Promoting healthy school meals: an industry viewpoint

School meals are rarely out of the headlines. The issues concerning funding, quality of food and how to encourage pupils to choose the right thing, aren’t new, but the keenness of the debate demonstrates that what our children and young people eat is fiercely important to parents, teachers, school caterers and politicians alike.

As nutritionist for the school catering company Scolarest, my role includes analysing school menus to ensure that they are nutritionally balanced, and meet with the Government’s nutritional standards. In fact, the core menu goes beyond those guidelines to meet the more stringent criteria of the Caroline Walker Trust (www.cwt.org.uk). We have also developed a separate range of menus offering a greater variety of fruit, vegetable and salad choices and incorporating a reduced number of processed foods.

Our development of these new menus stems from our recognition that the original guidelines by themselves were not sufficient to make certain that young people were getting a balanced meal. We’ve implemented a range of initiatives to address this issue including working with suppliers to make processed foods healthier, developing new dishes designed to increase the fruit and vegetable content of menus, introducing new recipes developed to boost children’s intake of essential vitamins and minerals such as calcium and iron, as well as developing new training schemes for our catering staff.

Many of the measures outlined in the Secretary of State for Education and Skills Ruth Kelly’s spring announcement on school meals, ahead of the new nutrient-based nutritional standards for meals set to apply from September 2006, reflect steps that we have already taken. For instance, by working with suppliers we have reduced the salt content of our frozen bread to 260mg of sodium per 100g of bread. Similarly, the Government’s public health white paper included a commitment to introduce a new vocational qualification for school caterers to help them promote healthy food. Two months before, Scolarest pioneered its own unique healthy eating distance learning qualification for school cooks, the NCFE Intermediate Certificate in Nutrition and Health. More than 50 of our Scolarest regional managers have already gained the qualification and more than 850 school catering managers have enrolled for the distance learning course covering many aspects of diet and nutrition including the principles behind a healthy diet and healthy food preparation methods, the nutritional needs of different age groups and issues such as food labelling and food additives.

Other initiatives have included removing salt from the cooking process, reducing fat and sugar content of dishes and the use of healthier cooking methods such as oven baking, steaming and grilling.

I know that many people feel we could make school meals healthier by removing the element of choice. As someone who spends a lot of time in school dining halls, this is not something I would advocate - although limiting choice may be helpful - particularly given the need to cater for youngsters from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Today there is no such thing as a standard meal and experience tells us that many youngsters will steer clear of unfamiliar foods. One can’t force children to eat healthily, but one can encourage them to try new things by introducing them alongside familiar dishes or trying a sideways approach, such as incorporating more vegetables into main meals like bolognese sauce.

Cost restraints also impose their own challenge on the menu development process: all our menus have to come within a budget specified by the education authorities that we work for. This leads to variations in the money available to us, with local authorities allocating from between £1.20 to £1.80 per meal, a sum which not only has to pay for food but also cover staff wages, training and equipment. Along with increased Government investment, we would also like to see national guidelines on the cost of ingredients for a healthy and balanced meal. This would be a fairer system which would help ensure uniform standards across the country and improve the nutritional content of meals.

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Commitment to healthy eating: an industry viewpoint

As a catering company we fully recognise the important role we play in helping to educate customers and in providing the information and choice they need in order to make an informed decision about what they eat. Providing catering services across both public and private sectors, from hospitals and schools, to business, industry, the military services and for many of the UK’s most prestigious cultural, historic and leisure venues, healthy eating has become one of the most important considerations for our clients and customers.

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