

Summary

If you only have five minutes, read this.

This plan is about good food and happiness. It is about the pleasures of growing, cooking and eating proper food. It is also about improving the academic performance of our children and the health of our nation.

What we found

The quality of food in England's schools has improved enormously since 2005, when Jamie Oliver alerted the nation to the horrors of the Turkey Twizzler. There has been a clear, measurable improvement in the nutritional quality of most school food, and a reduction in junk foods.

The best schools do a brilliant job of weaving food education – cooking, growing vegetables, even modest efforts at animal husbandry – into school life and the curriculum. We have been hugely impressed by the energy and enthusiasm we have witnessed among school cooks, caterers, teachers, nutritionists, parents, volunteers, charity workers and many others working to make school food great.

But there is still work to be done. Some schools are lagging behind, serving food that is much too bland, boring and beige. Across the country, take-up of school food remains stubbornly low, at 43%. That means that 57% of children are not eating school lunches at all. Some graze instead on snack foods served at mid-morning break (when the standard offerings in our experience are panini, pizza and cake). Others go off-site to buy their lunch – usually junk food - or bring in a packed lunch.

Many parents mistakenly imagine that a packed lunch is the healthiest option. In fact, it is far easier to get the necessary nutrients into a cooked meal – even one of mediocre quality. Only 1% of packed lunches meet the nutritional standards that currently apply to school food.

This country faces a serious health crisis caused by bad diet. Almost 20% of children are obese by the time they leave primary school at 11. Diet-related illnesses are putting a huge strain on the nation's coffers – costing the NHS £10 billion every year. We need to tackle the problem now, before the costs (both personal and financial) become too heavy to bear.

Eating school dinners is better for children. It is also better for the school's finances. A half-empty dining hall – like a half-empty restaurant – is certain to lose money. In order for the school food service to break even, average take-up needs to get above 50%. In other words, the system is currently bust. It has to be subsidised with money from school budgets and local councils, to the tune of £140 million a year.

This state of affairs is neither desirable nor necessary. Parents currently spend almost £1 billion a year on packed lunches; persuading just a fraction of them to switch to school food would make the system solvent again (and their children healthier).

What needs to be done

What you have in your hands (or on your screen) is not a traditional ‘report’, or a set of recommendations to the government. It is a plan. It contains a series of actions, each of which is the responsibility of a named person or organisation. These are the things that need to happen to transform what children eat at school, and how they learn about food.

Below, we have given a very condensed list of these actions. We heartily recommend that you read the whole plan to get a better sense of the purpose behind them. In the meantime, there are a few essential points that need making.

Increasing take-up is not something that can be done from the top-down. It requires a cultural change within each school. It means cooking food that is both appetising and nutritious; making the dining hall a welcoming place; keeping queues down; getting the price right; allowing children to eat with their friends; getting them interested in cooking and growing.

The only person with the power to orchestrate all this is the head teacher. They need support from their governors and leadership team, but if the head isn’t behind changing the food culture in a school, it won’t happen.

The vast majority of head teachers already believe that good food is vital to children’s health and academic achievement, and to the broader life of the school. But many feel they lack the knowledge and experience to improve their food culture. So this plan is aimed primarily at giving head teachers the practical support, advice and information they need.

We have put together a ‘checklist for head teachers’: a brief guide to the practical steps every school can take to improve the quality and take-up of its food. This includes everything from chucking out prison-style trays and getting teachers to eat in the dining hall, to banning packed lunches (it *can* be done!). The checklist can be found at the end of the plan.

The government has agreed to provide funding for specialist organisations to go into 5,000 schools that are struggling with their lunch service, to help them turn things around. Boris Johnson has also agreed to create flagship ‘food boroughs’ in London, with more areas to follow if these are successful.

Separately, we have set up a taskforce to help small schools overcome their particular logistical difficulties, and drawn up a strategy to improve the skills and morale of school caterers.

Many studies have shown that hunger affects concentration, and that well-nourished children fare better at school. The government has agreed to allocate money to help schools in the poorest areas establish breakfast clubs. And it has promised to look at extending free school meal entitlement, to ensure that the children of the so-called ‘working poor’ do not go hungry at lunch.

We have also recommended that free school meals should be extended to all primary school children, starting with the most deprived areas. This is the only one of our recommendations that the government has not agreed to yet. We understand that the considerable cost and the need to involve other departments make it a big ask. But we are pleased that the Secretary of State agrees with us in principle and we would urge schools and councils to consider funding universal free school meals themselves.

Providing a wholesome lunch for children is only half the battle. We also need to equip today's children with the skills they need to feed themselves – and, in time, their own children.

We are delighted that the government has accepted our recommendation that cooking lessons should be made a part of the national curriculum for all children up to the age of 14. The new curriculum will emphasise the importance of cooking nutritious, savoury dishes, understanding where food comes from, and taking pleasure in the creative arts of the kitchen.

Finally, many people have been concerned by the government's decision to exempt most academies and free schools from the existing school food standards. The fear is that, without legal constraints on what they serve, these schools will be tempted to slide into bad habits. We have not found any evidence of widespread slippage – indeed, some of the best food we have eaten has been in academies.

However, we do believe it is wise to have some sort of safety net in place. To that end we have worked with the Medical Research Council and our own expert panel to develop a set of simpler food standards, which we believe will be easier to implement and enforce. If the new standards are agreed to be effective from a practical and nutritional standpoint, the Secretary of State has agreed to make them mandatory across all types of school.

In the past year, we have seen many different people from across the school food sector – and beyond – coming together to help build on the good work that has been done already. Michael Gove, Sir Michael Wilshaw (head of Ofsted), the Department of Health, Public Health England, Jamie Oliver, charitable organisations and representatives from all the major school food providers – from private industry to local authority caterers – have agreed to do their bit to increase take-up and create a truly first class school food service.

Good food provision in schools has been shown to lead not only to healthier children, but to improved attainment. We hope this plan will help to create a generation of children who enjoy food that makes them healthier, more successful and, most importantly, happier.

Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent