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The School Food Plan: Putting food at the heart of the school day

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Summary

The *School Food Plan*, published in July 2013 by the Department for Education, is the latest chapter in England's school food reform drive over the past decade. In contrast to conventional independent reviews, which put forward recommendations for consideration, the *School Food Plan* lays out actions, which are currently being implemented.

The plan sets out 16 actions across policy and industry, ranging from changes to the national curriculum and school food standards, to industry-led taskforces. The implementation of the *Plan* is expected to run for two years, after which the actions will be fully embedded into everyday school food activity, with an expected enduring positive impact on health and attainment.

This paper gives a brief overview of the *School Food Plan*, providing the background to the *Plan* along with a summary of its central principles. It also offers an update on the 16 actions, taking into account the Government's subsequent announcement that universal free school meals for Reception to Year 2 (pupils aged 4–7) will be provided by September 2014.

Keywords: diet, free school meals, obesity, schoolchildren, school food, school food standards

Introduction

In July 2012, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, appointed Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent (co-founders of Leon Restaurants) as independent reviewers, charged with answering two specific questions in relation to school food in England:

(1) How do we get our children eating well in school?
  (a) What more needs to be done to make tasty, nutritious food available to all schoolchildren?
  (b) How do we excite children about food so that they want to eat it?

(2) What role should cooking and food play more broadly in schools to enrich children's home lives and leave a legacy for later life?

According to the *National Child Measurement Programme*, 10% of 4–5 year-olds in England are obese; this figure rises to 1 in 5 by the time they leave primary school at the age of 11 (DH 2012). At the same time, tens of thousands of children across the country go hungry every day (CS 2012). In neither case are children eating well.

Dimbleby and Vincent spent a year visiting more than 60 schools and met with experts, representative groups and other organisations working in school food. Supported by a specially convened expert panel, they carried out detailed research and new analysis to examine evidence for links between eating well and academic performance, the economics of school food,

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examples of what works well internationally, and to understand what parents and children want from school food. The result was the *School Food Plan*, published by the Department for Education (DfE) on 12 July 2013 (Dimbleby & Vincent 2013). Building on the progress of the past decade (see Nelson 2011 and Nelson 2014 for an overview), the plan lays out 16 clear actions across policy and industry to transform food in primary and secondary schools across England.

The authors state a vision of 'flavourful, fresh food served by friendly fulfilled cooks in financially-sound school kitchens'. The plan aims to ensure not only that no child goes hungry at school, but also that the food provided is tasty and nutritious as well as equipping every child with the necessary cooking skills to enjoy feeding themselves well throughout their lives. In addition to the 16 agreed actions, the plan also includes a recommendation for Government to introduce a phased roll-out of universal *free* school meals for all primary school pupils (Dimbleby & Vincent 2013).

The Plan in brief

The *School Food Plan* (Dimbleby & Vincent 2013) is built on the premise that children who eat better are able to learn better and are healthier and happier individuals. Research and extensive anecdotal evidence attests to the wide ranging positive impacts of improving food. In particular, the *Plan* refers to the evaluation of the free school meals pilots carried out in Newham and Durham from 2009 to 2011, which not only found that consumption of vegetables by students increased, but also observed a significant positive impact on attainment, with pupils in the universal free school meals pilot areas making between four and eight weeks more progress at Key Stages 1 and 2 than their peers in comparison areas (Kitchen *et al*. 2013). The *Plan* also points to further studies linking eating well in schools to better cognitive development and improved classroom behaviour, including CHPNP (1998) and Storey *et al*. (2011).

The *Plan* emphasises increasing take-up as both the means and the end. At present, take-up of school meals across the country averages at 43% (SFT 2012), which means the system is not breaking even (Dimbleby & Vincent 2013). Increasing take-up will help create an economically viable school meals service at both a school and system level, as economies of scale will enable the price to go down while allowing caterers to improve the quality of the meals served (Dimbleby & Vincent 2013).

While increasing take-up is a desired outcome across the board, the *Plan* also recognises that there is no single 'one-size-fits-all' solution for the provision of food and food education in schools. Every school is different, and there are many different ways of providing good school food and food education. The *Plan* therefore refers to the importance of sharing what works well – for every challenge faced, there is a school that has already overcome it.

The *Plan* does, however, identify three underlying features evident in all schools with healthy food cultures and high take-up of school meals:

(1) Concentrate on the things children care about: good food; attractive dining environment; their social life during lunchtime; price; and the 'brand' of school meals (*i.e*. are school meals 'the thing to have').
(2) Adopt a 'whole-school approach', (*e.g*. treating the dining hall as an integral part of the school where children and teachers eat together, where lunch is very much a part of the school day, where cooks are considered as important staff members; and treating food as a vital element of wider school life and learning.
(3) Have a headteacher who supports and leads the change.

In producing the *School Food Plan*, Dimbleby and Vincent were guided by driving principles of positivity and consensus, along with a commitment to openness, data-driven analysis and securing quick wins where possible. These principles continue to form the basis of the *Plan*'s implementation.

