

ShowCase

Increasing uptake of school meals in South Tyneside, Gateshead and Sunderland

Topic:

Nutrition

Organisation: South Tyneside, Gateshead, and Sunderland local authorities; Healthy Schools; North East Improvement and Efficiency Partnership

Location:

North East

Dates:

March 2007 to March 2010

Budget:

Text

Website:

Text

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Overview

The aim of this project was to use a social marketing approach to help the three local authorities – Gateshead, Sunderland and South Tyneside – increase uptake of school meals.

Sponsored by the North East Improvement and Efficiency Partnership, the project targeted primary school children at Key Stage 2 (aged 7 to 11). However, the scoping research and resulting segmentation identified head teachers as key influencers of school meal uptake. A three-pronged strategy was therefore developed to engage head teachers:

- Communications and engagement with head teachers through various media channels
- Dining room interventions, such as introducing plates and bowls and healthy tuck shops
- Training for lunchtime supervisors

Results

- School meal uptake in the three pilot schools rose from 3.5 per cent to 9 per cent, depending on which intervention mix the schools received
- One school has made changes to the dining room experience and another has introduced plates and bowls to replace 'airline' trays

- In the post-intervention survey, head teachers reported better relationships with catering managers and the majority reported they now felt able to make changes to their menus



School meals in primary schools make a vital contribution to the dietary intake of school children in England. Whether a child does or does not eat a healthy meal at school is now recognised as being fundamental to that child's behavioural, educational and social development.

In 2004 celebrity chef Jamie Oliver hosted a TV programme that changed the dining rooms of schools across England, culminating in a petition to the then Prime Minister. Appalled at the quality and provision of high fat, salt and sugar foods, Oliver mobilised the public to campaign for changes in school food. Ruth Kelly, the Schools Minister at the time, placed a number of pieces of legislation before Parliament which changed school food in England drastically.

England's Department of Health (DH) and Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, now the Department for Education) are working closely to implement change and have introduced a range of interventions to boost school meal uptake and improve nutritional health. In 2004, the DH issued a milestone White Paper, *Choosing Health*, in which it committed to 'improve nutrition in school meals' by revising school meal standards to reduce fat consumption and enhance fruit and vegetable intake.

In 2005 the School Meals Review panel was set up by the DCSF (Department for Children Schools and Families, now the Department of

Education). The panel recommended a series of new standards and regulations to legislate school food in England for the first time. In September of that year the School Food Trust was established to oversee the implementation of the legislation, offer support and advice to caterers, collate and analyse school meal data, and implement a national training programme for school cooks.

However, following the rapid and widespread changes to school meals in a bid to make them more nutritionally balanced, uptake of school meals suffered a significant decline. More and more students now opt to bring a packed lunch to school, but there is a growing concern about the relatively low nutritional quality of packed lunches in comparison to school meals. The decline in school meals uptake also undermines the financial viability of the school meals service, thereby threatening its ability to continue offering healthy options to children in schools.

In 2007, a collaborative of caterers from the North East, together with Healthy Schools and the local government office, approached The NSMC for guidance in adopting an innovative approach to falling rates of school meals uptake. A social marketing pilot project was subsequently set up as part of The NSMC's learning demonstration sites scheme. Funding was provided by the North East Improvement and Efficiency Partnership, which wanted to bring a fresh approach to health improvement initiatives in the region and increase involvement from local authorities (LAs).

Steering group

External partners with a vested interest in the school meals issue and the authority to represent their respective organisations were invited to a prospective steering group briefing, where the issue being addressed was presented and the social marketing process explained. In addition, expectations for the steering group and commitment needed from

members were clarified. From this initial meeting a steering group of six people was established, which included:

- Three local catering managers
- One representative from the School Food Trust
- One Associate from The NSMC, who provided free social marketing guidance and support
- One representative from the North East Improvement and Efficiency Partnership, who chaired the group and managed the project's budget



The aim of the project was to increase the number of children in Key Stage 2 eating school meals one to three days a week. This is the age when children start to exercise choice over what they eat.

Review of secondary data

A review of relevant secondary data was carried out in early 2007 by an independent researcher. This included a review of government policies and previous studies on school meals and healthy eating among children, as well as local, national and international interventions.

Primary research

In April 2007, The NSMC conducted semi-structured interviews with nine professionals involved in promoting school meal uptake and healthy eating across schools in the North East. The aim was to identify the main factors affecting school meals uptake and the most important influencer of this behaviour.

