



Too much on their plates?

Standfirst: The Association for Public Service Excellence's survey of education caterers shows they support the healthy eating agenda but are under intense financial pressure and concerned about the future of school meals. Rob Bailey looks at the results

What do school cooks think of Jamie Oliver? Has the television chef become the bane of their lives since forcing Turkey Twizzlers off the menu? Or has his focus on making school dinners more nutritious been a welcome one?

In a poll conducted by the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE), almost 60% of education catering managers agreed Jamie Oliver had been a good influence in highlighting healthy eating; and 11% 'strongly agreed'. The research also revealed that school caterers are being highly creative in marketing school dinners and are keen to do all they can to ensure children find eating in the school canteen a positive experience.

Children's understanding of healthy eating has also increased. A continued emphasis on food in the national curriculum is seen as the most effective way of keeping them informed on nutrition and helping them understand the benefits of eating a healthy meal at lunchtime. The message that nutritious food can also be enjoyable food is filtering through.

School cooks are, however, up against constant competition; from local take-aways luring older children – who are allowed outside the school gates at lunch-time – to spend their dinner money on less healthy options and from packed lunches containing their favourite snacks for the younger age group. And despite their endorsement of DCFS regulations on healthier school meals, the survey found that

the majority of education catering managers are struggling to cope with extra costs these stricter nutritional standards entail.

Such increases, occurring at the same time as inflation is pushing up prices of staple foods by around 15%, is placing them under great financial strain. While supportive of the healthy eating agenda, a total of 70% respondents think it has now gone far enough. The vast majority - 97% - said they want a period of stability to enable the new standards to bed in.

The move towards job evaluation and single status is also having an impact on staffing costs. The Equal Pay Act requires men and women to be paid on equitable terms and historical pay inequalities in local government are being redressed with job evaluation to harmonise pay rates. Recent settlements as a result of equal pay laws have led to wage cost increases of up to 25% in some cases in the female-dominated school catering sector. While no-one for a minute doubts the importance of staff in local government receiving equitable pay, education caterers do not want to pass this cost onto their customers and are therefore trying to find ways to cover this increase as well as those higher food costs.

There are also concerns that the credit crunch will mean more parents sending their youngsters off to school with packed lunches, or money to buy cheap but unhealthy take-aways instead of school dinners. All of these factors mean education caterers are feeling a strain and fearing for the future.

The APSE poll confirmed the uptake of school meals is volatile. But, on a positive note, a previously large drop-off at secondary school age, when children are allowed to go outside school grounds at lunch-time, appears to have stabilised. This perhaps also indicates positive action taken by some Headteachers in enforcing a lunch time 'stay on site' policy which prevents pupils leaving school premises at lunch time. School cooks were split over future up take of school meals; one third of respondents predicted it would increase; one third thought that it would decrease; and a third expected it to remain the same.

Parents who consider a packed lunch a cheaper option might be tempted to stop their children having a hot meal at lunch-time as times get tighter. Packed lunches may seem more economical because the cost is buried in their weekly grocery bill, but the reality is that crisps, drinks and snacks are expensive and school meals offer better nutrition at good value for money.

The sad truth is that, for youngsters from the worst off families, a school dinner might be the only hot, well-balanced meal of the day. An increase in free school meal entitlements may become apparent as a result of the economic downturn; although it is too early to quantify this as yet. While children from the most deprived backgrounds will be eligible for free school dinners, it is a worry that uptake among those families that fall outside the free school meal entitlement might decrease due to the credit crunch.

A total of 74% of the respondents in the APSE poll said they support free school meals for all children. At present, primary school children in deprived areas can access free school dinners as part of a £20 million drive by the Department of Health to cut childhood obesity and get young people eating more healthily. The pilot will run for two years beginning in September 2009, with the option of extending it into a third year. Some other councils have taken decisions to subsidise education catering or fund free meals from their own budgets. APSE welcomes such moves, but it means the national picture is inconsistent and we would like to a consistent approach backed by central government funding.

APSE has 300 members providing front-line services, including catering, from local authorities across the UK and runs the performance networks benchmarking service and advisory groups for service providers. Our survey featured 135 respondents, 82% of whom were local authority in-house caterers. In-house providers have no separate legal status to the rest of the authority and typically use service level agreements as a substitute to contracts with the schools they cater for. Almost 75% of respondents in the survey expected to remain within local authority control for the forthcoming year, while 7.6% expected the service to be outsourced.

APSE has campaigned for subsidised school meals and this survey backs up our arguments. Given all the factors highlighted in the research, it is increasingly difficult for these caterers to provide school meals at breakeven costs. With some councils subsidising school food whereas others don't, young people's nutrition is turning into a postcode lottery. As a nation, we need to decide whether we are serious about children's health.

As the economy tightens, and families face unaffordable supermarket bills, the argument for national government to invest in children's nutrition is an increasingly powerful one. The long term financial benefits of children eating healthily from an early age have been statistically proven; with obesity related illness one of the fastest rising treatment costs in the NHS budget, spending a little on children's nutrition now will save the taxpayer millions on healthcare in the longer term.

Education caterers in a number of APSE member authorities are also joining up the health eating agenda with environmental sustainability by sourcing food from local suppliers and cutting down on 'food miles'; not to mention the impact procuring from local businesses has on boosting the local economy.

Managers who are struggling to put a decent meal into mouths of children who might not otherwise get one – and finding local solutions to environmental and economic challenges in the process – deserve all the support they can get.

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APSE School caterers survey – key points

- 97% want a period of stability to enable new nutritional standards to bed in
- 60% said Jamie Oliver had been a good influence
- Concerns include higher food prices and impact of recession on uptake
- 74% of school caterers support free school meals for all children

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This article first appeared in November 2008 in Cost Sector Catering