Universal Infant Free School Meals - Dining Room Checklist

If you had any choice in the matter, would you opt to eat here?

Quality of food, although important, is only one of many factors that affect the decision-making process. If you would prefer not to eat in your dining room, the likelihood is that there are things about it that your pupils consider off-putting. This may reduce the number that benefit from a nutritious meal at lunchtime.

In schools, given that dining often has to take place in a multi-use hall or communal area, the challenges around providing an attractive and welcoming environment are particularly great.

Managing Expectations

This is about setting behavioural and operating standards for the dining room and checking that you have achieved the correct balance between providing a 'service for customers' and an 'educational environment for pupils'. Bearing in mind that at lunchtime, pupils effectively become customers, what level of behaviour is expected of them? What support and encouragement should they expect from the dining room team? How should they seek assistance when required? How long will they be given to actually eat their lunch? What are the choices available to them and how should they feed back their views? What are your expectations in terms of what they are required to eat and what catering staff are required to actually put on the plate?

Crowd Control

Dining rooms can be very noisy and intimidating places, especially for pupils new to the school. Make sure that you have systems in place to introduce them gently to the environment and to ensure that their first impressions are positive. Have a dedicated seating area which is away from the hustle and bustle of the queues and servery. Some schools have set up 'buddying' systems where older students provide extra support to younger pupils.

Minimise chaos and the potential for accidents by identifying clear lines of traffic that follow a logical sequence to the service style and cross paths as little as possible. Ensure pupils are able to carry their food safely. They shouldn't have to push through groups of other children or raise their food above elbow height. Tables should be positioned in such a way that, once chairs are pulled out and diners are in place, they still allow sufficient and easy access.

Queues

Long queues are off-putting. However, they are often dealt with very effectively within schools. Determine what you consider to be a reasonable queuing time for pupils. If this is regularly achieved within your school, promote this fact to them. If not, consider other options such as additional service points or the introduction of staggered dining/separate sittings.

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Make sure pupils do as much preparation as possible while queuing. They can select their trays, cutlery, bread and even salad before actually reaching the servery.

Wherever possible, try to keep some distance between the queues and the area where pupils are dining.

Noise

Depending on the acoustics in the dining space, music can either add or detract from the noise levels. If the acoustics are right, soft music has been found to relax children and young people, and can encourage them to reduce the noise levels so that the music can be heard. The music selection needs to be sensible, but can be a useful incentive for pupils, if they are allowed to choose what is played.

Acoustic sound panels can help absorb some sound. These can be a more cost effective solution than acoustic ceilings and can be moved to different areas of the hall depending on the need. Look at your flooring and check that it is not adding to the noise levels. Soft vinyl can reduce noise, for example from scraping chairs. If you are reviewing your furnishings, consider adding some soft chairs and curtains or blinds. These help absorb sound and will assist in creating a more relaxed atmosphere. If possible avoid carpet in dining areas.

Welcoming

Set a clear standard of presentation for your dining room and ensure that these standards are consistently met e.g. should all lights be on and working before each service? Should all curtains and blinds be open?

Wherever possible, take action to ensure that the area doesn't become a general dumping ground for school equipment. If it is necessary to store equipment within the area, ensure that this is done in a way that has minimum impact. If possible, disguise storage areas behind brightly coloured screens.

Use tablecloths as a quick and easy way to change the atmosphere of a room. Consulting with your school council, you may find a design that fits in with a theme. Pictures of brightly coloured vegetables on vinyl tablecloths will reinforce the healthy eating message and can be wiped clean.

Add bowls of bread, salad, jugs of water or even flowers to the table.

Invest in menu boards which can be easily moved and stored away. Consider using electronic messaging boards/screens to advertise the daily menu. These can be used at other times during the day to promote other activities and provide important school information.

If the hall is used for other activities, such as physical education or drama, consider decorating the hall with a joint theme. For example having a sports café, or a theme from a play, or a production.

Consider putting up students'/pupils' artwork or other student display work and changing it regularly depending on themes or projects in your school. You may wish to choose local artwork to represent the theme of the dining area. Having a student-led design group or editorial board can be a good way to regularly review what is on display and come up with new ideas to put on show. Coloured window transparencies can also be used to great effect.

Walls within communal areas can soon become cluttered with various notices. Establish a protocol among school staff covering the display of such materials. Ensure that they are removed once they become tatty or out of date. Walls benefit from being brightly painted. Areas that experience such heavy traffic soon start to look shabby, so make sure that they are regularly maintained with a fresh coat of paint.

Review the temperature: is the room too hot or too cold? Does this change with the seasons? Speak to those who are using the space and adjust appropriately with heaters, coolers or covering bright windows with adjustable blinds.

Furniture

Make sure that the furniture is of an appropriate size and type for its target market. Invest in a type which will make best use of the available space. Tables with integral seating often work well where space is limited. Furthermore, they prevent noise created by dragging chairs and are often collapsible for easy storage.

Staff

If your staff create a warm and welcoming environment then poor quality facilities can often be overlooked. However, over the lunch period, dining room assistants (DRAs) are very frequently left to their own devices and are uncertain about what is actually required of them.

- To get best use of this very valuable resource schools should:
- Establish clear objectives around what they want their DRAs to achieve – are they required to create a pleasant and encouraging environment, or just to 'process' the children as quickly as possible?
- Produce a clear job description/ person specification around the agreed objectives.
- Identify the skills required to deliver the objectives.
- Provide the appropriate training and support.
- Monitor performance/ make individual DRAs accountable for their performance.

If practical, avoid planning activities for your hall immediately before or after lunchtime. This will reduce pressure on catering staff for clearing away tables, and reduce pressure on children and young people to rush their meal.