

FEEDING THE FUTURE

Five fundamentals that should matter most to state school leaders in the health, nutrition and provision of school meals



1



**PROVIDING A VARIED, BALANCED
AND NUTRIENT-DENSE DIET**

2



**CATERING TO INCREASINGLY
DIVERSE NEEDS**

WHAT MATTERS MOST

The health and wellbeing of students and staff.
Delivering a positive social impact. Driving
operational efficiency. Whatever matters most
to you, your pupils and your colleagues,
Sodexo has the knowledge, resources,
experience and skills to help you support
your people and make a positive
impact on their quality of life.

3



**IMPROVING SUSTAINABILITY
AND REDUCING WASTE**

5



**EXPLORING NEW WAYS TO
INCREASE EFFICIENCY**

4



**ENABLING EDUCATION WITH
A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH**

FOREWORD

As 'Gen Alpha' are now well into their second term of secondary school, I reflect on just how much this forward-looking generation must deal with. A crisis of mental health, palpable climate change concerns, confusion over health and nutrition and intense social media activity all add complexity to daily life at school.

As a major provider of education catering services in the UK, we have a responsibility to respond authentically and to educate our young customers about food and nutrition. What they eat affects every aspect of their lives and the habits they form in school will shape their futures, irrespective of background.

We also have a duty to provide key insights to our clients. In doing so, we help them to understand and simplify the core issues they face, in response to which we offer sustainable solutions that add real value to the school day.

This report, which forms part of our What Matters Most series, aims to do just that.

It focuses on the five fundamentals that we believe should matter most in terms of health, nutrition and the provision of school meals. Combining expert opinion with our own operational experience, we offer practical insights and solutions for state school leaders who share our view that school meals are an integral part of a child's development.



We know there is no 'magic bullet' for school food. Health and nutrition messages come thick and fast, and often conflict. But the evidence is clear: When the fundamentals are executed well, pupils benefit.

This is what matters most, and I trust you will find this guide useful as you continue to develop the catering services for your own school.



Tom Laskey
Marketing Director
Sodexo Schools & Universities
UK & Ireland

THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT FOOD IS CHANGING. HEALTH IS BECOMING MORE IMPORTANT THAN CONVENIENCE, AND CONCERNS ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE ARE INFLUENCING LIFESTYLE CHOICES MORE THAN EVER.

The recently published National Food Strategy ^[1] emphasised the much needed evolution in the ways we produce, process and consume food. It examines at length the things that have gone wrong and how we put them right.

It sets out clear goals for the future of our food system which includes supporting our health and wellness, instead of making us sick. It must also be able to withstand global shocks and play an important role in halting the negative impacts of climate change.

At the heart of these recommendations is the need to create a brighter future for children and young people, who are becoming increasingly aware of these issues and stand to benefit the most from healthier, more nutritious, more sustainable food choices.

Sodexo's work with organisations such as The British Nutrition Foundation and WWF, along with our experience providing catering services to schools of all shapes and sizes, has informed our understanding of what children need to learn, develop and succeed.

In this report, we examine the five fundamentals that matter most, honing in on what school leaders can do to deliver them more effectively, and how we can work together to help feed the future.

We begin with a look at diet and the role nutritious school meals play not just in an immediate sense, but also in establishing habits that last for life. Many families lack the time or knowledge to provide truly healthy meals at home, but schools have an opportunity to close the gap and boost both physical and mental health.

We also look at how schools can make sure no child feels left out because of cultural or religious beliefs, allergen sensitivity or ethical eating choices. Developing menus and spaces that cater for all is easier said than done, and it takes experience and knowledge to balance competing factors.

The same can be said of the need to recognise the growing importance of sustainability to children and young people, as well as the need to improve efficiency and enhance the dining experience.

The key for everyone involved, from school governors to cooks and kitchen assistants, is to remain focused on what matters most - the lifelong health, performance and nutrition of all our children and young people.



1

PROVIDING A VARIED, BALANCED AND NUTRIENT-DENSE DIET

A NUTRITIOUS DIET IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND TEENS. THEY NEED THE RIGHT FUEL FOR THEIR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT. CONSUMING THE RIGHT FOOD AND DRINK AT SCHOOL HAS A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THEIR BODIES AND BRAINS, WHILST HELPING TO ESTABLISH THEIR LIFELONG EATING HABITS.

As a leading school catering provider in the UK, we understand the role we play in influencing the quality of life of children and young people well into the future. And it's a responsibility we respect.

To develop positive behaviours when it comes to food, it's vital to encourage children to eat a wide-ranging, nutrient-rich diet from an early age, as children with poor diets might develop at a slower pace. School meals should be at the very heart of this process, as they are often the only opportunity for a child to consume a variety of fresh ingredients.

School meals when done well are an important source of healthy food

Many families lack the time, knowledge or ability to prepare truly well-balanced, nutritious meals. This can often be the case for low-income households, particularly if they live in 'food deserts' - neighbourhoods with limited or nonexistent access to affordable and nutritious food. Of course many families qualify for free school meals, but for numerous reasons, a high proportion still don't take them up.