The *School Food Plan* is not a new organisation. Rather, it is a *Plan* being implemented over a two-year period, in part funded by the DfE. The successful delivery of the plan depends on the actions and support of people on the ground with the power to bring about change in their local school – parents, students, headteachers, school cooks, and others. In recognition of the particular influence of headteachers, the plan includes a school food checklist specifically for headteachers.

The *Plan* sets out 10 actions for government and 6 actions for the sector. In addition, the *Plan* recommended a phased roll-out of universal free school meals for primary schools. On 18 September 2013, the Deputy Prime Minister, Nicky Clegg, announced that the government would be introducing universal free school meals to all pupils in Reception to Year 2 by September 2014. This news has altered the scope of certain actions within the *Plan* while impacting the delivery of them all.

The next section goes through the *Plan* action by action, and briefly lays out progress to date along with the implications for schools and other stakeholders, as well as identifying opportunities to get involved.

The *School Food Plan*: Action by action

(1) Put cooking into the curriculum: make cooking and food education an entitlement for primary and secondary pupils aged 4–14 years.

Practical cooking and food education will be compulsory by September 2014 for pupils aged 4–14 years in the new national curriculum (published September 2013, effective September 2014). This action may be particularly challenging for some schools to deliver, for example, if a school no longer has a teaching kitchen. However, there are many different ways to provide effective cooking lessons: some schools succeed without any kitchen facilities – for example, *Focus on Food*'s 'cooking buses' bring the kitchen to the classroom – and there are experienced organisations ready to help such as the Royal Academy of Arts' Chefs Adopt a School Programme and Purple Kitchen. *The Times Educational Supplement*, the UK's most accessed resource by teachers, is also building a dedicated online support page for cooking in the curriculum (see www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resources). The British Nutrition Foundation also provides free curriculum-aligned materials around healthy eating, cooking and wider food education through its *Food – a Fact of Life* education programme initiative, available at www.foodafactoflife.org.uk

(2) Introduce food-based standards for all schools.

The DfE has commissioned a Standards Panel, chaired by Henry Dimbleby, to produce a revised set of food-based standards (based on a nutritional framework) – an early draft of the revised standards can be found in the published *School Food Plan*. Testing of the revised standards in schools took place in November 2013. The government consultation is expected to launch in early 2014. The revised standards will apply to all maintained schools, and all new academies and free schools. These standards are expected to be available by September 2014, and officially enforced by early 2015 – exact timings are subject to change.

The revised standards are intended to be simpler to understand than the current food- and nutrition-based standards, giving school cooks greater flexibility to provide meals that are delicious as well as nutritious.

(3) Kick-start increased take-up of good school food.

In light of the government's new policy to roll out universal free school meals for pupils in the first three years of school (ages 4–7 years), the DfE has revised its original commitment for this action, increasing the total seed funding available to £14.4 million. The DfE has published tenders to (1) support infant school readiness to provide school meals to all pupils in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 (£9.6 million available), and (2) increase take-up of school lunches in at least 2000 junior and secondary schools where take-up of school lunches is very low (£4.8 million available). Organisations of any type were invited to apply for the tenders last year, and it is expected that contracts will have been awarded by late February 2014.

(4) Establish financially self-sufficient breakfast clubs.

The DfE has published a third tender (in addition to those listed in Action 3), providing £3 million for organisations to set up breakfast clubs in at least 500 schools where over 35% of pupils are eligible for free school meals and where there is no existing breakfast provision, as many of the most vulnerable children go to school hungry. Organisations of any type were invited to apply for the tender last year, and it is expected that contracts will have been awarded by late February 2014.

(5) Establish two flagship boroughs in London to demonstrate the positive impact of improving food on a larger scale.

Supported by the DfE, the Greater London Authority (GLA) will fund and launch two flagship boroughs, intended to demonstrate the positive impact on health and attainment achievable by improving food across the whole environment, using schools as a catalyst to drive this change. This initiative is inspired by the successful reduction of heart disease in Finland through a similar holistic approach (NIHW/NKPF 2009). The GLA is currently selecting the two flagship boroughs through a competitive process and expects to announce the two chosen flagships later in Spring 2014. You can find out more about the flagships initiative at www.schoolfoodplan.com/london-flagships.

(6) Investigate the case for extending free school meals entitlement.

The DfE will continue to examine the case for further extension beyond the government's current policy, which offers free school meals to students until the age of 18 who are in full-time education on a means-tested basis – and by September 2014, universal free school meals will be offered to all students in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2.

(7) Train headteachers: include food and nutrition in headteacher training.

The National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) has agreed to include content on food and nutrition in its leadership development programmes, including the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers. NCTL is developing content to include school food in three of its compulsory essential modules within the leadership curriculum. This will include putting together a series of case studies on issues such as improving behaviour in the canteen and providing healthy food at an affordable price.

The *School Food Plan* also includes a checklist created specifically for headteachers, which lays out some clear actions all headteachers can take to improve food in their schools.

(8) Public Health England will promote policies that can help improve children's diet in schools.

Public Health England has agreed to promote interventions that improve food quality in schools and tackle childhood obesity. For example, local Health and Wellbeing Boards are being encouraged to support schools and organisations in their area that are working to improve healthy student diets in schools, and *Change4Life* has now aligned its campaigns with the *School Food Plan*.

