

Chips with everything? The pupils decide

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To promote 'healthy eating' choices by school pupils requires the support of both teaching and catering staff. This article describes how the 1st and 2nd-year pupils in a Cumbria comprehensive were invited to suggest changes to the school lunch menu, and how these changes were implemented. First reactions to the new choices were favourable, but the article points out that 'it is vital to appreciate the needs of the catering service and to spend time trying to find the common ground on which to co-operate'.

Over recent years, teachers and other professionals have become increasingly dissatisfied with the excess of fat and sugar in school meals, and with their low fibre content. Many teachers work hard to encourage sound nutritional habits, yet see unhealthy food regularly served for school meals; it seemed timely to try to co-ordinate a scheme between the catering service and teachers to try to facilitate change in school eating habits. This has been a unique undertaking for the Education Authority, and the SSCR and the Health Education Council have provided the necessary support for this scheme. There have also been very close links with the District Health Authorities.

Marjorie Gass (DHEO, and fellow tutor for the 13-18 HEP) and I introduced these and other facts to health education co-ordinators and home economics staff in Cumbria. The response was very positive. Diana Bentley (SSCR) and Peter Farley (then Director of the 13-18 HEP), key members of my support team, were both keen to see a local project based on nutrition education and school meals.

The next vital link was the County Catering Service, because any development was directly related to its response.

The view of the catering service

In November 1984, Marjorie Gass (DHEO) and I spoke to Susan Newall, the Catering Manager, and her deputy, Helena Bartoz. The catering service is aware of the problem, and has been consistently willing to co-operate; but there are very real problems and anxieties. As a business, financial targets must be met at the end of the year; it is, therefore, concerned that 'healthier' dinner menus may mean fewer pupils taking a school meal, and hence smaller profits and fewer jobs for dinner ladies, at a time of much talk nationally of abandoning the service.

There has also been evidence in ILEA that if you do not provide chips, burgers, and hot dogs, pupils will buy them elsewhere: and chips are both popular and profitable, selling at 25p per 5-ounce portion, whereas a whole baked potato sells at 15p per 8-ounce portion. (The service has, however, reduced the oil

consumption used in deep frying by 40%.) The sale of sweet-course items and flavoured drinks are also vital to the overall profit, because they sell at about three times their cost and so subsidise the main-course protein foods. This is not the case with fresh fruit juice or flavoured milk. Also, whole milk as opposed to skimmed milk receives an EEC subsidy.

Not unreasonably, the service was hesitant to introduce some measures, and people were dubious about the influence that nutrition education could have. But I said quite emphatically that 'education would work', and Susan Newall straightaway asked for a month's trial in a school. I replied that I would like to use Thorncliffe School, Barrow-in-Furness, subject to the Head's approval. Permission was readily given, and only then did I inwardly question my belief that 'education would work'!

First steps

The scheme was to involve 1st and 2nd-year pupils, and they were initially asked to suggest foods they would like added to the school meal menu. The selection looked like this:

MEAT: Liver, chicken, sausage, mince, bacon

OTHER MAIN DISHES: Shepherd's pie, pasta dishes, hot-pot

VEGETABLES: Potatoes (boiled and mashed), and also baked with cheese and pickle filling; also a preference for raw vegetables as in coleslaw

FISH: Tuna, pilchards, battered white fish

SALADS: More salad items

SOUP: More variety, especially in winter time

SANDWICHES: White and brown bread with egg, cheese and tomato, peanut butter; also salad rolls

OTHER: A selection of fresh fruit, and cooled milk

To our delight, the catering service said that these preferences (apart from

bacon) presented no problems, since the items were already on their lists. For their trial they wished to use a special cook providing new menus, and asked for 12 pupils, changing each week, to sample them. This gave the school a chance to monitor progress.

Throughout the term, prior to the start of the scheme, the home economics department concentrated its teaching on food groups and the importance of balance and variety in the diet. During the three weeks before the commencement of the scheme, a separate educational process took place — peer group tutoring.

Input from 4th-year pupils

All 4th-year pupils in the school study various health topics, of which 'healthy eating' is one. Some pupils also take biology and home economics. Four artistic girls from this group had already prepared a 20-minute talk for their English lesson called *Food, glorious food — or is it?*, and they agreed to present it to the lower years in tutorial time. They cut the length, and adjusted the vocabulary and scientific content. For example, they felt that rather than use time explaining how the digestive system processed fat, they would concentrate on the possible consequences of eating too much of it. They also demonstrated the action of Coke and brown sauce on dirty tarnished coins, and discussed the possible consequences for the human digestive system.

