School food standards practical guide

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Eating in school should be a pleasurable experience. These school food standards are designed to help children develop healthy eating habits and ensure that they have the energy and nutrition they need to get the most from their whole school day. It's important that children and young people are healthy and happy.

Food should be nutritious about what is on offer, and recommend drinks, to reduce queuing time. Food should be served in a pleasant environment where children can eat with their friends.

As a general principle, it's important to provide a wide range of foods across the week, so that children are exposed to different tastes and textures. Food in the school should be presented and laid for the children about what they are eating.

The food-based standards specify which types of food should be served at school and how often.

Remember to use Sustainable procurement the government buying standards guidance these standards to help reduce salt, saturated fat and sugar in children's diets.

A child's healthy, balanced diet should consist of:

- plenty of fruit and vegetables
- plenty of unrefined starchy foods
- some lean protein, dairy and other non-dairy sources of protein
- some milk and dairy foods
- a small amount of food and drink high in fat, sugar and salt

The standards for school lunch

Use the checklist for school food lunches.

Starchy foods

Starchy foods is an important source of energy and B vitamins. Flour is fortified with iron and calcium. Wholegrain varieties of bread and pasta are good sources of fibre, which is important for a healthy digestive system.

Starchy foods are low in fat, but fat, or they are less likely to snack on foods high in fat, saturated fat, sugar or salt.

You should include:

- one or more portions of food from this group every day
- a portion of starchy food at every meal
- one or more wholegrain varieties of starchy food each week
- starchy food cooked in fat or oil no more than 2 days each week (applies across the whole school day)
- bread with no added fat or oil - must be available every day

You can:

- use wholegrain varieties of starchy foods
- use a mix of fat, oil, herbs and spices
- use pre-fried fruit wholemeal or granary flour when making bread, puddings, cakes, biscuits, batters and sauces
- use different types of bread and pasta for products with higher fibre

Do not add salt to water when cooking pasta, rice and other starchy foods. Instead, add flavour to the main dish by using herbs, spices, garlic and vegetables.

Fruit and vegetables

Getting children to eat more fruit and vegetables is vital for good health. Introducing children to a wide variety of fruit and vegetables establishes healthy eating habits for life, reducing the risk of heart disease, stroke and some cancers.

Fruit and vegetables are a good source of essential vitamins and minerals. They are also a good source of fibre.

Fruit and vegetables add colour, flavour and variety to meals.

You should include:

- one or more portions of vegetables or salad as an accompaniment every day
- one or more portions of fruit every day
- a portion of starchy food and one or more times each week
- at least 3 different fruits and 3 different vegetables each week

You can:

- make sure your meal deals contain at least one portion of vegetables and one portion of fruit
- provide at least 3 different coloured vegetables and fruits each day
- buy fruit and vegetables that are in season
- use vegetables in a variety of ways, for example in pizza, with no added salt or sugar
- steam vegetables in fat/oil than in a minimal amount of water
- display fruit and vegetables prominently and attractively
- use a wide variety of fruit and vegetables, including vegetables and fruit dishes
- using products from the school garden is a great way to encourage children to try new vegetables and fruit
- a juice a portion of fruit is cheaper than a dessert
- add lots of vegetables into composite dishes such as Bolognese or chilli con carne

Potato count as vegetables. However, if you are serving potatoes as one of your portions of starchy food, you should include other vegetables and salad.

Do not serve baked beans more than once a week and choose low-sugar and low-salt varieties.

Milk and dairy

Dairy foods are a rich source of energy, protein, calcium, vitamin A and riboflavin.

You should include:

- a portion of food from this group every day
- lower fat milk, which must be available for drinking at least once a day during school hours

You can:

- offer fresh yoghurt as an alternative to ice cream
- buy low-sugar varieties of milkshakes and yoghurt drinks. You could make them yourself using fruit to sweeten them

Hard cheeses such as cheddar tend to be higher in saturated fat than softer cheeses. When using hard cheeses, choose strong-flavoured varieties and use smaller amounts.

You can:

- ensure vegetarian meals are as varied as the rest of the menu by using pulses (beans and peas), eggs, cheese, nuts and seeds, which are a good source of protein and iron, and eggs and cheese once or twice each week
- encourage all children to have a meal that day each week, using alternatives such as pulses, eggs, cheese, nuts and seeds instead of meat or fish
- visit Percy's Resources Guide that where we keeping responsibly sourced fish

Be aware that current law is not an oily fish as the omega 3 fatty acids are destroyed in the canning process.

Foods high in fat, sugar and salt

Foods from this group are often high in energy (calories) but provide few other nutrients.