(9) OfSTED inspectors consider behaviour and culture in the dining hall and the way in which a school promotes healthy lifestyles (OfSTED 2013).

As of September 2013, OfSTED has amended its guidance for school inspectors to include consideration of the school dining environment and activities to promote healthy lifestyles among pupils.

(10) Measure success – set up and monitor five measures to test whether the *School Food Plan* is working.

The DfE will be collecting data regularly on five different measures, namely:

- take-up of school meals;
- nutritional quality of school meals (number of schools meeting the new standards);
- proportion of 16-year-olds who can cook a repertoire of savoury dishes;
- morale of the workforce;
- proportion of schools with a quality award (*e.g.* the Food for Life Partnership award or the Children's Food Trust award).

The DfE has commissioned the baseline measures for 2013.

(11) Share 'What Works Well' on a new website to enable schools to learn from each other.

The *School Food Plan* delivery team will oversee the development of this to be hosted at www.schoolfoodplan.com – schools, parents, children, caterers, and others are encouraged to share case studies of what is working well for food at their school. New case studies and other 'what works well' content have begun to be uploaded to the existing *School Food Plan* website. The newly structured 'what works well' website is expected to launch later in Spring 2014.

(12) Improve the image of school food.

The *Plan* highlights the importance of parents realising that school lunches are better than they used to be – and much healthier for their children than the alternatives: a recent study by a team from Leeds University found that only 1% of packed lunches meet the current school food nutritional standards (Evans *et al.* 2010). To this end, branding experts Richard Reed (co-founder of Innocent Smoothies) and Wally Olins (CBE, author of *The Brand Handbook*) are helping to devise a strategy for spreading the good news. Jamie Oliver, a British celebrity chef who is internationally renowned for his campaigns to improve school food, has also agreed to help through his work in different media.

(13) Bring school cooks closer to the rest of the catering sector.

Building on the activities of the Workforce Development Group (see next action), Lunch and Hotelympia, two high-profile events for the catering and hospitality industry in the UK, will work to include school cooks.

(14) Improve the skills of the workforce.

The Workforce Development Group, public-private alliance led by the Local Authority Catering Alliance (LACA), is developing a more structured approach to training and qualifications for school caterers. They are currently developing a set of agreed professional standards, and mapping existing training offerings for school caterers.

(15) Launch Small Schools Taskforce – caterers, kitchen designers and manufacturers work together to provide good food for small schools.

A cross-sector coalition bringing together major players in the UK's school food sector, such as Annabel Karmel (MBE, best-selling author of books on children's nutrition), the Catering Equipment Distributors Association, LACA, Brakes (a private caterer and food supplier), is leading this taskforce. As one of its activities, the Small Schools Taskforce is preparing to launch a pilot scheme working with small schools in Cornwall

and Devon to examine how to overcome the particular challenges of small and rural schools, whose meal services cannot benefit from economies of scale and usually face higher than average fixed costs for labour and transportation. The findings of the Small Schools Taskforce will be made publicly available in an open source report to share what works well for small schools.

(16) Ensure small schools are fairly funded.

Building on Action 15, it is expected that a specific recommendation will emerge around how the government can ensure meal services in small rural schools are fairly funded, given the greater economic barriers they face in providing high-quality healthy school meals.

Conclusions

The *School Food Plan* aims to transform school food culture across England by focusing on increasing take-up as both the means and the end. The introduction of universal free school meals has made the successful delivery of the 16 actions in the *School Food Plan* all the more pressing and important. Removing price as a barrier for infant pupils is not in itself sufficient to ensure enduring high take-up across all year groups. For that, the 16 actions of the *School Food Plan* are needed, working to drive positive changes across the entire school food system so that every student in England can – and wants to – enjoy nutritious school meals. Sharing what works well is critical, and in all schools it is essential that the headteacher leads change, that a whole school approach is adopted, and that the needs of the child remain at the forefront. In this way, we can realise a vision of children eating well and thus increasing their success in school, their health and, ultimately, their happiness.

Looking ahead

We are still in the early days of the implementation of the *School Food Plan*, but the positivity and consensus that characterised the review phase remain. It is critical that we – the sector, parents, children, schools – capitalise on this momentum to bring about lasting positive change. Schools will face two transformational changes around food by September 2014. First, all infant pupils will be eligible for free school meals (on top of the existing free school meals requirement). Second, as part of the new national curriculum, cooking and food education will be required until the age of 14. In each case, headteachers and others have a powerful window of opportunity to transform the role of food in their school. Although implementation of the *Plan* will only run for two years, where appropriate, each action is designed to become self-sustaining to bring about an enduring culture shift. As a result, England will have an opportunity to become a beacon of inspiration for school food around the world.

Get involved, get in touch

If you would like to get involved or share your story of what works well for food in schools – just email info@schoolfoodplan.com. Questions and comments are also welcome.

To find out more about the *School Food Plan*, please go to www.schoolfoodplan.com – watch the five-minute film, read the *Plan* and download the headteacher checklist.

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Conflict of interest

The author is coordinator for the *School Food Plan*.

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