TROLLEYS can all be produced and branded to meet your specific capacity and operational needs.

BESPOKE FURNITURE can be produced to take advantage of any awkward spaces that you may have.

Are all functions/areas clearly signposted? Is it clear to pupils what the traffic flow is and how they should move around the dining room? If there is insufficient wall-space consider FREE-STANDING SIGNAGE – wait here to be directed to the servery, salad bar, waste station etc. As well as providing clear instruction such materials can be used to support your brand or theme.

Pupils, especially the younger ones, can find a noisy, bustling dining room very intimidating. Address this by introducing them to the kitchen and dining room team at an early stage and describing the actions that they should take should they need help.

Children are susceptible to peer-pressure. Use this to your advantage by introducing 'Lunch Buddies'. They should be given a clear remit (and suitable training) to provide help where needed, to encourage other children to appreciate lunchtime and to support the dining room team. Where introduced, pupils generally consider it a great privilege to be given this role. Lunch Buddies can be provided with a suitable UNIFORM, HAT OR BADGE. Further acknowledgement could be given by creating a 'Lunch Buddy of the Week' award.

5. Reduce the amount of time that pupils spend queuing.

Pupils find long queues off-putting. They will be discouraged from taking a school meal, particularly if avoiding queues by bringing a packed lunch, means that they can get out to play earlier.

Where queues are long, but turnover is quick, remember to promote the average time that each pupil actually spends queuing.

Where there are large numbers of pupils, and queues are slow, consider the potential for reducing the time spent in line by splitting them at an earlier stage. To achieve this, the servery needs to be divided into distinct areas. This can mean that one area is devoted to the traditional item, one to the vegetarian, one to the cold etc. Where one item is known to be more popular than the others, the less popular items can be combined within a single service point. Dining room staff can be used to direct pupils to the appropriate area.

In those schools with a nil choice menu, the servery can be divided into sections with the full menu replicated and offered from both points.

Very often, it is the process of pupils choosing their day's meal that creates a bottle-neck at the servery. Facilitate this by making sure that pupils can actually see the food being offered. It may seem silly but high service counters combined with high-sided presentation dishes can mean that pupils are often asked to make a choice without actually being able to see what is available. Where this is the case, consider creating a PRESENTATION TABLE, to display the day's menu options. If example plated meals are used, it is important to keep them looking fresh and appealing throughout the lunch period. A dried-up looking plate of food will not encourage anyone.

Alternatively, consider displaying framed pictures of each dish actually on the servery. Where a wristband system is introduced – see below, the colour of the FRAMES/STANDS used can correspond with the bands.

While always being mindful of any hygiene concerns, increasing the amount of pupil self-service can be very beneficial. Consider allowing pupils to help themselves to cold meals, sweets, puddings, yoghurts and drinks from chilled presentation units. Table-top and free-standing mobile units are available.

Further efficiencies can be achieved by shifting the selection process to an earlier part of the day – pre-ordering.

Customer confidence (and consequently meals uptake) increases when pupils are guaranteed their preferred choice every day. With a few notable exceptions, there is often little consistency in the way that pupils select dishes – those which are popular one day, may have low uptake when next featured. This reflects the fact that sometimes, pupils make their choices in social groups rather than as individuals. Without pre-ordering this inevitably means that some pupils are left to take a meal that they would not have chosen.

The mechanism for pre-ordering can be as complicated or as simple as the school wishes. If a COLOURED WRISTBAND system is used it is not necessary to record the choice of each individual pupil. A simple method might be:

- Each class is provided with a fixed number of wristbands with say, red representing the traditional main course, green the vegetarian option and blue, the sandwich.
- During registration the teacher tells the class the exact dish that each colour represents and each pupil selects their choice.
- The teacher then notes the number of each colour taken. The total order is then given to the Cook by the agreed time each morning.

Although pre-ordering is very effective, it only works well if the school is absolutely committed to its success. The challenges likely to be faced are:

- Unpopular with school admin staff
- Extended registration period
- Pupils struggling to understand that, once they have selected their meal, they can't change their mind.

All of these issues will quickly settle down, providing the school with the following benefits:

- Reduced dining time and therefore impact on the school day
- Satisfaction that every pupil gets their first choice of meal
- Increased take up of meals
- Reduced food wastage
- More efficient throughput of customers at the service counter.

Making choice available only to those pupils attending registration can also help to reduce late attendance. Where this system is adopted, to guarantee meal suitability, it is advisable to restrict late attenders to the vegetarian option.

In some schools queues can be quite intrusive for those pupils already seated. Help control queues by providing TEMPORARY BARRIER SYSTEMS.

6. Recognise special achievement.

Provide pupils with extra incentives to take a school meal by creating a 'Wall of Fame' to recognise special achievement and effort. Create a range of categories which pupils, as individuals or in groups could strive for. Categories could include: 'Star Diner of the Week', 'Best Table Manners', 'Clear Plate Award', 'Class Award for Most School Dinners taken', 'Cook's Special Award'.

Create a certificate for each category and group the winners, in professional looking frames, within the dining room or other public area within school. Although the frequency of awards – they can be presented at special assemblies - is very much up to you, in order to provide pupils with sufficient incentives, it may be advisable to update them a minimum of every two weeks. SNAP-FRAMES would facilitate this process. Consider producing electronic versions of the various certificates so that names can easily be inserted and updates printed off.

Expand on the idea by creating a 'golden table' or 'premium dining' at lunch time. Reward high performers on a regular basis by seating them at a special table with say, table cloths, napkins, better crockery and cutlery and food served at the table (perhaps by teachers?).

Create a league table for those children taking the most school meals with perhaps a champion for the school or each class. Clear plates and good eating habits can be rewarded by the issue of STICKERS. Stickers proclaiming 'I ate all my vegetables' or 'I made up my own salad' have an advantage in that, as well as providing encouragement to pupils, they also promote your success directly to parents. Build upon this idea and the enjoyment that children get from 'collecting' by providing them with a STICKER-TYPE BOOKLETS, CERTIFICATES OR ACTIVITY SHEETS. The more meals pupils take, the faster they obtain the stickers required to complete the certificate.

7. And Finally

- Review 'improving school dining at low or no cost' on the Learning Network www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk
- A school representative should conduct regular (if not frequent), audits of the service. They should undertake the dining experience from the pupil's perspective. Any shortfalls could be discussed at catering team briefings.