# Account of practice:

## Improving behaviour in one school: the positive impact of changes to how and what students eat

Jenny Gaylor, Vice-Principal, Carshalton Boys Sports College, Sutton, Surrey

Carshalton Boys Sports College in Sutton, Surrey, is a non-selective school for boys aged between 11 and 19. It is located in one of the biggest council housing estates in Europe, with many of its students coming from families experiencing multiple disadvantages. It has 1,225 students on roll, 36.6% of whom are eligible for free school meals.

When Simon Barber became principal just over 10 years ago, only 4% of the pupils at the school achieved at least five GCSEs at grades A to C. Simon very succinctly described the significant problems, at that time, with regard to pupils' behaviour across the school: "The atmosphere and discipline were terrible".

Since then, there has been a significant improvement in pupils' attainment. In 2013, 97% of pupils achieved key benchmark qualifications, with 45% achieving at least five GCSEs, including English and mathematics, at grades A* to C. In A2 examinations, 98% of pupils achieved pass grades of A–E, with 31% achieving A or B grades.

There have also been significant improvements in pupils' behaviour, and more generally on relationships between staff and pupils, with the changes in how and what pupils eat being one of the main reasons for this. When Simon Barber took up his post, he quickly took steps to make the canteen (as it was called then) into the centre of school life. He strongly believed that improvements to how the pupils ate and behaved at lunchtimes, would have a profound and long-lasting impact on the whole life of the school. He also believed that improvements to how pupils were treated at lunchtimes, and how staff interacted with pupils, could then be a catalyst for wider improvements across the school.

He and his colleagues across the school, therefore, began to implement changes as quickly as they could. Jenny Gaylor, Vice-Principal at the college, is one of those colleagues. She describes how she and staff in the college have made strenuous efforts to improve the whole atmosphere at lunchtimes, especially the ways in which pupils behaved.

She describes the pupils' poor behaviour before the changes were introduced:

> Kids were locked out at lunchtime. The teachers would all be in the staffroom, and there was vandalism… kids were charging about outside. There were fights. It was not a good place to be.

More generally, there was unacceptable behaviour within the school as a whole and especially at lunchtimes. The atmosphere at lunchtimes was part of the wider issue, that pupils were simply not sufficiently engaged in a positive way in school. At lunchtimes, in particular, there was lots of shouting and a poor quality of food, large amounts of which used to get thrown around. Quite understandably, the school staff did not want to eat in such an unpleasant environment.

Therefore, as part of the wider improvements being introduced into the school, Jenny and her colleagues decided to change some key elements of the arrangements at lunchtimes.

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Jenny and her colleagues initiated key improvements to the overall eating environment. As Jenny describes:

> *It was about changing the eating environment, rebranding it, calling it the café, rather than the dining hall.*

Therefore, Jenny and colleagues played a key role in modifying the actual design of the kitchen and adjacent eating area, so that pupils could see what was happening in the kitchen, which helped to develop further their interest in how the food was being prepared. In addition, there are now two outlets called 'Refuel', where pupils can buy hot healthy takeaway food (such as soup or noodles) and eat it quickly as they would in a commercial fast-food outlet. However, there is still the emphasis on providing a hot, healthy meal, while giving pupils enough time to move on to something else, such as going to a lunchtime club or playing football.

Clearly, one of the key elements in improving the eating experiences of pupils was to introduce healthier food into the menus. As many schools have done, this involved simply removing the unhealthy fast food, such as ready-made pizzas, and replacing it with healthier options, such as organic meat, fresh fish and fresh vegetables.

There were barriers to these changes: some colleagues were sceptical, thinking that pupils simply would not eat such food. However, the experience has been that pupils adjusted quite well and readily to eating what was actually available. Greater resistance came from some sceptical colleagues, including some of the kitchen staff.

In response to this resistance, and key to the changes implemented, was introducing some new staff into the kitchen. As Jenny describes:

> *We brought in a catering manager who made some changes. In terms of leadership of kitchen we took the decision to appoint a chef. That absolutely was the turning point in terms of transforming the quality of food that was produced.*

The fact that the chef was also male helped to encourage pupils in this all boys' school to develop a healthier attitude to eating.

In order to break down any resistance and also change pupils' behaviour, it was considered crucial that staff should model positive behaviour and attitudes. The senior leadership team has taken the lead with this aspect. Most notably, senior leaders actually serve the food to pupils in the café. This shows the pupils that staff in the college care greatly about what pupils eat there. As Jenny comments:

> *Some may find it odd to see the principal serving mashed potato at lunchtime. However, it shows that we care about what you eat and so will serve your food.*

While the principal and other staff are serving the food, they can encourage healthy eating by asking, for example, if pupils want vegetables.