A follow-up phase of semi-structured interviews was carried out by The NSMC in January 2008 with 14 head teachers from Gateshead and Sunderland. The aims were to:

- Understand their attitudes and perceptions of school meals
- Investigate key factors required to stop the decline of school meals uptake
- Explore what activities or services could be delivered to achieve this

Primary research was also carried out with 24 parents recruited from 4 schools across Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland, and 22 children in Key Stage 2 recruited from 3 schools across the 3 areas. Conducted by an independent researcher in spring 2008, the research aimed to investigate how parents and children perceived school meals, reasons for preferring packed lunches or disliking school meals, and children's power in the decision making process.

Insights

From head teachers

- Communication clutter – Since school meals became a government priority, head teachers have been bombarded with information, legislation and advice. However, there is confusion around who manages the catering services within a school (head teachers or the local education authority) and what can or cannot be included in school meals
- Lack of dining hall management, little understanding of nutritional standards and poor customer service skills of lunchtime supervisors ('dinner nannies')
- Poor quality and presentation of food (due to low cooking skills of school cooks)
- Limited availability of popular items for students served last
- Children's lack of cooking skills and knowledge of different foods – For example

many head teachers commented how their students did not know what a kiwi fruit was

From parents

- Loss of control over being able to provide something they know their child will eat and like
- Worries about popular food items not being available if their child is served last
- Concerns over the quality and composition (such as high in carbohydrates) of school meals
- Financial cost of school meals, particularly for families with more than one child

Questions & Answers
FRC's 2009

Question
With the credit crunch going on, I don't think I can afford school meals, is there anything you can do?

Answer...
You really should check if your child is eligible for free school meals, for a family with two children it could save you nearly £1000 a year and ensure your child gets a hot and tasty meal every day. You can check on direct.gov or with your local council to see if you qualify.

Question
My child sometimes comes home and tells me there was nothing left.

Answer...
We hope this happens very rarely, but just like in your local restaurant or coffee shop the popular items can sometimes 'sell out'. To stop this happening schools and caterers try a number of things. If something is popular then they will provide more of that option next time.

Question
My child is a fussy eater so am worried if let them have school meals they will go hungry.

Answer...
Your school will work with you and your child, it is important to go through the menu the night before so you can encourage your child. School cooks can encourage children to try something new and often this is rewarded with a sticker. Many parents report that their child asked for new foods after trying them at school. Why not give it a go a couple of days a week at first?

Question
My child comes home and tells me what they have had and it is all carbohydrates.

Answer...
The nutrient standards have removed the 'empty calories' and sugar/rush foods and replaced them with more balanced foods that provide energy across the afternoon. This is supported by free bread available with every meal. Sometimes when it is a pizza or pasta dish we would encourage you to plan with your child that they had a fruit or yoghurt based pudding instead of a carbohydrate based one so they can benefit from all the food groups. School cooks and lunchtime assistants also try to do this.

From children

- Popular but unhealthy options (such as chicken nuggets and chips) are no longer offered at school and they are often confronted with food that is unfamiliar, unpopular and different from what they eat at home
- Due to lax or non-existent regulation of packed lunch contents, children often bring confectionary and convenience food into the dining hall. These items are often seen as

more appealing and exciting than school meals

- School meals take longer than packed lunches to serve and eat, as children have to queue up and then sit down for two courses, which reduces their playtime
- Food is sometimes prepared and served in an unappealing way, particularly when different foods served on the same plate spill over and mix together

Segmentation

Although the target audience was initially primary school children, research showed that if a head teacher is engaged in the school meal agenda, uptake improves, so head teachers were chosen as the primary audience, with children and parents as secondary audiences.

Through the qualitative research, head teachers were segmented into four groups, based on their engagement and attitudes around school meals:

1. **Too busy** – Typically do not engage with the school meals agenda and see little benefit in being hands-on in this issue. They have other 'more urgent' priorities to attend to and commonly find the 'Jamie Oliver effect' an annoyance, as school meals were much simpler before. Caterers find it difficult to secure a face-to-face meeting with these head teachers, who are unlikely to respond to email or letter communication.

"I think the school meals service should be taking the initiative with this, rather than ourselves."

"Really, I feel that if I make a stand here, I've got absolutely no backing from the Government or from the Governors."

