

Improving food choices: the Surrey initiative

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This article describes a 'healthy eating' project in which, unlike the Stockport programme examined in the previous contribution, the impulse for action has been passed down from the top. The range of foods available in school dining rooms is being modified or extended, and a new programme, operating in all secondary schools in the county, aims at making pupils understand the four main NACNE recommendations, so that they may reflect this knowledge through their food choices.

In Surrey, a two-pronged initiative to improve the choice available to pupils, and to encourage awareness of the health issues involved, has resulted in a *Choosing Food for Healthy Living* campaign. This forms an integral part of Community Health Education, and has the full support of the Surrey Health Education Service (a service which is funded by District Health Authorities in Surrey and encourages health education in the community).

These initiatives have been developed as part of the Authority's response to the NACNE report. As is well known, this committee was set up to investigate British dietary habits and the possible effects that such habits may have on both long- and short-term health. The discussion paper prepared by NACNE recommended certain dietary guidelines, which are, in general, to reduce the amount of fat, salt, and sugar in the diet, and to increase the amount of fibre.

Part of the Surrey initiative is to influence *what is available* over the school cafeteria counter, and the School Catering Service has already started to alter recipes by reducing salt and sugar, and by encouraging the use of wholemeal flour and

whole-grain rice in menus. The Service has approached food manufacturers with a view to reducing synthetic additives — in particular, colourings — from products used by the Surrey School Catering Service, and one company is now removing the colouring E102 from its fruit drinks. This additive is known to affect hyper-active children.

Supplementing this is the attempt to make pupils more aware of the *choices* they can make. This began with meetings organised jointly with the Inspectorate in the autumn of 1984, when Home Economics teachers, catering staff, and dieticians with LEA Inspectors to discuss methods of implementation and to sample a range of foods for a 'healthy life-style'. This was followed by a trial scheme at four secondary schools, which used the traffic-light system of food coding, reflecting the NACNE guidelines. Teaching packs, posters, and handouts for the pupils have been produced to support the campaign.

Following the success of this trial scheme, the campaign has been extended into every secondary school in Surrey as from the beginning of this autumn term.

The initiative involves:

1. Liaising with staff involved in the teaching of Health and Nutrition Education in schools and colleges, in order to put forward a common message to pupils and students.
2. Guiding pupils and students to select their mid-day meal wisely, using a system of food coding at the counter, thus enabling them to relate the nutrition education they receive to the foods they choose.

A teaching pack *Choosing Food for Healthy Living*, contains handouts, posters, suggestions for class exercises, and materials to promote the traffic-light labelling system, as well as 'healthy eating' recipes aimed at the School Catering Service. The pupils' Fact Sheet, which is distributed to everyone in the school, is illustrated opposite, and the four classroom exercises are summarised below.

Exercise 1. *Choosing a healthy meal.* The pupils are given the current canteen menu, and are told they have 70p a day to spend. They are invited to plan their lunches for three days, bearing in mind the traffic-light coding of the items.

Exercise 2. *How can you make your meals more healthy?* Seven menus are set out, and the pupils are asked to substitute one item for another on the list given in Exercise 1, to make the menu 'more healthy'.

Exercise 3. *How healthy is your diet?* The pupils are asked to write down everything they remember eating on the previous day, and to analyse the items by traffic-light code, leading to pie-charts and discussion of their choices.

Exercise 4. *Healthy eating collage.* A variety of magazine food advertisements are colour-coded and made into a display.

To summarise the Surrey initiative so far:

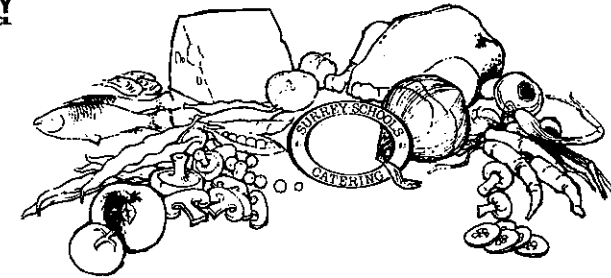
- School catering in Surrey is aware of the problems related to pupils' food choice when operating a cash-cafeteria system of meal service, and is concer-

ned that pupils make a choice which is nutritionally sound.

- To overcome such problems, the School Catering Service has initiated an effective Health Education Programme, which is run with the help and co-operation of teaching staff to promote a greater understanding of applied nutrition among pupils.
- The aim of the programme is to make pupils aware of the importance of choosing a healthy diet.
- The objectives are that, after being introduced to the programme through handouts and follow-up work in home economics lessons, the pupils should be able to understand the main four NACNE recommendations and be able to reflect this knowledge through their choice of food items from the school dining room – using the guidance of the traffic-light food codes.

This county-wide initiative is in its early stages, and it will not be possible, for some time yet, to determine its impact. However, the fact that it has been undertaken at all reflects the concern felt within Surrey County Council, and I should be pleased to share the results of our experience so far with any others who are contemplating an intervention of the kind described here.

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PUPILS FACT SHEET: The Traffic Light Guide to Choosing Food for Healthy Living

1. Why is food choice an important factor in healthy living?

The adequacy of our diet perhaps contributes the most to our overall state of health and there is evidence to suggest that a number of illnesses can be directly related to what we eat.

For example:

- (a) Too much **fat** in the diet can be linked to:
 - heart disease
 - strokes
 - obesity
- (b) Too much **sugar** in the diet can be linked to:
 - diabetes
 - obesity
 - dental decay
- (c) Too much **salt** in the diet can be linked to:
 - high blood pressure
- (d) Too little **fibre** in the diet can be linked to:
 - cancer
 - bowel disorders

2. What can you do to reduce the risks of these illnesses?

Follow these simple recommendations:

- (a) Reduce the amount of

fat/fatty foods	}	in the diet
sugar		
salt		
- (b) Increase the amount of fibre in the diet.
- (c) Drink plenty of liquid.

3. Remember:

- (a) To watch out for '**hidden sugar**' found in foods like:
 - jam
 - chocolate
 - cakes
 - biscuits
 - fruit yoghurt
 - many puddings
- (b) That as well as butter and margarine, pastry, biscuits, cream and all fried foods are also surprisingly **rich in fat**.
- (c) Try to **avoid adding any salt** to your food – the salt which occurs naturally in our food is sufficient for our needs.
- (d) To **eat more fibre** – include foods such as:
 - bread – especially wholemeal
 - potatoes (without added fat) especially jacket potatoes
 - breakfast cereals – especially those containing bran
 - vegetables, fruits and salads

4. To help you follow these dietary guidelines – a system of 'traffic light' food coding has been introduced in school catering.

Foods high in fat, sugar or salt are coded **RED**. Foods high in fibre are coded **GREEN**. All other foods are coded **AMBER**.

When choosing your lunch, aim to

- (a) **Include** plenty of foods from the **green** group.
- (b) **Reduce** the foods selected from the **red** group.
- (c) Choose your lunch mainly from foods from the green and amber groups.