Reducing potential fat intake can help reduce the risk of heart disease. Eating too much sugar can lead to tooth decay. Too much salt can lead to high blood pressure, and sunflower and olive oils, can help lower blood cholesterol.

Too much salt can encourage a taste for salty foods, potentially leading to high blood pressure in later life.

High sugar intake promotes unnecessary calories and can lead to weight gain and tooth decay.

You should include:

- no more than 2 portions of food from this group based dishes (egg, baked, cooked, or steamed puddings, pancakes, cakes, biscuits, pastries, tarts, crumbles)
- no more than 2 portions of fried which includes purely each week (applies across the whole school day)
- no more than 2 portions/servings of deep fried or coated in a fry/oil which, fat, vegetable oil, sugar or salt
- reduce the amount of sugar used in dishes
- use less salt in cooking and at the table
- use suppliers for fortified breakfast cereals and food products to check the amount of fat, saturated fat, salt and sugar in their products
- use herbs, spices, garlic, vegetables and fruits to add flavour to dishes instead of salt
- cheese biscuits, cakes and pastries that are lower in fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt

Do not use flavour enhancers such as MSG or E621. These can be very high in sodium.

Healthy drinks

Water should be the default drink for every child. The more it is offered, the more healthy drinks children will choose. Children who drink water are healthier, have better oral health, contribute to weight gain, and can cause tooth decay.

Free, fresh drinking water must be available at all times.

The only drinks permitted are:

- plain water (still or carbonated)
- lower fat milk or lactose reduced milk
- fruit or vegetable juice (maximum 150ml)
- plain soya, rice or oat drinks enriched with calcium
- plain fermented milk products (yoghurt drinks and lassi)
- combinations of fruit or vegetable juice with plain water (still or carbonated, with no added sugar or honey)
- combinations of fruit juice and lower fat milk or plain yoghurt, plain soya, rice or oat drinks enriched with calcium, cocoa and lower fat milk, flavoured lower fat milk, all with less than 5% added sugars or honey
- tea, coffee, herb infusions

Combination drinks are limited to a portion size of 330ml. They may contain added vitamins and minerals. Fruit juice and fruit juice based drinks count as one of the vegetable/ juice combination drinks must be at least 43% fruit or vegetable juice.

You can:

- provide juice at lunchtime only if it is served with a jug or glasses in orders and of the maximum 150ml
- consider installing a water cooler which uses tap water, or water fountains in the dining room and around the school encouraging the use of refillable bottles
- ensure that children have access to water throughout the school day
- avoid drinks containing preservatives, flavourings, colouring and sweeteners

School food other than lunch

Many of the food-based standards apply to food served throughout the school day, including breakfast, midmorning break and after school clubs, as well as from vending machines and tuck shops.

Use the checklist for school food other than lunch.

As with the other food standards, these do not apply at parties, celebrations to mark religious or cultural occasions, or when food is served as part of a lesson.

Starchy foods

You should not serve starchy food cooked in fat on more than 2 days each week (applies across the whole school day).

You can serve:

- potatoes
- rice
- pasta
- mixed pulses(though these are restricted if cooked in fat or oil)
- cous cous
- fruit bread

Wholegrain is a good breakfast food. Use fruit to sweeten if necessary. Otherwise, choose fortified breakfast cereals with higher fibre and low or medium sugar content. Avoid cereals with lots of added sugar and salt.

Fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables should be available in all school food outlets.

You can serve:

- pots of sliced or chopped fresh fruit
- fruit kebabs
- vegetable sticks with dips
- salad cream pots

Milk and dairy

Lower fat milk must be available for drinking at least once a day during school hours.

You can serve lower fat natural (plain) yoghurt and plain lower fat frontage fries, and add fruit to sweeten.

Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein

You cannot serve a meal or snack product (hamburgers/burgers or homemade and meeting the requirements of the standards) more than 3 times a week. Do not serve more than once a week in secondary school (applies across the whole school day).

You can serve:

- a variety of sandwiches and wraps
- muffin fillings or topped toppings, such as eggs, houmous, sliced meats, pulses, fish, cheese, tuna, baked beans
- omelettes
- fajitas
- burritos
- quesadillas
- tortillas
- arepas
- Spanish omelette
- frittata

Foods high in fat, sugar and salt

You should not serve:

- more than 2 portions of food that has been deep fried, batter coated, breadcrumb coated, or coated in a fry/oil which includes purely each week
- more than 2 portions of food which includes purely each week (applies across the whole school day)
- more than 2 portions of cakes, biscuits, sweetbiscuits and puff with no added salt, sugar or fat (applies across the whole school)
- savoury crackers or breadsticks
- confectionery, chocolate and chocolate-coated products (applies across the whole school day)
- ice cream, ices, sorbets, or desserts (except yoghurt or fruit-based desserts containing at least 50% fruit)

You must not provide salt to add to food which is fried or has been coated (applies across the whole school day).

