



**FOOD
STANDARDS
AGENCY**

**REPORT FROM THE SCHOOL COUNCIL
NETWORK**

(January 2006)

INTRODUCTION

1. The Food Standards Agency has developed a School Council Network with 9 schools across England. The main purpose of the School Council Network is to listen and understand the views of children and young people especially in relation to food¹.
2. Over the last few years, there has been growing concern about the quality and nutritional content of children's food both in and out of school. By developing the School Council Network the Agency aims to gain a better insight into what children and young people think about a range of food issues.
3. The Agency has been working with 4 secondary and 5 primary schools throughout England in areas as diverse as Lyme Regis, Liverpool, Barnsley and Northampton. (A full list of schools is attached for information as part of Annex B). Termly meetings are planned with each of the 9 schools councils and the first of these meetings took place between October and December last year.
4. At around this time the DfES was also seeking feedback on its consultation on school food. It was suggested via colleagues in the Agency's Nutrition Division that time should be set aside at the meetings to gauge the opinion of pupils about their thoughts on school food and how it can be improved.
5. This report outlines the main comments that were made by pupils from the various school councils. The report also encompasses more general views about food that pupils either felt strongly about or wanted to see added to the final report. We've tried to group similar themes or issues together for

ease of reference and to highlight any key differences or opinions that may have some bearing to the work that the Agency and the DfES might want to take forward in the future. More comprehensive answers to the consultation questions are set out in Annex C.

¹ Further background information about school councils and how they operate is set out as part of the appendices.

VIEWS FROM PUPILS

Choice

6. Some members of the school council, especially secondary aged pupils had fairly strong views about food and what they expected from food at school, as opposed to food at home. Views ranged from 'there's little choice in school' to 'there's far too much choice'. Some also felt that if all pupils had to make their own choices, many would simply opt for the more unhealthy options.

7. We discussed with them what they thought government or individual schools could do to make healthily eating easier. Views again ranged from:
 - Restricting menus so that there was more limited choice (although this view was not universally popular).
 - Ensuring that chips and other deep fried food was not available on the menu every day (i.e. having a no 'fry-day').
 - Making healthy food more 'fun' and 'attractive' through bonus points and incentives schemes that pupils could earn if they opted for a healthy meal.

Location

8. However pupils also felt that choice and the decisions they made in relation to food were in part, dependent on the location of the school and access that pupils had to local shops either at break/lunch times or on their journey to and from school.

9. Some schools for example, had a very strict policy of not allowing pupils out of the school grounds during lunchtimes. In schools, where this was

commonplace, pupils wanted to exert greater control over their caterers and wanted to see more healthier options available. In other schools that did allow pupils to leave the school premises (if permission had been granted by the parents and the school) it was thought that more pupils would 'vote with their feet' and visit local takeaway shops, if the menu was too healthy.

Role of Parents

10. Members of the school councils were also asked to consider what other issues the government might want to take into account in terms of encouraging children and young people to eat more healthily. A recurring theme centred on the role of parents and the wider influence they have in helping to shape eating habits.

11. Many of the pupils did question whether parents actually knew enough about what constituted a healthy diet and there was some concern about the range of messages and how confusing these could be. When probed about what more could be done to encourage parents to cook healthier food for their children the following was suggested:

- Encouraging parents to enrol on cooking lessons where they can learn about the importance of a healthy diet (these lessons could even be in school).
- Producing guides, dvd's and other written information to parents on how they can cook healthy food on fairly modest budgets.

Role of the Media and Celebrities

12. Pupils were well aware of the role of the media and the part it played, along with celebrity endorsements, in encouraging people to eat unhealthy food. Many pupils talked about the mixed messages that they were often subjected to, i.e. 'the 5 portions of fruit a day' message was heavily promoted in schools and yet these messages were hardly ever reinforced on television or on billboards. Instead pupils felt that messages about eating more unhealthy food were often more visible and constant and this therefore made it easier to think of these foods when they were hungry or needed a snack.
13. Some of the pupils felt that an internal struggle can develop between their knowledge, attitude and behaviour. They know for example, that they should be eating less fatty foods but their behaviour doesn't always change to reflect this. Some felt that this was in part due to the pressure of 'doing what your friends/peers are doing' and the endorsement of some brands by well-known celebrities.

What more can government/schools/others do?

