

School cooks give Jamie Oliver thumbs up but fear for the future

A survey of school cooks has found that 60% think Jamie Oliver has been a good influence in highlighting healthy eating.

But, despite their endorsement of the television chef, the research by the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) also found the majority of education catering managers are struggling to cope with extra costs associated with stricter nutritional standards at a same time when inflation is pushing up prices of staple foods.

- 70% think healthy eating has now gone far enough
- 97% want a period of stability to enable the new standards to bed in.
- 74% of school caterers said they support free school meals for all children, an initiative that is being jointly piloted by Education Secretary, Ed Balls and Health Secretary, Alan Johnson

While the worst-off children are currently eligible for free school dinners, caterers are also concerned that take up of school meals among middle-income families might decrease due to the credit crunch with hard up parents switching children over to packed lunches.

APSE's principal advisor for catering, Rob Bailey, said: *'Parents might think a packed lunch is cheaper because the cost is buried in their weekly grocery bill, but school meals offer good nutrition at good value for money.'*

APSE's chief executive, Paul O'Brien, added: *'APSE has campaigned for subsidised school meals and this survey backs up our arguments. As times get tight, it might be the only decent hot meal of the day for some children.'*

The APSE survey showed school meal uptake is volatile, but a previously large drop-off at secondary school age, when children are allowed to go outside school grounds at lunch-time, has stabilised thanks to the efforts of local authority caterers. The research revealed a high degree of creative marketing of school dinners is now taking place and children's understanding of healthy eating has increased, particularly when linked to the national curriculum. However 'Job Evaluation' in local councils has introduced a new pay structure for staff, in many cases adding up to 25% to the total wage bill putting further pressure on school meals as caterers are reluctant to pass those costs on to parents.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

APSE works with over 300 local authorities throughout the UK who provide front-line services, including school meals

The survey featured 135 respondents, 82% of whom were local authority in-house providers..

Local authorities were invited to bid to take part in a free school meals pilot programme set up jointly by the Department of Health and the Department for Children Schools and Families as part of a £20 million drive to cut 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.

School meal numbers have remained the same overall with one third of respondents reporting an increase in the numbers of children opting for school meals, one third saying numbers had decreased and the rest saying numbers had remained roughly the same despite the volatility created by Jamie Oliver's TV campaign.

The Equal Pay Act requires men and women to be paid on equitable terms. Within local government historical pay inequalities have led to the introduction of job evaluation to settle pay rates for men and women. In school catering many of the women have been historically under-paid and recent pay settlements as a result of equal pay laws have led to wage cost increases for school meals services.

For further comment or to arrange for interview or request a copy of the survey briefing please contact Mo Baines on mbaines@apse.org.uk or ring 0161 772 1810 or mobile 07971 843515