

## Account of practice:

### Giving pupils the food they deserve

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Peter Devonish, Headteacher, Neatherd High School, Norfolk

Peter Devonish, Headteacher at Neatherd High School, is passionate about school meals:

*I won't put anything on the table that I won't eat myself.*

In this account we explore how Peter's leadership has brought about a cultural change in the eating habits of Neatherd's pupils and how he has led the challenge of providing affordable food which is attractive to pupils, high in nutritional content, and meets the exacting requirements of the Food for Life Programme's (FFLP) Gold Standard.

### The school and its context

Neatherd is an 11–18 school situated with a shared sixth form provision provided on a separate campus; this account focuses on the 11–16 campus and its 1,015 pupils. The school was graded 'good' in its most recent Ofsted inspection:

*Students join the school with attainment that is broadly in line with the national averages. They leave having attained standards that have been consistently above average since the last inspection, and this represents good progress.*

School Ofsted Report, 2012:5

The number of children who use the school's dining facilities varies with an average of 420 pupils buying food from the canteen each day, of whom around half take up the option of the 'daily special'.

### Leading and managing changes to the school's food culture

#### Providing the vision

"I know this sounds like a textbook but the head has to have a vision for school food" says Peter. "The head has to genuinely 'get this' or have someone else who is passionate; it can't be something that is tacked on and nodded to".

Peter takes every opportunity to articulate key messages to the school community.

*I will often say to parents that the kitchen is the heart of our school but actually it's really the engine of our school...if your child is not well fed they are not going to work well.*

This message is a constant refrain on the school's website; has a high profile in the school prospectus; features regularly in the school's newsletters to parents and is a central theme at parents evenings. There is an open invitation to parents to come and sample the food; those that do are invariably 'amazed at the quality and choice' on offer. The school also blogs on the FFLP website – why not visit it to get a flavour of what they are doing at the moment? ([www.foodforlife.org.uk/whats happening/blog.aspx?schid=915](http://www.foodforlife.org.uk/whats happening/blog.aspx?schid=915))

## Leadership structures

Peter does not favour over-elaborate, top heavy management structures. He has a small core team consisting of Peter; Graeme the kitchen manager, Will Clennell (TLR 2) who oversees environment and sustainability issues and has a role akin to a senior leader in many schools; and a representative of the catering company. The group meets monthly to discuss food quality, food provenance, marketing and resourcing. This tight group ensures that the school maintains its focus.

In keeping with his belief in simple structures Peter affords Graeme considerable autonomy. Peter explains that if Graeme is to be creative in his efforts to attract and maintain pupils' interest in the canteen food he needs to be given the freedom to experiment with menus and ingredients. 'Graeme's soul goes into his food; if we attempted to micro manage him we would lose this'.

## Strategic leadership

Peter has convinced the governing body of the value of his strategy. The governing body play a strategic role and receive regular reports from Peter on progress. Whilst they support his efforts they also challenge him, particularly with regard to the resource implications. The governing body agrees the financial subsidy on an annual basis and Peter recognises that this is the proper way for the governing body to behave. He has to provide them with evidence that his strategies represent a worthwhile investment. One practical way has been by regularly inviting the governing body to experience the school canteen themselves but more powerful evidence has been the positive changes in the culture of the school and improved levels of pupil achievement.

## Engaging staff

Peter hasn't felt the need for a lot of whole staff training: "I'm not quite sure how we would fill a full training day". Staff can't fail to be aware of the importance of food in the school's culture but this has been achieved by osmosis:

*It's everywhere – staff briefings about FFLP events; assemblies; newsletters.  
They can't escape it.*

Some staff are enthusiasts and are used as champions to seek out curriculum opportunities for promoting key ideas. Peter is content that this style of leadership is best suited to taking his staff with him.

Is there a useful lesson here for school leaders? Is it absolutely necessary to make every member of staff a convert to an idea or is it sufficient to get a critical mass, which may be a minority of the staff, on board in order to bring about significant cultural change? Or is it a case of choosing the style appropriate to the context?

## Engaging pupils

Gaining buy in from pupils has been essential and Peter has used a mixture of formal and informal mechanisms. Pupils put forward their views at school council meetings and are represented on the School Nutrition Action Group (SNAG). Equally important is the informal feedback given to senior leaders on duty and children are encouraged to give Graeme their opinions and will make comments such as 'that dish was too 'garlicy' or the pizza was too cold'!

