

Reducing food waste in schools

Improving familiarity and appreciation of school meals



Introduction

Aim: This intervention aims to reduce food waste by increasing pupils' willingness to try unfamiliar food instead of pre-judging it based on preconceived ideas or its appearance. It also aims to encourage greater appreciation of school meals amongst pupils, parents and staff.

Rationale: During the research, adults and pupils reported that in many cases pupils assume that they will not like dishes, or certain food types offered at school before tasting them. The main reasons were:

1. School meals include unfamiliar foods that are different to those that pupils eat at home. This is a particular issue in schools with pupils from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, but also includes pupils who are not used to eating home-cooked or fresh foods.
2. Familiar foods sometimes look different at school ("It's not how my mum / dad makes it!")

Pupils also reported that being given a full-sized portion of food that did not appeal and sometimes put them off the other food served on the same plate. This further increased the amount of food thrown away instead of being eaten. This intervention outlines ways to offer pupils small 'tasters' of food, it encourages them to try new food and helps them to make informed food choices rather than prejudging whether they will like something.

School cooks and mid-day meal supervisors reported that it would be easier for them to encourage pupils to eat school meals with consistent support from parents. They suggested that some parents base their perceptions of school meals on their own childhood experiences, unaware of the quality now on offer to pupils. Parents who have a positive attitude to school meals are likely to communicate this to their children, enthusing about the menu and encouraging their children to eat the food provided. Allowing parents to experience the quality of school meals through taster sessions is therefore also likely to have a positive impact on their children's eating habits and reduce food waste.

Activities

This document contains six activities to improve familiarity and appreciation of school meals. Please select those which are most suitable to your school's situation; we suggest you try three in order to achieve a significant reduction in the amount of food that is wasted. Every school is different, so feel free to adjust any of the instructions to ensure that the system works smoothly in your setting.

1. Pupil feedback
2. Rewarding pupils
3. Taster sessions for pupils and staff
4. Sharing recipes with parents
5. Taster sessions for parents
6. Visiting the school kitchen

You and your pupils may also think of other activities to improve familiarity and appreciation of school meals.



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Activity 1: Pupil feedback

Asking pupils for feedback on what they like and would like to change about school meals will provide useful information for those planning your school's menu and cooking the food. It will also engage pupils with school meals, an important process if school food is to be appreciated and valued.

You will need to be clear who plans your school's menus and how much scope there is for adapting them. If menus are decided by an external contractor or the Local Authority, it is likely that changes to the actual dishes on offer will be difficult. However staff will be able to make some changes e.g., cooking more portions of popular dishes or adjusting how long they cook vegetables or pasta. Although they will not be able to change salt levels, they can adjust the herbs and spices used in dishes if pupils are finding food too spicy or too bland. In schools with their own cook there will be even greater flexibility, and staff may be able to replace an unpopular meal, ensuring that nutritional guidelines are still met. It could be appropriate to explain some of this background to older KS2 and secondary pupils.

The School Council could be involved in devising a simple and motivating way for pupils to record their views on specific dishes, emphasising the need for positive as well as negative feedback. Ensure that feedback is communicated to the school cook / catering manager, and that pupils know what action has been taken as a result. It may be that some changes suggested by pupils are not possible, in which case an explanation of the reasons (at a level appropriate to the age of your pupils) will ensure that pupils do not feel that their views have been ignored.

Activity 2: Rewarding pupils

In primary schools, stickers can be used to reward pupils for trying something new. With appropriate feedback from adults, children will learn that being adventurous about unfamiliar food is a positive thing. Generic 'well done' stickers can be used, but special stickers are likely to have an impact. They give teachers the opportunity to praise members of their class who have been rewarded during lunchtime, and communicate a message to parents, who may ask their child about the sticker at home.

In secondary schools, consider ways in which existing pupil reward mechanisms, such as house points, can be used to encourage pupils to participate in taster sessions or try unfamiliar foods.



Top tips from schools

- Ask older pupils from the School Council to sit with young children who are new to school meals, encouraging them to try the food and supporting them in the unfamiliar environment.
- Make school meals a treat! Once a month, select 6 lucky pupils who do not normally have school lunches to receive a free meal. Create a sense of occasion by awarding these pupils a certificate (entitling them to their free school) meal during assembly. This will help to create a culture in which school meals are valued, making pupils less likely to waste them.

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Activity 3: Taster sessions for pupils and staff

Offer pupils a sample of dishes that they are reluctant to try or are unfamiliar. Pupil feedback on school meals (see Activity 1) is likely to identify some dishes which pupils perceive to be unappealing, and you could also consult the School Council about which dishes to offer as tasters. Tasters can be used in a variety of ways: to encourage pupils to taste less popular meal options on an existing menu; to introduce dishes prior to the launch of a new menu and to allow children who normally have packed lunches to try school food, thereby raising the profile of school meals.