This talk was presented to all 1st and 2nd year pupils, the girls also answering many questions. The staff also presented an illustrated talk to 1st and 2nd year groups, called *Food is Fun*, for it is very easy for people in general and the young in particular to assume that 'healthy' food is dull and uninteresting. It should also be emphasised that pupils and staff co-operated throughout this phase, making sure that all aspects of the education were complementary and not repetitive.

Selecting the menus

During the week before we began co-ordinating with the catering service, the special cook provided staff with advance

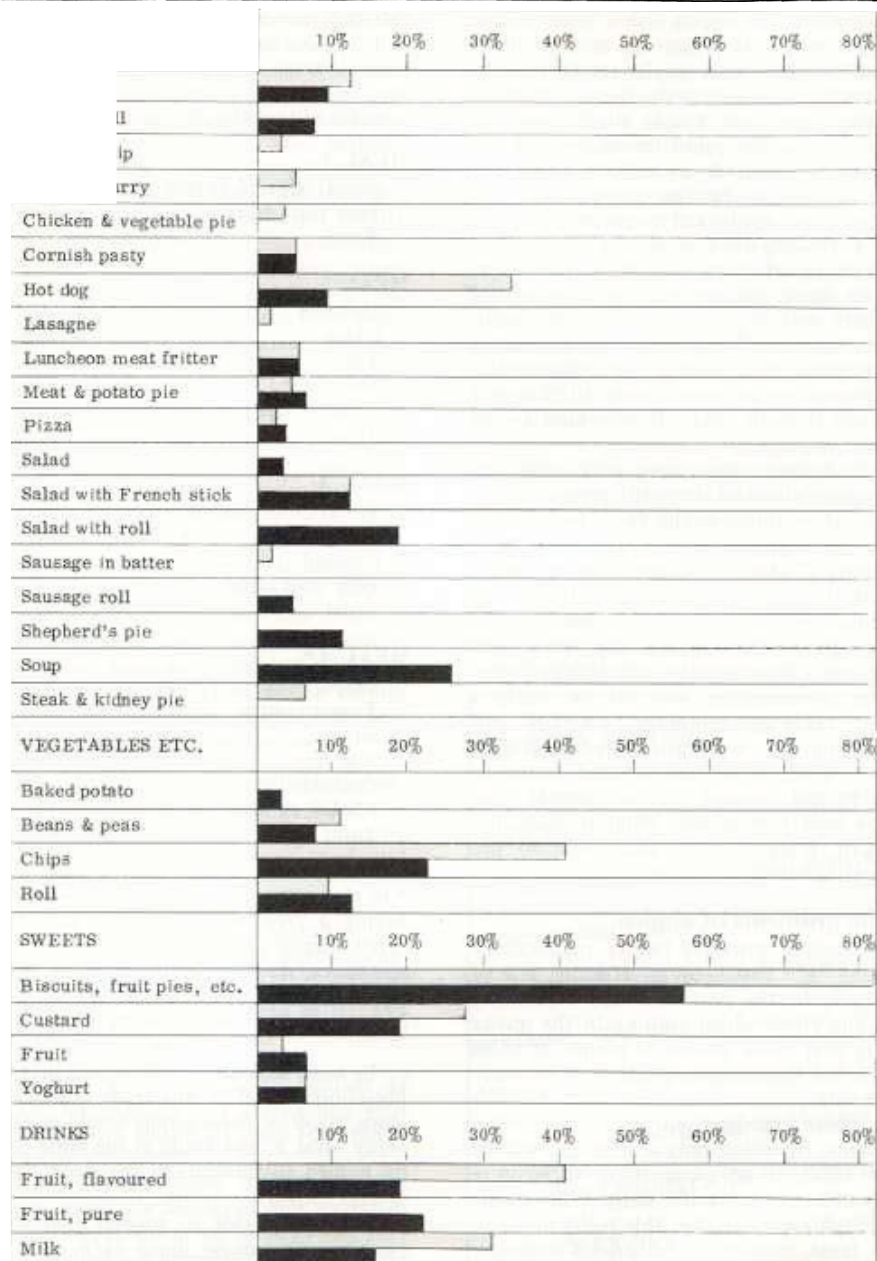


Table 1. Meal selections by 63 1st and 2nd-year pupils. The shaded band indicates selection on the day before the project began, and the black band shows selections by the same pupils six weeks later.

menus and the pupils with a Tesco leaflet on fibre foods. Then, in tutorial time, staff worked with pupils trying to help them choose meals in the light of balance, variety, and cost. Taking all of these into account in the rapid throughput of the school canteen is an arduous task for pupils. It is further complicated by inadequate displays of menu items.