A key aspect of staff modelling best behaviour and attitudes was encouraging staff themselves to eat in the café, as it was a time when staff (especially the senior leadership team) could meet and talk with pupils more informally than they might be able to in other contexts. Because the quality of the food was so good, staff who organised clubs at lunchtimes saw the provision of a school meal as a real incentive to organise these clubs.

A key feature of the approach to improve the experience for all pupils was for Jenny and her colleagues to take account of the pupils' own role in this:

- Older pupils model best behaviour and attitudes: to do this, these older pupils behave properly by, for example, clearing their own food from the tables, which then encourages the younger pupils to behave in similar sensible, helpful, and reasonable ways.

- Sixth formers use the café area all day: they are encouraged to use the café as a common room thereby, again, showing the younger pupils how this area should be used responsibly.

- Pupils are asked their views about food, as part of an overall approach to listening to 'pupil voice' across the college, in order to bring about continual improvement. As Jenny stresses:

  *We believe in the student voice. The chef will go out and get the students to taste the food…try it and rate it. A group of students also came forward with some ideas for breaktime snacks.*

- The college council is also very active: at one point they complained about the price of the healthy sausage rolls that were being served. College staff always listen to such concerns and, where appropriate, act upon them, in this instance by reducing the price of these sausage rolls.

- Views about food are gathered through an online college council, thus encouraging as many pupils as possible to see the café as the hub of activity in the college.

Improvements to the ways in which pupils eat in the college are all part of a wider approach to encouraging a healthier attitude to food and behaviour in the college by all pupils. The college has been part of a Food for Life Partnership for several years and is aiming to achieve the gold standard in 2014. The college regards its healthy eating policy as being an integral part of education about food in general. For example, it is a college target that all pupils should acquire basic cooking skills and learn about growing food as part of their wider education. As Ofsted commented in its June 2013 inspection report: "The Mud Club, where students grow food for their own college café and tend to a flock of hens and a very proud cockerel, also promotes responsibility and make an impressive contribution to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development".

It is clear that the ways in which improvements have been implemented in the eating experiences of pupils are closely associated with the general approach to distributed leadership across the college, with all staff being part of this cultural change. As Jenny commented:

> *Because we have a flat leadership structure… people do join in and help out and other colleagues do follow those examples.*

When asked about the impact of the changes in regard to food, staff think that there is a link between these changes and better behaviour and higher attainment. It is very difficult (perhaps indeed impossible) to prove a direct causal link between this one single set of changes and the overall improvement in behaviour and attainment at the college. Nevertheless this, staff definitely see the introduction of a healthy eating policy as one strand of the transformation in provision and practice which has taken place over a number of years in the college. As Simon Barber has stated:

> *The culture and behaviour that begin in the canteen are responsible for an atmosphere that supports attainment across the whole school.*

In particular, staff see the improvement in pupils' behaviour in the afternoon session as being closely linked to the changes that have taken place to what pupils eat and how they behave at lunchtime. The college has introduced a longer afternoon session, which staff see as having been easier to implement because of the changes made at lunchtimes.

With specific regard to behaviour at lunchtimes, Jenny observes:

> *I can't remember the last time a piece of food was thrown in the café. It used to be a food fight every day. It just doesn't happen. It is a social place now… an adult atmosphere.*

Standards have also risen significantly in the college over a period of time. The percentage of pupils achieving at least five GCSEs at grades A* to C rose from 4% in 2003 to 97% in 2013. Staff, including Jenny, are convinced that, as well as being a direct result of wider changes made in the college, there is also a link to the improvements in what pupils eat and their overall eating experience, especially their behaviour, at lunchtimes.

Jenny talks proudly about the impact of the improvements on individual pupils, especially those who have presented some behavioural challenges in the past. Such examples include the pupil who is now gaining a great deal from working part-time in the college kitchen as part of a day release course and the pupil who is now doing a catering course as a direct result of opportunities he took advantage of in the college's dining provision.

To achieve such positive change, Jenny has needed to address some key challenges which are common to the implementation of change such as:

- changing colleagues' attitudes
- helping colleagues to see how the changes are part of a wider college improvement agenda
- making the links between the changes and improved outcomes, including pupils' attainment

Reflecting on how she led the change, Jenny believes there were some particularly effective strategies which she used to address the challenges she faced, including:

- modelling best practice and leading by example – senior leaders serving the food to pupils in the café
- having the right staff doing the right jobs, especially those in leadership positions – appointing a catering manager and a chef
- putting in place incentives and rewards for staff to adopt the changes – providing a school meal for staff who organised clubs at lunchtime
- using feedback from pupils – acting on the views of the student council
- positioning the changes within the overall context of college improvement – encouraging colleagues to see the impact of pupils' healthier eating on their attainment
- using a distributed leadership approach – empowering colleagues to take responsibility for improvements