14. Pupils were asked throughout all the 9 school councils what more could be undertaken by schools, parents, government, media, and children and young people themselves to eat more healthy food. The following was suggested:
- More teaching about the effect that food can have on the body at different stages of development. This should be supplemented with more information about how your body uses food to replenish itself and fight off infection.

- Pupils in the primary schools we visited were often focused on incentive or reward schemes as a way of encouraging others to eat healthy food. Some (as we've already mentioned in paragraph 7) wanted extra house points for buying healthier food or bringing in a healthy lunchbox. Others wanted on-going rewards for maintaining a well balanced diet and a percentage of pupils suggested that they should be able to redeem their house/bonus points for music or books.

CONCLUSION

15. Although we only visited a fraction of the schools in England, we hope that this report gives a very brief snapshot of the ways in which children and young people think and behave around food.
16. Pupils we encountered were fully aware of the importance of maintaining a good diet but there was confusion about what 'good' and 'balanced' really meant. There was also some concern that some caterers could be providing unhealthy food in schools and pupils thought that in these cases, government should be doing more to protect the interests of children and to ensure that the food they ate was not just safe but nutritious too.

Background on School Councils

- i) School Councils have been developed to give young people a voice in how their school is run and to provide an opportunity for them to be part of the school's decision making process.

- ii) School Council members are typically chosen through a school election process, with each class nominating and voting for a boy and girl to be their class representative. These class representatives then form the Year Council. The Year Council will normally nominate two representatives – a boy and a girl – to represent their Year on the full School Council. (Although this process does vary from school to school, some primary schools for example may just elect one or two representatives from each form, who then sit on the full School Council).

- iii) From our discussions with Head Teachers and School Council Link Teachers members of the School Council are not just the 'bright or intelligent' children. School Council members are often chosen because of other skills, i.e. that they could actually represent the views of their peers.

SCHOOL COUNCIL NETWORK - SCHOOL SUMMARIES

The summaries have been taken from the Ofsted Reports on each School

School	Location	Catchment Area
Abraham Guest High School	Wigan	LEA Area – Wigan

Type of School

- Comprehensive
- Age 11 –16
- Mixed gender
- 946 pupils

Diversity of School Population

- Predominantly white
- Located in a pleasant residential area 605 of pupils are from two deprived wards with high unemployment

School	Location	Catchment Area
Bishop Martin Church of England	Liverpool	LEA Area – Liverpool

Type of School

- Infant and junior
- Age 4 –11
- Mixed gender
- 204 pupils

Diversity of School Population

- 4% of pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds
- The school is located in a nice residential area in the suburbs of Liverpool

School	Location	Catchment Area
Cheadle Hulme College	Cheadle	LEA Area – Stockport

Type of School

- Comprehensive
- Age 11 – 16
- Mixed gender
- 1351 pupils

Diversity of School Population

- 5% of pupils have English as an additional language
- Large spread of social backgrounds

School	Location	Catchment Area
Christ Church CE (JA) Junior School	Sowerby Bridge	LEA Area – Calderdale

Type of School

- Junior
- Age 7 – 11
- Mixed gender
- 154 pupils

Diversity of School Population

- Majority of pupils are of white UK heritage
- The school serves an area of old terraced and council built homes
- A significant number of pupils are from families that do not comprise the two natural parents

School	Location	Catchment Area
Darton High School	Kexborough	LEA Area – Barnsley

Type of School

- Comprehensive
- Age 11 – 16
- Mixed gender
- 1064 pupils

Diversity of School Population

- Predominately White
- The area which the majority of pupils are drawn from has above average levels of disadvantage

School	Location	Catchment Area
Star Primary School	Canning Town	LEA Area – Newham

Type of School

- Infant and Junior
- Age 3 –11
- Mixed gender
- 610 pupils

Diversity of Population

- The school is multi-cultural, just under 50% of pupils speak English as an additional language
- Many of the children live in council owned flats

School	Location	Catchment Area
Higham Ferrers Junior School	Rushden	LEA Area – Northamptonshire

Type of School

- Junior
- Age 7 – 11
- Mixed gender
- 343 pupils

Diversity of School Population

- Predominately white
- The school is in a rural town where general indicators of prosperity are below the national average

School	Location	Catchment Area
Shinfield St Mary's CE Junior School	Reading	LEA Area – Wokingham

Type of School

- Junior
- Age 7 – 11
- Mixed gender
- 221 pupils

Diversity of School Population

- Mostly white (good mix of cultures and ethnicity)
- Although the school is in a village location, most of the pupils come from South Reading which is less prosperous than the immediate area around the school

School	Location	Catchment Area
The Woodroffe School	Lyme Regis	LEA Area – Dorset

Type of School

- Comprehensive
- Age 11 - 18
- Mixed gender
- 886 pupils

Diversity of the School

- Predominately white
- The school takes pupils from a wide area of the Devon / Dorset borders and a very mixed socio-economic profile

DfES CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the term 'a healthy, balanced diet'?

