



School meals have seen great improvements in recent years, but transforming school food is about more than switching to fresh ingredients and ticking nutrient boxes. **Suzannah Wright** explores

As the School Food Trust's nutrient standards become embedded in school kitchens, there is a growing need for school meals workforce reform to support the changing roles and pressures faced by kitchen staff.

This issue was highlighted in a survey carried out by Unison last year, which suggested catering staff are working under increased pressure, carrying out more unpaid overtime and are concerned about a lack of training for the new meals. A subsequent report outlined the need for what Christine Lewis, Unison national officer for education, describes as a school meals workforce strategy, with two key strands: more training, and more hours for staff.

TIME

The Unison survey found that 90 per cent of respondents faced increased work pressures, while only five respondents said extra staff had been taken on to cope with increased workload. This is not unexpected: a 2005 Price Waterhouse Coopers report, prepared for the school meals review panel, estimated that school food reform would require a 15 to 20 per cent increase in working hours, costing more than £8,000 per secondary school on an ongoing basis.

There has been a large investment in school meals since 2005, but as Lewis points out "the money has gone mainly into ingredients, and it is difficult to get back from 20-odd years of neglect in a short period of time."

The increased time for preparing fresh food is accompanied by increased time spent on jobs such as stock ordering, dealing with payments from pupils and general kitchen prep work. A study commissioned by Unison and carried out by the Association for Public Service Excellence found that school kitchen staff actually spend longer on these other tasks than preparing food. It recommended more extensive use of labour saving devices such as mechanical dishwashers, as well as the adoption of cashless tills.

More hours for catering staff will inevitably mean more money, something of which schools have precious little at the moment. But, says Lewis, "the tighter the money gets the more you've got to say actually children's health is a priority – children's health is as important as their education, and children's education is affected by their health." →

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Judy Hargadon, chief executive of the School Food Trust, adds that the problem is not how to justify staff costs, but how to increase take up of school meals: "What we should be doing is increasing the number of people eating in the school and if you do that you can begin to cover your staff costs more easily. The challenge is to get more customers not to reduce staff or treat staff unfairly because that doesn't work well in the long run."

TRAINING

The Unison survey found that 50 per cent of respondents had received no extra training to deliver the new meals, training which Hargadon believes is crucial. "For many years school cooks were only expected to open a packet and put the contents on the tray. Their job now demands a higher level of skill and there's a lot of catch up still to be done to be able to meet the new standard."

The SFT is developing a variety of different training schemes including midday supervisor training, which has just been piloted in partnership with Hull University, courses for nutritionists, and a pilot of middle manager training for catering managers.

The jewel in SFT's training crown is its network of FEAST (Food Excellence and Skills Training) centres which provide a range of courses for those involved in school food service. Of the 29 FEAST centres, most are located in FE colleges but one is located at The Blue school in Wells, Somerset, which also provides an inspiring example of a successful catering service.

A maintained secondary with 1450 pupils, The Blue has managed its training in house for five years and has three catering outlets, a catering team of 18 staff, and a turnover of approximately £250,000. Offering a range of food from standard dinners to sharing platters and fresh made sandwiches for pupils, it also supplies a meals service to four primary schools.

Business manager Jane Spencer says staff development has been a key part of the school's catering success. "Before FEAST came into being, my catering manager had identified a training need for our staff and was a firm advocate of recognising the skills people already possessed. We had begun to investigate NVQs for catering staff, working with the training arm of the LA, when we found out about FEAST and applied to become a training centre. It fitted the ethos of our school and was very timely because we were in the process of applying to the DCSF to become a training school – the two things sat together nicely. FEAST then became the catalyst to deliver training to a number of our own catering staff."

On becoming a training centre, Spencer brought in the assistant manager post to enable the catering manager to focus on training, and created a senior GKA (general kitchen assistant) post on a higher grade so that staff could progress on the pay spine after completing their NVQ. "We now have a team who are highly motivated and keen to progress to higher levels of training," she adds, talking with pride of one catering team member who joined the school as a washer up with no qualifications and is now a cook and working towards an NVQ Level 3 qualification.

For others wishing to improve staff development for catering teams, Spencer advises that the SFT website can help you find a local FEAST centre, but the best first point of contact is with LA catering or workforce development teams who will know more about training in your area and also funding available to subsidise it. →



CONTRACTS

In many schools, as at The Blue, bringing catering in-house has been the catalyst for positive changes but it can be a daunting task. Spencer says it took one year for her to be "comfortable" after taking the catering service in house, and two for her to be "confident" with it.

For others, contracting is still the only really viable option and there are many suppliers who work diligently to provide top class services. If your provider is not among them, the key to improving services is negotiation, says Hargadon. "It needs give and take – you say to your caterer: 'what do you need from us to make it more effective?' But at the same time, say: 'what we would like from you is this...'. There is no reason why caterers can't vary the contracts they have with different schools to suit the needs of the school and they are desperate for schools to work with them on these issues."

If the school meal revolution is to really take hold, it will require more investment in the people who cook, serve and support school meals. This may be hard to find as budgets are squeezed, but there is an increasingly strong argument to say that this spend will be well worth it both for the school's own outcomes, and for the nation's health. **EE**

WASTE NOT

A recent study carried out by the Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP) showed high levels of food waste in secondary school kitchens. We asked some experts how you can reduce waste in your school.

“ One of the systems that works extremely well in reducing waste to the minimum is pre-ordering of lunch in the morning. A number of schools do this so they can then make the appropriate number of portions based on what children have ordered. I think that's what is going to make a big difference. The whole thing just requires much more sophisticated organisation than in the past.

Judy Hardagon, chief executive, School Food Trust

“ Greater use of fresh (and local) produce means that waste is much reduced. For instance if you use frozen chicken you can only use it once, whereas if you buy chicken fresh you can cook it one day and use it cold for sandwich fillings the next. Although our menus are not designed to reduce waste, some of the content is designed to be cooked at lunch time on one day and used at break the next day, with fresh food being prepared at lunchtime again, and so on. We have a 'made to measure' sandwich and baguette bar, this uses up all sorts of odds and ends in various fillings!

Jane Spencer, business manager, The Blue school, Wells

“ Working with suppliers to reduce food packaging is an avenue that is often overlooked. Assessing the way goods are delivered to a school can spark creative ideas that can be put to suppliers. This might involve the receiving of goods in returnable crates or boxes, ordering in larger quantities which can reduce the weight of packaging per item delivered or ordering goods in an alternative pack size that has less packaging.

Paul Bracegirdle, environmental manager for Sodexo

“ The key to keeping food waste to a minimum is good and consistent communication between the catering team and the school. Understanding when exams and study leave occur and when year groups have school trips means that the catering team can accurately calculate the number of meals per day, thus reducing cooked food waste. Using a dedicated waste management system allows schools to analyse if and why waste is being generated and act on this accordingly. Through measuring volumes of waste, our catering teams can see if and where they are buying or preparing excess food. This simple analysis results in cost savings and means less waste goes to landfill.

Allan Edwards, corporate affairs and corporate responsibility director, Compass Group UK & Ireland

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