You could make 'taster days' a big event, publicised throughout the school - this works particularly well prior to the launch of a new menu. Regular taster sessions can also become part of your school's normal lunchtime routine. Tasters can be arranged in the following ways, always ensuring that adults are enthusiastic and encouraging when presenting the food:

1. Have a pile of clean spoons behind the servery and offer pupils a spoonful to try as they get to the counter.
2. Ask a member of staff to go out along the queue and offer pupils a spoonful to try. (The most hygienic way to do this is to have a small tray with a bowl or plate of the food and a pile of clean forks / spoons beside it.) As well as engaging pupils with sampling school food, offering tasters in the queue may help to relieve the monotony of queuing.
3. Use unserved food to provide tasters for pupils at the end of the lunch period. You may want to include pupils who usually have packed lunches as well as those who have school meals but are unsure about a particular dish.

Depending on the age of your pupils, the time available and the dish(es) being sampled, you could ask the adult offering tasters to engage pupils with the food being tasted by telling them:

- The name of the dish
- A personal comment about why s/he likes this dish
- Which country the recipe comes from
- Information about the main ingredients

Wherever possible, involve teachers and other staff in tasting sessions. Young pupils, in particular, are likely to be influenced by seeing their teacher taste something new, especially if s/he obviously enjoys the food! If you have decided to have high profile 'taster days' ensure that they are well publicised. This is particularly relevant in secondary schools, where pupils may have the choice whether to eat elsewhere so could be unaware of the tasting opportunity.



"Taster sessions worked really well, especially as we were about to launch a new menu. Everybody was impressed with how tasty the brownie with beetroot was, and we were pleasantly surprised how many of the children tried new foods, including some who always have packed lunches."

Headteacher, Fair Furlong Primary School,
Bristol

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Activity 4: Sharing recipes with parents

1. Recipes from home to school

School kitchens can make one-off changes to menus without compromising their adherence to nutritional guidelines, so consider a special 'recipes from home' day. Ask pupils to bring their family's favourite recipe to school, sort them into vegetarian and non-vegetarian, and perform a lucky dip to select winners which are prepared by the school kitchen. When asking pupils to bring recipes, it will be important to consider whether to give any guidance on suitable ingredients e.g., no nuts, no pork. Days themed around recipes from a particular country can also be successful, and may be particularly appropriate in schools with a high ethnic mix. As with 'taster days' (see activity 1) ensure that days when shared recipes are being used are high profile in school and well publicised to the whole school community.

2. Recipes from school to home

Include recipes from the school menu in your parent newsletters and / or website and encourage parents to cook and eat these meals with their children. You could also highlight particular ingredients to families, for example encouraging them to try a new vegetable. If you have a parents' room, or an area where parents often congregate, consider a recipe book with photographs of the final product being eaten in the school dining hall.

"The project was really useful for our school, making the whole school more aware of issues around food waste and children's reluctance to try different foods. We also identified that some children did not really know what some foods were and with a little encouragement discovered that they actually like the taste."

Business Manager, Lauriston Primary School, Hackney

Activity 5: Taster sessions for parents

After close consultation with your catering staff / provider, invite parents to tasting days to enjoy school food for themselves. These sessions could be done in a number of ways:

1. Parents sample a school meal at a time when visiting the school for another reason (e.g., meetings for parents before their child starts at your school, PTA meetings, parents' evenings)
2. A (limited) number of parents share school dinner time with the children. This can be repeated a number of times so that all parents who want to take part and sample a meal can do so. (As with inviting adults into school for other events, it will be necessary to consider issues around child protection when planning this.)
3. Small tasters are offered in the school entrance foyer / hall / playground at the end of the day when parents are arriving to collect their children. You could run this after school for a few consecutive days (like a school book fair) and have tasters available for parents and children to try together and talk about on the way home.
4. Parents attend with or without their children for a special tasting evening. This can be a sit down set meal or a buffet of different dishes to sample, with the option for parents to write comments in a feedback book or take home recipes of the dishes sampled. In some schools it might be appropriate to make a small charge for the evening.

Follow up whichever activity you decide to do with a piece in the next newsletter about how successful the event was and what it has achieved.

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Activity 6: Visiting the school kitchen

To help pupils to value school meals, invite a group of older pupils or the School Council into the kitchen for a brief look at the work that goes into preparing them and to meet the staff who are involved in the process. Repeat the visit after lunchtime to see all the food that is leftover / thrown away in the kitchen and dining hall areas. Ask the pupils to think about how to tell the whole school community about what they have learned.