2. **Disengaged and confused** – Typically do not understand their role in the school meals provision and may pass on inaccurate information to parents. They are not aware of all the national standards and may be confused about who is responsible

for the management of school meals and kitchen staff in their school. These head teachers feel that school meals have changed for the better, but feel unsupported in dealing with tricky parents and do not always immediately see the benefits of school meals. Communication with their catering provider only occurs when there is an issue or problem to resolve. However, they are open to communication if it is clear, concise and easily available.

“Could you limit packed lunch places? I think I’d have parents with placards at the school gates if I did that.”

3. *Trying within their field* – Believe that changes in school meals are needed and that school meals are a good service to offer in their school. They have sporadic communication with their catering providers, but this communication is generally positive. They know their remit and promote school meals to parents as far as they feel able. They are keen to learn from other head teachers and to share examples of what works. There is potential to engage these head teachers in deeper and more connected communications, since they would be open to new ideas and more formal engagement (such as through a school food group) with their school cook and caterer.

“I just need to work a little bit more with a couple of members of the kitchen staff.”

4. *Engaged and passionate* – They are at the forefront of the school meals debate in the region and probably prioritised school meals before Jamie Oliver’s campaign. These head teachers are commonly asked to pilot new ideas or marketing promotions, and their schools are likely to have packed lunch policies and school gardens. They have positive and frequent communications with their caterer, and sometimes involve their cooks and dinner nannies in other school activities.

“25’s the maximum [number of packed lunch places allowed] – I’ve set a

number...it’s understood now, we’ve had 8 or 9 years of that.”

“I do dinner duty every day. If I don’t, my deputy does.”

The interventions were targeted at segments two and three, as they were expected to be most responsive and benefit most.

Exchange

A key barrier for these head teachers was a lack of time and competing priorities. Therefore the project needed to offer an attractive exchange in terms of:

- *Choice* – Packed lunches can cater for ‘fussy eaters’, allowing children to pick and choose their own (often unhealthy) options
- Improving student behaviour (including better concentration and academic performance) and reducing time required for disciplining
- Contributing to better qualified and satisfied staff
- Creating a more pleasant dining environment

Competition

The qualitative research with head teachers, parents and children identified packed lunches as the primary competition for school meals. This is due to:

- *Choice* – Packed lunches can cater for ‘fussy eaters’, allowing children to pick and choose their own (often unhealthy) options
- *Price* – Especially for families with more than one child who are managing a tight budget, packed lunches offer a cheaper option and one they know their children will eat (hence value for money)
- *Fullness* – Parents would much rather have their children be full (even if what they have eaten is not healthy) than sign them up for school meals, which they often claim children do not end up eating

- *Peer popularity* – Packed lunches are still seen as ‘cool’, especially when they contain popular recognised brands that can be swapped and traded between friends
- *Freedom* – Packed lunches can be eaten outside in the summer and can be consumed more quickly, so children can go out and play sooner

Various other health campaigns, such as from the School Food Trust and Change4Life, also competed for the target audiences’ attention.



Solutions group

After the scoping work was completed, a solutions group was set up in 2008 to help develop the interventions. This group comprised of catering managers, school cooks, dinner nannies, head teachers, and health promotion specialists from the local health authority. Research showed that school clerks and dinner nannies are key influencers, as first impressions given by these frontline dining room staff contribute to a child’s view of school meals, which can last throughout their school life. In most cases, this first impression was one of stern and unapproachable staff. A number of school clerks and dinner nannies were therefore invited to join the solutions group.

Findings from the secondary and primary research were presented to the group, who then helped develop a multi-pronged marketing strategy that focused on engaging head teachers, encouraging children to eat school meals and training dinner nannies to provide a more supportive and pleasant dining experience. The interventions needed to

appeal to both the head teachers (so that they would implement them in their schools) and the children (in order to improve uptake of school meals).

