

Increasing your School Meals uptake

Maximising the uptake of school meals at lunch time creates a number of direct benefits for your school.

- ✓ The nutritional content of a school meal is generally far greater than that of the average packed lunch. An improved diet improves pupils' ability to concentrate and absorb new information. It provides the required levels of energy and helps improve standards of behaviour. Therefore, it can be said that improving the uptake of school meals will facilitate an overall improved performance across the student body.
- ✓ It will generate economies of scale for the school account.
- ✓ It will reduce the need to store and manage packed lunch boxes.
- ✓ It will improve the social skills of pupils.

The **'What Works Well'** section of the School Food Plan Website www.schoolfoodplan.com demonstrates that there are five key tools that schools can use to encourage greater take up.

Get people involved at the right stage and manage their expectations

Parents and pupils will better support your service if they have a clear understanding of what is to be provided, what is not to be provided, and the reasons why.

Some schools clarify expectations right from the start by explaining, to the parents of each new intake, that unless there are special extenuating circumstances, all pupils are expected to take a school meal. It is good practice, at this stage, to clarify school policy on serving the meal e.g. all pupils will be required to try everything they select, the correct accompaniments will automatically be served with each main course, etc. If the school is able to use this opportunity to demonstrate how its policies conform to the School Food Plan, then so much the better.

Where changes are made to the school meals policy, e.g. placing restrictions on the contents of, or banning packed lunches, then less resistance will be encountered if it is introduced with each new intake rather than to existing diners. It will be further reduced if parents and pupils consider that they have had an input into how the service operates. To be effective, any consultation must take place sufficiently early in the process to allow for implementation, for decisions to be reported back and for challenges to take place. Where stakeholders are left feeling that consultation was merely a paper exercise, and the decision was a forgone conclusion, then it is unlikely that resistance to change will be reduced.



In each case, it is important to evidence the basis for any decisions made. This can be achieved by outlining the pros and the cons and the justification for the final decision. In some cases it might also be necessary to educate both pupils and their parents. For example, the most common reasons for not taking a school meal are:

"My child is fussy and won't eat what you provide"

This creates an ideal opportunity to point out that it takes some time for children to accept and enjoy new

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tastes. School provides the ideal environment for this process – children are more likely to try something new if they see it being enjoyed by their peers and dining room staff will provide ongoing encouragement and praise. Parents need to be helped to understand that their children may at first struggle to enjoy a meal that is low in salt, sugar and fat. However, if they allow the school to persevere, more often than not, it will result in less fussy dietary habits and an easier life for them.

“School meals are too expensive”

School meals can seem expensive, especially when paid as a lump sum, say termly, for more than one child. However the true costs of producing a packed lunch are often hidden within the weekly grocery bill. The cost is likely to be higher than anticipated once food waste is taken into account.

“Values other than financial also need to be considered”

Even where it is possible to produce a packed lunch for less than the cost of a school meal, it is a fact that 99 out of 100 packed lunches are unable to provide the same level of nutritional value. This challenge often becomes greater when cheaper ingredients are used.

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“The meal/ service is poor quality”

The service needs to be carefully devised, managed and consistently audited to ensure that this isn't the case.

“My child doesn't receive the meal he would choose”

This can easily be overcome with the introduction of pre-ordering – see below.

“My child has a meal at home – we like to eat as a family”

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Mechanisms for involving stakeholders/ managing expectations

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- ✓ Provide each new intake with a clear school meals policy. Ensure all school staff are aware of policy and their role within it. Involve all levels of school staff in its production.
- ✓ Use parent evenings and school newsletters to conduct surveys and questionnaires. Provide appropriate and timely feedback, including level of response received. Make clear the role you expect of parents in order to support you.
- ✓ Create working groups with all relevant stakeholders represented. Again, share appropriate and timely feedback.
- ✓ Establish and maintain a student council.
- ✓ Where ever possible, introduce change gradually and sensitively. Provide reasons for all changes made.

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- ✓ Produce a customer care charter. This might include the behaviours expected of pupils, e.g. not wandering around the dining room, talking quietly and also the experience they are likely to have whilst there e.g. how long they might spend queuing, the help and assistance that they can expect to receive, how to forward their views etc. Display the charter in dining rooms and include within newsletters. Find example attached.
- ✓ In all actions, highlight the anticipated benefits and the mechanism for review and feedback.

Allow pupils to pre-order their food.

As adults, we would be reluctant to visit regularly, any eating establishment that required payment up front but wouldn't guarantee that you would be served your selected meal. As parents, many people adopt the same approach for their children in school.

Therefore, any mechanism that can guarantee that every day, pupils receive their preferred meal, is likely to help increase their uptake. Pre-ordering provides the means to achieve this. As well as contributing to economies of scale it provides two further benefits to school.

- ✓ It reduces food waste – and therefore overall production costs.
- ✓ Shifting the 'choosing' process away from lunch helps speed up queues – which in itself can encourage additional take up – and can thereby reduce the length of the lunch period.

Pre-ordering is best carried out during registration. Some schools do this on a weekly/fortnightly basis, however, from a customer perspective, daily ordering is preferable. The more flexible you can be, the better the response you will receive. Pupils can be given a coloured token or voucher that corresponds to their choice. A wristband may be a better option as these would be lost less easily. Where pupils change their minds and swap bands with their friends, this doesn't cause problems as the overall ratio of meals produced remains the same.



Where menus are fixed, it can be helpful to use photos to help children make their choices.