According to the age of the pupils, possibilities include:

- Whole-school, Key Stage or year group assemblies. Catering staff might be happy to attend assemblies, or for pupils to take photographs / video footage during their visit to use in these presentations.
- An eye-catching display for the dining hall or school lobby with photographs of the visit and captions.
- A rap or song highlighting key issues in a memorable way, to be performed in assemblies.
- A short quiz to be used as a starter to spark discussion in the classroom (e.g., tutor times in a secondary school).

One primary school that trialled this intervention invited the school cook to visit classes and talk to pupils about her job and get feedback from pupils about what they liked and disliked about school meals.



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Raising awareness of the intervention in school

A high profile campaign is likely to have a greater impact so we recommend launching this intervention at a whole-school level, telling everybody in the school community what you are doing and why. You will need to consider:

1. Which adults need to know about the intervention

Kitchen staff will be involved in planning some of the activities, so getting them 'on board' from the start is important. A quick meeting should suffice, emphasising how the intervention aims to encourage adults and pupils to value and appreciate school meals, as well as reduce food waste. Staff may have interesting insights into pupils' attitudes to school meals that will help you implement the intervention in your school.

Midday meal supervisors play a key role in ensuring the smooth-running of lunch times in both primary and secondary schools, and may also have useful ideas to contribute to the planning process. Ensure that they understand why you are encouraging pupils to try unfamiliar foods and make clear any links you are making with PSHE messages (see 2). Encourage them to get involved in the activities you plan, whether tasting unfamiliar food or sharing recipes. Be sure to discuss any implications for their interaction with pupils, since they are in the ideal position to reinforce the key message to pupils.

Teachers and Learning Support staff might not play a major role in the dining hall, but are nonetheless in an excellent position to support the initiative. Ask them to remind pupils about taster sessions, creating a sense of expectation and reinforcing the message that trying new things is valued. Invite staff to join pupils for tasters – there is a clear message to pupils when they hear a teacher saying "I've never had it before, but I'll give it a try."

Parents will appreciate hearing about the activities planned for their children, as well as those with which they are being invited to get involved (taster sessions, recipe sharing). Parents of younger children are well placed to reinforce key messages about trying new food in the home environment.

2. What message to communicate

As well as telling adults and pupils about the specific events that you are planning, decide what reasons to give them for introducing them. Raising awareness of food waste will support your work towards becoming a sustainable school, and you may also want to make links with PSHE / SEAL objectives. For example, you could focus on encouraging pupils to try new experiences rather than sticking with what is familiar in a wide range of contexts e.g., trying new sports, new hobbies or new authors, as well as unfamiliar food.

For older pupils it could be possible to link the 'don't make decisions about food simply on its appearance' message to discussions about how people sometimes prejudge each other based on how they look. You might also want to link this intervention to your work as a Healthy School, since trying new foods could result in pupils having healthier diets as well as reducing waste.

3. How to communicate the message

As well as short meetings with key staff, launch assemblies (whole-school, Key Stage or year group) are recommended to tell pupils about the initiative and give it a high profile in your school. If appropriate to your school, parents could be invited to assemblies, as well as including an article in your parents' newsletter and / or website.

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Curriculum links

Maths / ICT

Using appropriate ICT, pupils can design a feedback questionnaire to find out pupils' and parents' perceptions of which school meals are popular and which would benefit from tasters. Analysing the results, and representing them graphically, will use a range of mathematical skills.

English

Following feedback on school meals, pupils can write letters to the school's catering company and/or cook to let them know the findings of the survey. Pupils can write articles for the school newsletter or website, or perhaps a local newspaper, outlining the problems associated with food waste and what their school is doing to reduce it.

Geography

Pupils can investigate where food comes from and how it is transported from its country of production to the UK.

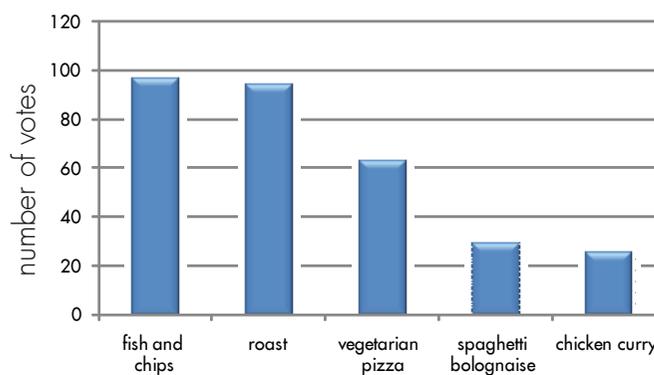
Pupils can investigate what happens to food if we throw it away, and how it impacts on the environment.

Citizenship

Pupils can debate the global issues surrounding food waste, taking on the roles of different people involved in the production, transportation, preparation and consumption of food.

Examples of the type of charts pupils might create following a pupil survey

Top 5 popular school meals



What is your favourite vegetable to have with school meals?