In general there was a good understanding of what a balanced diet is, especially amongst the pupils from the secondary schools. The different food groups were mentioned in almost all of our discussions and the importance of eating fresh fruit and vegetables was also well known.

However, in one school the pupils referred to the fact that there might be a misunderstanding with the term balanced, i.e. that you can eat one unhealthy piece of food as long as it's balanced against a healthy food.

2. What would make you change your eating habits at school and choose more healthy foods, such as fruit and vegetables? Does what you learn help you choose?

There were some interesting responses to this question. Pupils felt that:

- There should be more control by 'those in charge' (either schools or government) to curb the amount of unhealthy food in schools.
- There should be less choice in schools, because most pupils if they could would always opt for the unhealthy option.
- Using more celebrities to talk about or promote healthy food would be helpful.
- Learning about the effects of eating unhealthy food and the impact this had on the body was a good one. However there was a need for this type of learning to happen at quite an early age as once habits are formed they become harder to loose.
- Healthy food should also be made more 'fun' and 'attractive' as it often equates to being the boring food.

2b What would be effective in persuading you and your friends to change your diets? (E.g. wrist bands, talks by celebrities, rewards for eating healthier foods)

School councils had different opinions on some of these suggestions.

- Wristbands had been very popular over the summer, but these were now seen as more of a fad and were beginning to lose popularity. Also in some schools wristbands were used to signal the difference between rival gangs and this was not helpful.
- More celebrities should promote healthy food and come and talk to young people about the importance of a good diet.
- Rewards for eating healthy foods was popular with pupils. Discounts at theme parks based on 'loyalty cards' that were credited when fruit or veg is bought were among some of the suggestions received.

3. List 3 things that your school could do to make school dinners more attractive?

Make healthy food fun

Make the environment more attractive

Develop loyalty cards and points

4. The Government is planning to remove certain unhealthy items from school dinners, such as poor quality burgers and nuggets. It is also planning to limit the number of times fried food can be served each week. Do you think this is a good idea? If yes why?

There was a 100% agreement with this suggestion from all the schools. The feeling was that if the Government wanted children to eat healthier food then it was their responsibility to ensure that access to it was easier.

In some schools a note of caution was added, simply removing all unhealthy food would not necessarily mean that only healthy food would be eaten. Children could and probably would vote with their feet by going to local chip shops instead of staying at school. A gradual phasing-in on of more healthy food was considered to be a better approach.

5. Be honest – if chips were on the menu, would you always choose them before a salad or a portion of vegetables?

There was a mixed response to this question and some of the answers depended on the other options that were available and what was being eating along side the chips. For other pupils the presentation of the salad or the vegetables might also be a factor.

6. Why do you think so many children stop to buy chocolate, crisps and fizzy drinks on the way to school? Do you think some children come to school without eating breakfast, for example?

Pupils agreed that some of the peers would stop off at shops to buy fizzy drinks and sweets. The main reasons that pupils gave for doing this was a) the shops were open b) they were on their way to school c) there was often no responsible adult looking after them at this point in their day.

In terms of why some children did not eat breakfast many cited reasons such as often it's too early to eat or they're simply not hungry at this stage.

7. What do you think about plans to replace chocolate, crisps and fizzy drinks in school vending machines with healthier snacks?

The majority of schools thought that this was a good idea and had already taken the steps to either replace items sold in vending machines or to remove the vending machines altogether.

8. Who knows most about healthy eating in your family? How could your parents, carers or other relatives help you to make healthier choices?

Overwhelmingly the answer to the first part of the question was parents. Pupils felt that more information should be made available about healthy eating, perhaps through cooking lessons and other literature.

9. What might make it difficult for you to continue healthy eating at home, well as in school?

There were three major reasons that were highlighted in practically every school. Cost was considered to be prohibitive, the perception was that healthy food costs more and if parents were on low budget cheaper food was more likely to be bought. Knowledge of how to cook healthier foods was important, without that knowledge parents were not likely to experiment. Time was the third factor, with many parents working and there being insufficient time to cook healthy food from scratch.