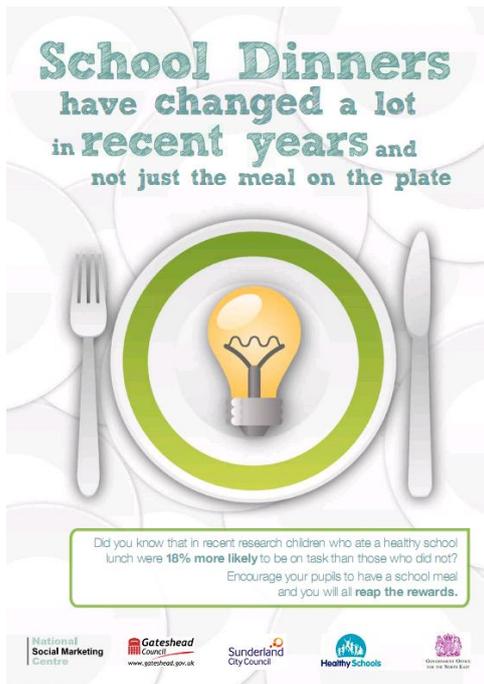
Communications and engagement with head teachers

Communication between head teachers and the catering services run by LAs was reported to be poor and inconsistent. Strategies were therefore put in place to improve communication.

Key messages

Clear, simple and consistent messages were developed specifically for head teachers and aimed to address barriers identified in the qualitative research. These messages were:

- A child who has a healthy meal is easier to teach and achieves more academically
- Head teachers have a right to be involved in their school’s kitchen and can develop bespoke menus for their schools
- Children can still eat their favourite foods (like tomato ketchup and Yorkshire puddings)
- A whole school approach, involving parents, lessons and staff, is the best way to achieve a positive outcome for school food across a school community



Messengers

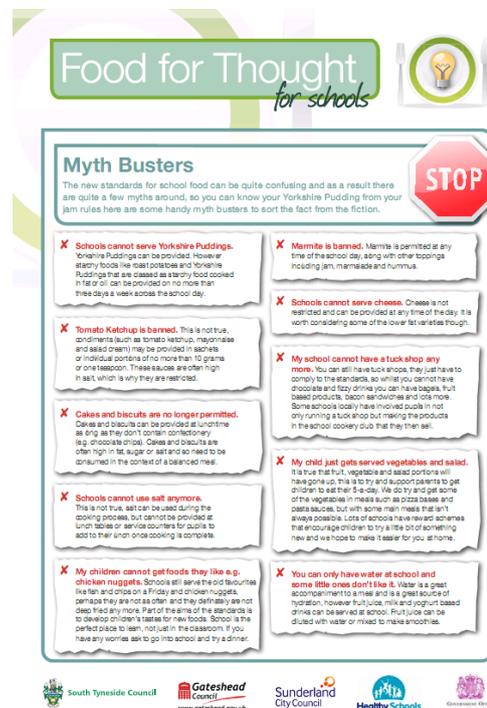
Involvement from the local area Head Teachers' Consortium was vital to establishing credibility for the messages, as well as from primary care trust (PCT) nutritionists and head teacher unions. This local representation was further supported by national evidence from the Nutrition Foundation and School Food Trust reporting links between good food and behaviour.

Key media channels

- **Print materials:** The print materials designed included a myth-busting card, newsletters and posters to be displayed in teachers' staff rooms and on school notice boards. The materials were pre-tested with teachers from the local schools for impact and likeability.
- **Online communications:** Head teachers reported they were often time poor and received large amounts of paperwork. The print materials were therefore backed up with e-newsletters and new sections on the Healthy Schools website. This included a case study compendium, which highlighted local successful initiatives and overcame

misconceptions about the new school meal standards.

- **Special events:** Pioneering head teachers and the area caterers came together at a school to discuss catering and to share ideas.
- **One-to-one communications:** Meetings between caterers, school cooks and head teachers to define roles and responsibilities were set up in the intervention schools to help head teachers and school cooks understand what services were available from the caterers, and to explore developing bespoke menus and other interventions for their schools.



Dining room interventions

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- A more relaxed, less crowded and noisy dining room experience was created, using queue management, lunchtime rotation and improved one-to-one management by dinner nannies. Children were considered customers, rather than passive recipients of a service, who made choices based on their own experiences and judgment
- Lunch break changes were introduced to ensure that each class group was served first at least once a week
- New menus were developed to suit individual school meal tastes
- Puddings were served in bowls and at the table, rather than on the same plates as the savoury main courses



Training for lunchtime supervisors

- Dinner nannies and kitchen assistants are essential in delivering the new dining room experience, so training in customer service skills, presentation of food, first aid, nutrition standards and positive behavioural management techniques were piloted. Since dinner nannies tend to have a low average reading age and lack formal educational qualifications, the training was developed with the Health Literacy team at the DH. The training materials were pre-

tested in one school before being rolled out to other schools



Implementation was staggered to meet the needs of the pilot schools.

