



Guidance

Checklist for headteachers

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This is a checklist of successful actions for schools. It includes specific actions that improve school food culture and increase take-up of school dinners.

Lead the change

Not all of these actions are your responsibility; they can be shared across the school.

Some are best done by:

- the school cook
- the school business manager
- the senior management team
- your external catering company
- volunteers

Get the right contract

Drawing up a new contract is a risky time for your school food service, but also a moment of opportunity. Don't draw up a new contract alone – lots of other schools have done this before you and found ways to get a good deal. Use an expert to help you draft it.

Ask your caterer to draw up a clear, written plan for increasing take-up over a set period.

Make it a contractual requirement for your caterer to achieve a certain standard of quality, as judged by an external organisation, for example, [Food for Life Partnership](#). Your contract must be explicit in setting out that food and drink served in your school must meet the School Food Standards across the school day.

Get specialist help. For details of organisations that can help you with contracts, cookery lessons, gardening or any other aspect of this checklist visit [school food plan](#).

Concentrate on the things children care about

Eating in school should be a pleasurable experience, time spent sharing good food with peers and teachers. These standards are here to help children develop healthy eating habits and ensure that they get the energy and nutrition they need across the whole school day.

You could:

- eat in the canteen often, create a positive environment for eating and enjoying food
- ask yourself whether the food looks appetising and tastes good
- be sure there is a mix of familiar and new foods for the children, and that the catering staff encourage children to experiment
- consider using local and seasonal suppliers - children and their parents find the idea of local produce exciting, especially when it comes from the school garden, and are more likely to try it
- avoid the most endangered species ([Marine Conservation Society red list](#)) when serving fish, and promote the best (MCS green list, which includes [MSC fish](#))
- manage children's choices to ensure they get a balanced meal
- consider offering a cheaper 'set menu' meal; require children to fill their plates with options from different categories; or simply put vegetables on their plates
- make sure packed lunches are not a 'better' option. Ban sugary drinks, crisps and confectionery, or offer prizes and other incentives for bringing in a healthy lunch
- consider what gets served at mid-morning break. Some children eat their main meal at this time. Too often, that means filling up on pizza, paninis or cake – the school food standards should be applied across the whole school day
- ensure tap water is always widely available for free, make it the drink of choice across the school and encourage all children to keep well hydrated

Environment

It is important to cook food that looks good and tastes delicious. Talk to children about what is on offer and recommend dishes to reduce queuing and to serve the food in a pleasant environment where they can eat with their friends.

You could:

- look around your dining hall. Is the room clean and attractive? Does it smell good?
- keep queuing times short. Try staggering lunch breaks; introducing more service points; serving food at the table, family style; and reducing choice
- have a cashless payment system. This shortens queuing times, enables parents to go online to see what their children are eating, and prevents free school meal (FSM) children feeling stigmatised
- replace portion-style trays with proper crockery

Social life

There are many hidden benefits to a good food culture. When children sit down to eat with friends and teachers in a civilised environment, it cements relationships, helps them to develop social skills and reinforces positive behaviour throughout the day. Lunch is an integral part of the school day, and should be one of the most enjoyable.

You could:

- have a stay-on-site rule for break and lunch time
- allow all children to sit together – don't segregate those with packed lunches but think about how you encourage school meal take up, or drive a healthy packed lunch policy
- structure the lunch break so there is sufficient time for eating as well as activities or clubs. This may mean making the lunch break longer or timing the clubs differently
- give special consideration to the youngest children, who might be intimidated by the noise and rush of lunch break

Improve communication

For children, eating in school should be a pleasurable experience, a time spent sharing good food with peers and teachers. It is the one time in the day when a school comes together in an informal, relaxed environment. It helps set the tone of a school and it helps provide a model for the relationship with food that children will carry outside school.

You could:

- make menus available in advance to children and parents online
- offer samples of the food for children to taste
- encourage teachers to eat in the dining room with the children. It may require a cultural or logistical shift and raises the status of school meals
- hold themed events – such as World Cup day, or international food day – to get the children excited and trying new foods
- organise a group to represent children's views on school lunch, such as a school nutrition action group (SNAG) or a School Council
- give children opportunities to prepare, cook or serve the food

Get the price right

Increasing take-up of school food is both the means and the end. The more children who are paying for school dinners, the more money goes into the system – and the better it becomes. The quality of the food goes up, and the price comes down, making it affordable to more and more families: a virtuous circle

You could:

- encourage those eligible for school meals to take up their entitlement
- consider subsidising school meals for year 7 pupils in secondary schools, to make them cheaper or free. Children who start eating school lunches often carry on, even once they have to pay
- consider offering lunch discounts for parents with more than one child at the school, or whose children eat a school lunch every day

Community and parent involvement

Getting parents involved has huge benefits for all schools. In every school we want there to be good food culture. In site visits, where this is clear and obvious, the teachers regularly ate lunch with the children. This is a great opportunity to get children's families involved: cooking and gardening clubs are often best run using enthusiastic volunteers. Finally, critically, children themselves should be given a voice.

You could:

- get the community involved
- give parents, carers and grandparents the opportunity to taste school food and eat with the children at lunchtime and parents' evenings
- invite family members to help with cooking or gardening clubs
- seek out partners in the community who can help with cooking and growing activities, for example local restaurants, food producers, allotment growers
- get local chefs in to teach in your school

Adopt a 'whole school' approach

To ensure that children eat well, it is not enough to cook nutritious food. You also need the children to choose school meals, put the good stuff on their plates and then eat it. As we have seen, the only way to improve the choices that children make is to adopt the 'whole school approach'.

You could:

- treat the dining hall as an integral part of the school, where children and teachers eat; lunch as part of the school day; the cooks as important staff members; and food as a vital element of school life
- treat your cooks and lunchtime supervisors as part of your team, on a par with teachers and business managers. Do they come to staff meetings? Do they enter and leave by the same door as the rest of your staff? Have they received training and development recently? Have you sought their views on improving the lunchtime experience?
- bring your school cook to parents' evenings – not to serve the food, but to answer questions from parents about their children's eating habits
- make sure children get consistent messages about nutrition in lessons and at lunchtime
- choose classroom rewards for children that are not sweets or cakes
- grow food in your school and use some in the school lunches
- use cooking and growing as an exciting way to teach subjects across the curriculum – from history to maths, science to enterprise, technology to geography
- offer after school cooking lessons for parents and children

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