

The Importance of a Good School Food Culture

Case Study: Carshalton Boys College

Food as the Centre of School Life

Carshalton Boys Sports College, in Sutton, is not blessed with a great location. A large aerial photo in the headmaster's office shows the academy as a tiny rectangle in the middle of a red brick estate that sprawls to the edge of the frame in every direction. It is one of the largest estates in Europe. A massive 40% of the school's children are eligible for free school meals.

When Simon Barber took over the school twelve years ago, only 14% of children managed to meet the academic benchmark of five GCSEs at A* to C grades including English and maths. The atmosphere and the discipline were terrible. School dinners weren't just bad: they were virtually non-existent. Children were actually locked out of the main school building for the duration of the lunch break, to give the teachers a break from the mayhem.

Simon's genius was to realise that the canteen ought to be the centre of school life. It was the one place where the whole school could meet in an informal setting: where teachers and children could sit down together to eat and talk, and in doing so cultivate a happier atmosphere. He understood the importance of table manners, not as a snobbish display of gentility, but as a means of teaching consideration, courtesy and social skills.

So having driven children from the dining hall for so long, how did Carshalton woo them back? The answer was to hire an experienced restaurant chef, Dave Holdsworth, and to compete directly with the local fast food outlets for the custom of older children, while introducing a stay-on-site policy for younger ones. Dave makes proper food taste so good that children have flocked back to the canteen.

From a low of 20%, take-up is now at 80%!

But Carshalton hasn't stopped there. It also offers a £1 breakfast for boys turning up early and a free curry in the late afternoon for those staying late. In the classroom, cooking lessons are compulsory for all children up to the age of 14. They even run a 'lads and dads' course where the boys teach their fathers to cook, to tackle the broader problems of malnourishment in the local area. They have chickens laying eggs and a garden club growing vegetables, all of which get used in the school kitchen.

This is all part of Simon's mission to nurture the whole child: alongside its amazing food culture, the school excels in sport and drama as well as more academic subjects. Last year, 60% achieved English and Maths GCSE at A*-C (significantly above the national average for boys) with this figure predicted to rise again next summer.

Simon is in no doubt about the connection between food and academic achievement. "For many of my boys, this lunch will be their main meal of the day. Good food makes them happy, but also helps them work better. And the culture and behaviour that begin in the canteen are responsible for an atmosphere that supports attainment across the whole school."