A networking and learning event was held at the start of the implementation phase. The event was held in a local school and attended by parents, school governors and teachers from other local schools. Children from the school, where the event was held, cooked wholesome food with the help of the kitchen supervisors to serve to the attendees.

The printed communication tools were piloted in one school during the 2009 spring term, although all schools across the boroughs could access the online communication tools.

During the 2009 autumn term, three schools, selected based on the segmentation model, piloted the dinner nanny training, titled 'Just a little bit more'. Training for dinner nannies was completed weekly and took half a term in each school. Feedback was positive with dinner nannies feeling more confident about dealing with children and encouraging them to try new foods, as well as increasing their understanding of the value of healthy eating and the quality of the new school meals.



Finally, dining room changes were made. One school piloted china plates and bowls, while the three schools that received the dinner nanny training changed their lunchtime rota and menus. Unfortunately, some of the originally planned interventions aimed more at children and parents had to be scaled back due to funding cuts (the North East Improvement and Efficiency Partnership was abolished after a change in government).



The project was evaluated using various methods:

1. Telephone interviews were conducted by an independent researcher pre and post intervention with head teachers in the intervention schools and control schools. Fifteen head teachers were contacted in autumn 2009 and were followed up in

- February 2010 to complete a questionnaire on the school meals agenda.
2. School meal uptake figures in the pilot schools were collected from the LA caterers in January 2009, and again after implementation in January 2010. These were compared against control data, which is the average school meals uptake figure for the LA.
3. Interviews and qualitative research was carried out by an independent evaluator with the dinner nannies who received the 'Just a little bit more' training.

Results

Pre and post implementation interviews with head teachers

Results suggested that the training for dinner nannies had positively impacted on several issues; such as time to obtain a meal; noise and dining environment; raised in the qualitative primary research. Changes initially considered too time-consuming, such as extending the lunch break or rotations, have now been implemented with the dinner nanny being supported by the school and caterer.

School meal uptake figures

By the end of the project, school meals uptake in the three pilot schools rose by between 3.5 per cent and 9 per cent, depending on which intervention mix the schools received. The interventions occurred during the hype around school meals and the national 2010 school meal figures showed an increase in uptake, but not as high as in some of the pilot schools.

'Just a little bit more' training

The training was delivered in four sessions. In relation to session two's learning outcome 'to promote health and wellbeing by encouraging children to eat a balanced diet', the pre-session/post-session baseline measured the knowledge and understanding of the government's guidelines on healthy eating and

nutrition for children and why it is important that these are followed.

Results from the pilot workshop were presented to the Learning and Skills Council, the Training and Development Agency for Schools, and the School Food Trust. The pilot has directly influenced a national accredited training model for lunchtime supervisors.



– even at a relatively young age, children require a pleasant experience.



What worked well

- Following a systematic process, which focused on primary research and segmentation allowed the steering group to identify that head teachers were a key target audience, rather than parents or children, as initially thought
- Further segmenting by attitudes and behaviour allowed the team to focus their efforts on those who are most likely to change and make an impact on the desired outcomes
- Carrying out research with children and pretesting the posters was worthwhile, as it validated the design and also created a buzz amongst young people as a by-product
- There is a great deal of passion and skill in our schools – the majority of head teachers were engaging, interested in new ideas and willing to try new things



Due to the closure of the North East Improvement and Efficiency Partnership follow-up was difficult. However, the findings were feedback to all the stakeholders identified as 'key players' and the materials and ownership of the project was officially handed over to the healthy schools lead in the local Department of Health. To ensure sustainability, the healthy schools lead was fully involved throughout the whole project.

Several of the caterers have gone on to identify funds for schools to change their dining space, as has the School Food Trust.

Lessons learned

This project underlined the importance of a positive, customer-orientated dining experience



Challenges

- Working across LA school meal providers was often difficult, as ideas, interventions and anything that risked their profitability was seen as a threat. This hampered the sharing of ideas and willingness to innovate
- With local work pressures high, it was difficult to keep the steering group engaged
- There was a lack of local coordination and development when the original project lead moved on and a replacement local lead could not be identified
- Funding from the local area was promised, but did not materialise. On reflection, this may have been avoided with clearer terms of reference set out at the start of the project
- Due to the rapid change in school meal provision and mixed messages, there was often discord and mistrust of ideas from organisations such as the School Food Trust – for example, some of the dining room changes such as queue management and plates and bowls were ideas communicated widely at national level, but were only taken on as a direct result of this project