In terms of managing stakeholder expectations, it is useful to acknowledge that there may initially be some teething problems – pupils wanting to change their selection at the service counter, increased registration time etc. As long as the school is committed to making it work however, and applies the required discipline, these will soon settle down and cease being problems.

Please find attached flyer making parents aware of the introduction of pre/ordering systems.

Maintain high standards of food.

The task of encouraging pupils to take a school meal will be made much more difficult if food looks unattractive, is served at an inappropriate temperature or tastes unpleasant.

The challenge faced by school cooks is to balance the requirement to serve high volumes of food within a relatively short time scale while at the same time providing a high quality product and service. Any shortfalls in delivery are best discovered by looking at the service from the pupils' perspective:

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- ✓ Can pupils actually see all the food on offer? Are they made to ask for certain products or dishes?
- ✓ Is the portion size of each dish easily recognisable?
- ✓ Do service dishes contribute or detract from overall appearance? Do they help to retain food temperature?
- ✓ Is the food presented in a way that will be appealing to its target year groups?
- ✓ Whenever possible, is the food in half empty containers transferred to smaller dishes.
- ✓ During lulls in service, are dishes covered and/ or returned to the hot plate in order to retain temperature?
- ✓ Is food well cooked – not under of overdone?
- ✓ Has it been cooked and transferred to the hot plate at the latest possible time?
- ✓ During longer service periods, are vegetables batch cooked?
- ✓ Are the appropriate garnishes used for each dish? Are these maintained throughout service?
- ✓ Are spills – on both service counter and dishes, immediately wiped up?
- ✓ During the latter part of service, as the amount of food on display reduces, is presentation condensed in order to maintain an attractive display?
- ✓ Is the food handled correctly – using utensils rather than gloves or bare hands?

Train the staff to understand ‘customer’

Research has shown that the attitude and ability of staff is almost as important as food quality when selecting an eating establishment. People are sometimes prepared to accept mediocre food if the environment and service is excellent and if the staff are friendly and efficient.

This rule applies to school dining as well as commercial restaurants and cafes. For example, children will sometimes choose not to take a meal they would have enjoyed if it means that they can avoid an ‘unfriendly’ member of staff or if a process to be followed is not user-friendly or makes them feel uncomfortable in any way.

In many ways, determining the correct approach to customers is much more difficult for schools. Commercial establishments simply have to encourage increased spend and/or repeat business. While striving to achieve the same, schools also have to try to educate their customers.

For this reason, the approach to customer care should be determined by school leadership and not defaulted to Catering and Dining Room Assistants (though of course their views should be used to help inform any decisions). The correct balance between encouraging pupils to enjoy a balanced lunch and serving high numbers within a relatively short timescale should be clearly defined. Every member of staff employed within the lunch service should be clear about their role in achieving this.

- ✓ Do your staff help to create a welcoming environment and attract new users? Can their time be better used to achieve this?
- ✓ Is their language, tone and attitude supportive or off putting? Do they achieve the correct balance between being encouraging and being efficient in achieving throughput?
- ✓ Is additional training required? How could this be provided?
- ✓ Is the dining environment intimidating to new users?
- ✓ Are current systems user-friendly?
- ✓ How frequently do school staff ‘walk the walk’ and experience the service from a pupil perspective.

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Promote your service/ Target promotions effectively

Before beginning promotional activity, it is important that the provider is confident about the quality of the product and/or service that he or she is supplying. For this reason it is worth taking the steps described above to get the offer 'right', before undertaking any significant promotions.

The level of promotions undertaken should correlate directly to the level of increase you are striving to achieve. Fewer promotions will be required where take up is already high. However, this does not mean that a school with 100% take up of meals doesn't need to carry out any promotional activity. Here, we need to learn from the commercial world where, in order to maintain public interest, even the most successful companies regularly remind us, through advertising, of their key products and services. Therefore we should not sit back and expect 'customers' to keep coming.



In order to target promotions effectively, it is important, in each case, to be clear about who the target market is and the message that needs to be relayed. It is equally important that the message is not sent in a way that is convenient to the school but in a format that is not easily received by the customer. As a simple example, if targeting pupils, a positive statement by a teacher in class is likely to have much more impact than an article in a newsletter.

Once the target market for each promotion has been established, to be effective, the message should *focus on the anticipated benefits to them* rather than the features of the product or service itself.

Promotions Check List

- ✓ In order to avoid contradictory communications, are all appropriate school staff aware of the messages to be shared, the objectives of all promotions and their roles in achieving them? Do school staff convey to pupils that they value school meals by regularly taking a meal in the dining room?
- ✓ Promotions are most effective when they convey a simple message and do not attempt to share too much information at once. Schools need to ensure that messages are scheduled regularly across the academic year and that these are re-inforced during key decision-making periods e.g. leading up to a new term etc. Have your promotions been scheduled in this way?
- ✓ Has each promotional message been produced in a format that will be easily received by the target stakeholders?
- ✓ Does each promotion outline the benefits to the target stakeholder?
- ✓ Does each message build upon those issued previously? To be effective, any promotional campaign must appear cohesive rather than as a series of fragmented statements. Are related colours, logos, images and fonts used?
- ✓ Is the menu worded and presented in a way that it serves as an effective sales as well as information document?
- ✓ Have you established a clear vision of what success would 'look like'? Have you incorporated a system for review?

Please find the attached documents to assist you in your promotional campaigns:

1. *Open bellied menu, containing positive messages about school meals, into which schools can incorporate their own menu cycles.*
2. *Generic poster 1 - inviting parents to come and taste school meals.*
3. *Generic poster 2 - tasting sessions at open evening*