

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

- Consider where food is sourced from – local may be cheaper.
- Frozen meals may be cheaper without compromising on nutritional value.
- Pre-ordered meals can reduce unnecessary wastage.
- Cashless catering systems can be used throughout the school to maximise the investment.

# Cooking the books

In the third part of our series on cost efficiencies, **MATTHEW JANE** looks at how schools can make savings on their catering provision

**I**t is an area of school resources that can quite literally eat money, but school catering does not need to be a financial burden. The benefits of quality catering provision, in terms of academic achievement, child concentration and the health and wellbeing of future generations could certainly be seen to justify any expenditure schools make on their dining provision. But this does not mean that schools can afford to throw unnecessary money at catering and a well considered and carefully approach can ensure the long-term financial viability of this important resource.

One method of reducing costs in the kitchen is to look at the procurement. By sourcing suppliers local to the school, the costs and quality of produce should improve, given the smaller transit distance.

Simon James, MD of Eden Foodservice, suggests one method schools could use is to outsource the catering provision to contract caterers, who may be able to procure supplies more economically. "This is not only achieved by economies of scale, but also by employing a team of purchasing experts that can source products and ingredients in the most cost effective manner."

When seeking the best deal in catering, it is important to remember that while price will have an obvious bearing, the quality of produce must still comply with the nutritional standards. James suggests that, while fresh ingredients are the ideal, frozen foods can be a cost-effective solution. "In fact, many nutritionists will point out that frozen produce often has a higher nutrient content than fresh alternatives," he says. "This is due to the deterioration of food once it is out of the ground and subject to handling, transportation and storage."

#### WASTE NOT, WANT NOT

In order to reduce costs, schools should be looking at reducing waste. Bede Feltham, marketing

director at sQuidcard, suggests one way of doing this is through online pre-ordering of meals and food. "This enables parents to pre-pay for school meals and select a choice of meals for their child. For example, in a primary school this could be meal A, B, or C from a menu listing," he says. "This system helps minimise waste as unwanted meals are not made."

As well as pre-ordering meals to reduce wastage, an online system can help promote the nutritional value of school meals to parents. Feltham says this is normally only made available upon request. "What we are increasingly seeing is this information being made available to parents online where they can view the transactional data linked to their child's catering account."

James also suggests working with suppliers to engage children and educate them about the importance of sustainability issues. "It is possible to get children involved in a range of activities, such as growing vegetables and preparing meals, as well as measuring how much food and packaging is thrown away to teach them about waste and encourage recycling," he says. Furthermore, if children are encouraged to grow vegetables, depending on the harvest, these could be used in the school kitchen to cut down on produce costs. While it may be a far from The Good Life-style self-sufficiency, every little helps.

#### LOSE THE CASH

Cashless catering systems offer schools improved service in the canteen and could free up time for catering staff. "By removing cash from the school, research from sQuidcard has shown that half of a full-time equivalent day has been saved in cash handling and associated back office processes," says Feltham.

Further to the savings in catering administration, there are a host of additional benefits. "To gain the full benefits and economies of the investment, the system should be used for wider requirements such as managing attendance, library books, school trips and uniform purchasing, so it is essential to use an experienced caterer to manage this service," says James.

Feltham adds that most schools now expect more than just a standalone cashless catering solution with a view to improving efficiencies in general. "These technologies can extend to ID, access control, payment for printing and photocopying, and online payments for school trips and other special events. "All of these have wider applications for cashless cost saving efficiencies across the school campus, with catering often being the initial catalyst."

There are a wide range of ways to reduce costs in catering provision, without affecting the provision of nutritious school meals. With some careful consideration and well planned buying practices, schools can ensure that dinner time does not have to cost the earth. ■