Following each meal, the pupils were asked about it in relation to size, cost, food eaten, and desirability, from both a health and flavour viewpoint. The cook also questioned the pupils. At the end of the three trial weeks, we collated the information gathered from all the trial pupils in both years. It presented a very positive picture.

Following this three-week trial, all the pupils moved on to the revised menu, and after three weeks they were asked the same questions as at the onset. The results (Table 1) suggested that eating patterns had changed, and there was enough evidence to indicate that if pupils are given the opportunity they will choose a more healthy diet. For example, chip consumption was cut by nearly a half, cakes and puddings by a third, and hot dogs by two-thirds. Salads and salad buns were, as we had forecast, found to be in real demand, and wholemeal flour was used throughout. What is more, the profit margins were acceptable to the catering service.

The problems of choice

Thornccliffe provides twelve main-course items each day – many of some, few of others. In the past, the only sure thing pupils knew whilst waiting in the queue was that there would be plenty of chips and hot dogs – this is common in many schools.

There are visual displays of the entire menus, of which only a selection will be on offer at any one time. It is quite possible for a specific daily menu to be written each day, but this really needs to be large, colourful, and priced – similar to some self-service restaurants. Pupils also need to be trained to use it.

The variety in the price of items is considerable, for example 50p for a salad,

roll and butter, 18p for toad-in-the-hole, and 25p for chips. If we take 68p as the price of a school meal, based on the free-meal allowance, then let us look at four possible uses of roughly that sum:

MEAL 1

Salad, roll and butter	50p
Pure fruit drink	19p
Total	69p

MEAL 2

Hot dog	20p
Chips	25p
Tomato sauce	3p
Shortbread	12p
Vimto	12p
Total	72p

MEAL 3

Liver, onion, piped potato	30p
2 jam tarts	12p
Custard	6p
Pure fruit juice	19p
Total	67p

MEAL 4*

Chips	25p
Tomato sauce	3p
Gravy	3p
Jam tart	6p
Custard	6p
Flavoured milk	14p
Total	57p

**In this example, in the case of someone having a free meal, a dinner lady will often suggest that they 'spend' their full allowance. As sweet-course items are next to the till, they will choose, say, an iced bun for 12p and pay the extra 1p.*

In most schools, pupils would invariably choose Meal 2, but from our experience many of these pupils would equally enjoy Meal 3, and could at the same time be helped to understand the need for a greater variety.

It is reasonable to suggest that with twelve main course items each day, an uncertain number of dishes in each selection, a rapid throughput, poor visual displays, and unrelated nutrition education, we do not get the best from the

catering service. I think all would agree that with more generous financial targets we could provide healthier menus more easily.

Two other aspects of this pilot scheme involved the tuck shop and parents. Pupils agreed to sell more nutritious foods such as nuts, raisins, fresh fruit and drinks (to compensate for lower profits they have since diversified into stationery products). Parents were involved when they received a letter explaining the scheme and asking them to read the pages on nutrition in a *Look After Yourself* booklet with their child.

Summary and suggestions

This project was an example of (a) co-ordination and co-operation, and (b) effective and affective teaching. The amount of time spent on the negotiating and preparation before the project began was essential. It is vital to try to appreciate the needs of the catering service and to spend time trying to find the common ground on which to co-operate. Change is possible, as long as a school is willing to spend time on education and a certain amount of follow-up work; but new ideas need to be introduced slowly.

1. In order to try to introduce change, pupils therefore must have sound nutrition education related to current thinking on the relationship between food and health.
2. To maintain change, pupils must be helped to make decisions based on enjoyment, variety, balance, cost, and possible health consequences.
3. Menus should be displayed better, and perhaps contain fewer daily main-course items.
4. Provide a more balanced number of foods, for example not overloading with hot dogs and ignoring a need for French sticks.
5. Consider the order and manner in which foods are displayed. For example, should sweet items be next to the till?
6. This does not necessarily mean choosing 'one protein food, one vegetable, one sweet,' or that a colour code should be used, for if the pupils have a fair variety of food, well displayed to facilitate

choice, then they should be given the opportunity to exercise that choice.

Each school is a special case and needs to try to find the right degree of change for that school. From our experience, that is much more likely to be successful if backed by a co-ordinated nutrition education programme and co-operation with the catering service.

The whole point of this project was to show that in Cumbria the Catering Service can provide healthy meals and remain solvent if education can help pupils to adapt and choose them.

On July 2nd, a seminar on *Healthy Eating Promotion in Secondary Schools* was attended by the catering staff from 11 schools, in order to prepare for 'healthy eating' programmes within their senior schools. This will be further extended during the coming year.

In conclusion I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the staff team who made this project possible, Angela Cooper and Christine Ashurst (home economics) and Doreen Parkinson and Julia Heaney (associate house tutors).