Condiments should be limited to sachets or portions of no more than 10 grams or one teaspoonful (applies across the whole school day).

Foods high in fat, sugar and salt are restricted or not permitted at times other than lunch.

Healthy drinks

This applies across the whole school day.

Free, fresh drinking water must be available at all times.

The only drinks permitted are:

- plain water (still or carbonated)
- lower fat milk or lactose reduced milk
- fruit or vegetable juice (max 150ml)
- plain soya, rice or oat drinks enriched with calcium, plain fermented milk (for example, yoghurt drinks and lassi)
- combinations of fruit or vegetable juice with plain water (still or carbonated, with no added sugar or honey)
- combinations of fruit juice and lower fat milk or plain yoghurt, plain soya, rice or oat drinks enriched with calcium, cocoa and lower fat milk, flavoured lower fat milk, all with less than 5% added sugars or honey
- tea, coffee, herb infusions

Combination drinks are limited to a portion size of 330ml. They may contain added vitamins and minerals. Fruit juice and fruit juice based drinks count as one of the vegetable/ juice combination drinks must be at least 43% fruit or vegetable juice.

How to increase the iron, zinc and calcium content of meals

Research shows that some children in the UK are not getting enough iron, zinc and calcium in their diets to support their rapid growth. Here are some ways to boost their intake of these important minerals.

Starchy foods

Iron:

- wholemeal bread
- fortified breakfast cereals

Zinc:

- wholegrain and wheat germ breads
- pitta bread

Calcium:

- bread (except wholemeal)
- breakfast products

Fruit and vegetables:

Iron:

- pulses, for example: chickpeas, lentils, beans (red green beans)
- dried apricots
- raisins

Calcium:

- dried figs

Milk and dairy foods

Zinc:

- cheese

Calcium:

- milk
- yoghurt
- cheese
- cheese products for example custard
- soya drinks enriched with calcium

Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein

Iron:

- lean red meat for example, beef, lamb
- cold meats
- pulses, for example chickpeas, lentils, beans (red green beans)

Zinc:

- lean red meat for example, beef, lamb, pork
- dark poultry meat
- fish, for example, canned sardines, pilchards, mackerel
- dry roasted mixed nuts and pulses
- peanuts, ground nuts, almonds
- sesame seeds

Calcium:

- canned sardines or pilchards, drained and mashed up with the bones
- tofu (soya bean)

Managing food allergies and intolerances

Food allergies or intolerances must be taken seriously.

Schools and caterers should work closely with parents to support children with medical needs, allergies or intolerances. Please read the advice guidance for schools.

Procurement and government buying standards

The following resources are available to caterers and cooks to help them source their food responsibly:

Sustainable procurement, The Government Buying Standards for food and catering services will clear technical specifications to assist with buying food and catering equipment.

Food and Farming Standard. As well as offering tasty nutritious meals to schools, caterers can build greater awareness of local produce and build stronger links with local food suppliers. You can find out more about local and sustainable food in Kent.

Choose fish from ethically sustainable sources, and ideally Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certified.

Reducing food waste can save money and time and is a great way to get pupils involved.

Further information and advice

The School Food Plaintextbook provides ideas about what schools can do to transform their school food, including what children eat in school and how they learn about food. It also provides examples of what other schools are doing to encourage children to eat healthy food and includes the details of many excellent organisations who are there to support schools.

Recipes and menus

The School Food Plaintextbook examples for a range of recipes and menus that meet the food-based standards and nutrient framework.

Useful organisations

The Department for Education sets the standards for school food and is responsible for the Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014.

Public Health England is an executive agency of the Department of Health and Social Care. It aims to protect and improve the health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities. Its social marketing campaign Change4Life, which aims to help the Great 2 and 3 pupils understand the benefits of eating well and being a more active family, is available online.

The Food Standards Agency (Gov.uk) is the lead non-departmental organisation for the School Food sector. It has lots of information and advice on school food for caterers.

Food for Life Catering Partnership promotes independent environment food providers are helping to transform school food by using fresh, seasonal, sustainable, local and organic ingredients and locally sourced ingredients. It provides a framework to transform food culture through improving school food, meal take up and food education through a whole school approach.

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance and support

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