## Leading change

On joining Neatherd seven years ago Peter was dismayed:

*Most of the food was brought in pre-cooked, then re-heated or re-fried...there was very little fresh food on offer.*

His crusade to alter the school's food culture started after a couple of years in post. Working with the catering company he brought about substantial improvements to the food offered and school achieved the FFLP Silver Award. More importantly the take-up of school meals increased significantly whilst complaints about the menus fell sharply. Peter sees many important benefits from these changes:

*I won't claim any facile links between the quality of food and a rise the number of 5 A\*-C grades. However, I am completely convinced by the argument that providing children with food that is nutritious has a positive effect on their behaviours and attitudes which impact positively on their learning and achievements. I see the benefits every day in the culture of the school that is calm and purposeful. We don't have a short lunch break; we have chosen to have a 55 minute break so that pupils can enjoy the social side of eating with their friends...just sitting and chatting.*

## Changing catering contractor

On the surface Peter's recent decision to change the school's caterers seems odd. The school had achieved the FFLP Silver award and could not have done this unless 'its food quality and provenance (were) delivered in partnership with our caterer' (FFLP Silver Standard). So why change? In part this was because the school lost its Silver Standard and wished to regain it and then progress to Gold.

*We felt that to move to the next level we needed to work in partnership with a company that both shared our passion for providing children with good quality, locally sourced foods but which also had the marketing know how to positively promote the food we offer.*

The new contractor is a local company offering a highly flexible, creative service and also understands the marketing needs of the kitchen.

*We are competing against the packed lunch and the modern packaging that is associated with it. We have to gain the children's interest in our food.*

Marketing strategies introduced by the caterer include:

- Attractive logos and interior design.
- More attractive ways of displaying the food – the 'eat with your eyes approach'.
- Marketing what is happening in the canteen such as themed weeks, for example, Italian Week.
- Incentives such as 'If you buy this healthy option you get a free drink.'
- Cooking in front of the children, for example the chef stir frying chow mein in a wok.
- Providing American style containers for dishes such as paella and allowing the children to take the food away and eat it outside – this makes the dining experience more akin to being on a campus which appeals to older children.

The next stage for Neatherd is to convince yet more parents and pupils that school meals represent much better value for money than the majority of packed-lunches.

## Appointing a new kitchen manager

If the opportunities offered by the new suppliers was to be fully realised Peter felt that he needed a change of leadership in the kitchen because his requirements were 'stretching the kitchen manager'. What was needed was a chef with high order culinary skills and he determined to recruit a new kitchen manager.

Peter led the interview panel for this key appointment. Questions focused on how candidates would go about preparing the food they served and how they would make it appealing to pupils. They appointed Graeme who had previously served in the army supplying the troops in Afghanistan. Graeme convinced the interview panel that he had the skills to prepare and serve high quality food, in bulk, in a short time frame to a demanding clientele.

But Peter wanted more than this:

*I questioned Graeme from a parents' perspective and asked him to describe how he would go about preparing a reasonably priced curry. Graeme described how he would make the stock from scratch using local ingredients and how the chicken or lamb would be marinated overnight. There was no reference to buying in sauces or pre-prepared meats.*

## Resourcing strategy

The Gold Standard requires that the food is “healthy, ethical, uses lots of local ingredients and is animal and climate friendly”. In practice this means that some food is more expensive because the school doesn’t buy pre-prepared food in bulk and entails catering staff working longer hours because most of the food is produced from scratch. Whilst the new caterers are more expensive for some items, Peter feels that the switch represents better value for money pointing out that whilst price matters, quality is of greater importance. Peter recognises that school leaders cannot ignore the economic climate and has taken care to persuade the governing body that this strategy represents good value for money.

Whilst the increased take-up of school meals has allowed the kitchen to keep its prices down it still receives a subsidy of £10,000 pa from the school budget (a policy that is reviewed annually). This may sound a lot but actually equates to 5p per pupil per day. Money well spent in Peter’s opinion if it provides his pupils with the ‘brain-food’ they need to flourish.

Peter has a long-term resource strategy and his goal is to eventually remove the subsidy and for the canteen to make a small profit which can be ploughed back into other FFLP activities.

## Advice to other school leaders

For school leaders about to embark upon a similar journey Peter advises:

- FFLP has to be central to the culture of the school, not an ‘add on’.
- Don’t underestimate the personal commitment in time and energy needed – the head’s leadership is crucial.
- Build a team of champions to spread positive messages.
- Resourcing is a challenge but you can move to a ‘win-win’ situation by increasing the take-up of school meals which keeps costs down; avoid viewing value for money as buying at the lowest price.
- Choose your catering company very carefully; select one which is attuned to your values and your needs.
- Appoint a chef rather than a catering manager; in all successful restaurants the chef is crucial and the same is true of the school canteen.
- Invest in the professional development of your catering staff.

## References

FFLP Partnership  
[www.foodforlife.org.uk](http://www.foodforlife.org.uk)