Instead, these families are often compelled to rely on cheap but unhealthy fast food, particularly in inner-city areas where takeaway options such as burgers, pizzas and chips are inexpensive and readily available. These options are high in unhealthy saturated fats and additives, offering little in the way of fresh, wholesome ingredients. Many parents believe they are left with little alternative, even though many do the best they can balancing a tight household budget.

This is why school meals are so important

The national lockdown implemented to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic emphasised this. A survey conducted by the British Nutrition Foundation, as part of Healthy Eating Week 2020, revealed that 50% of primary school pupils and over a quarter of secondary school students felt better or healthier after returning to school in September 2020 ^[2].

There is evidence to suggest that meals prepared at home might lack the vitamins and minerals needed. A 2019 poll of 2,000 parents even suggested that two-thirds don't know how to feed their children a healthy diet ^[3]. And further research published in 2020 highlighted that less than two percent of packed lunches meet the recommended nutritional standards ^[4].

Modern school meals are a reliable source of healthy food, providing children with the energy and nourishment to sustain them throughout the day. We've come a long way since Jamie Oliver's 'Turkey Twizzler' campaign of 2005, which prompted the introduction of mandatory school food standards to ensure the nutritional quality of food available to school children, along with a reduction in unhealthy junk food options.

LESS THAN

2% of packed lunches meet nutritional standards ^[4]

LESS THAN

1% of people achieve all of the recommendations in the Eatwell Guide ^[5]

2/3

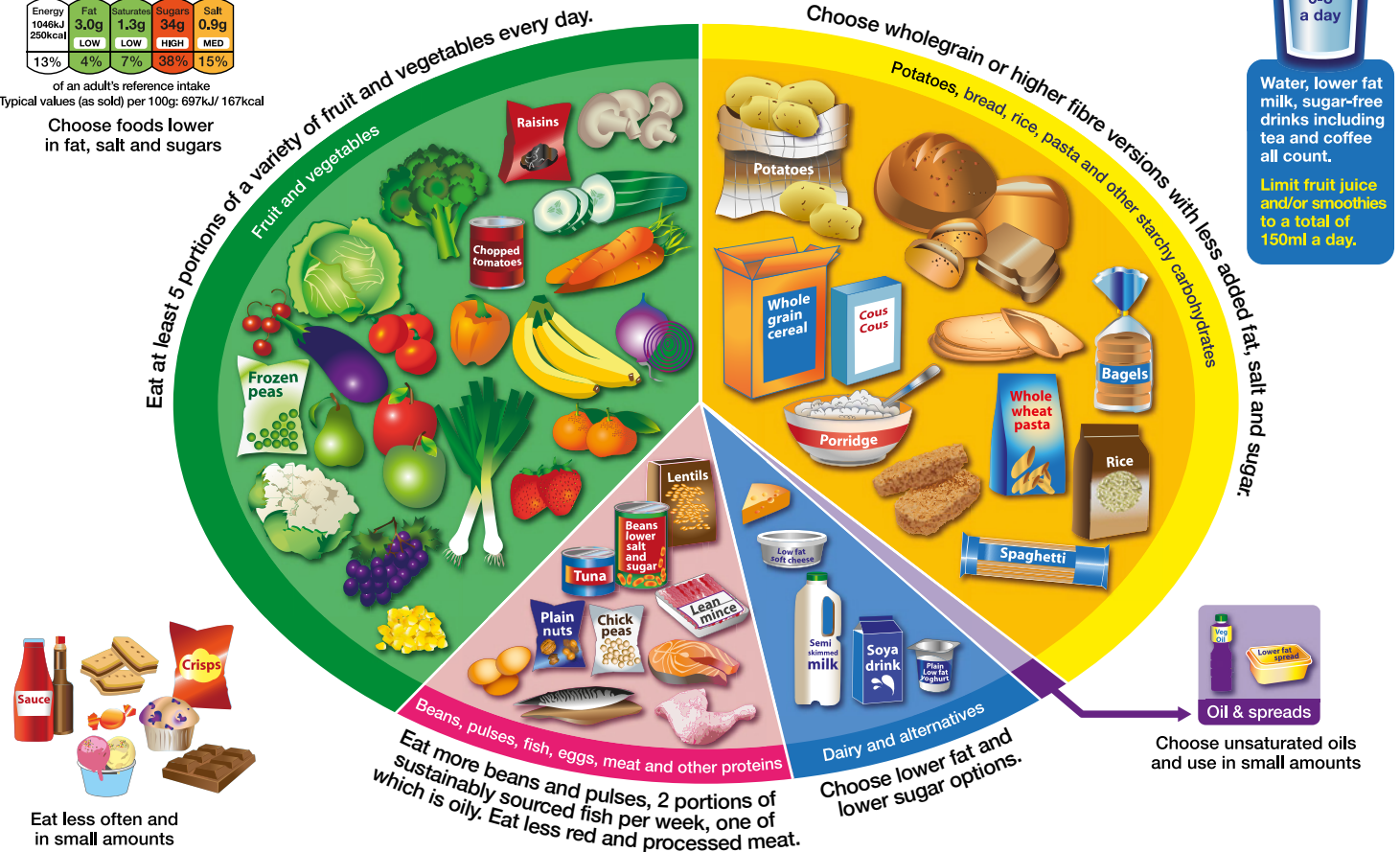
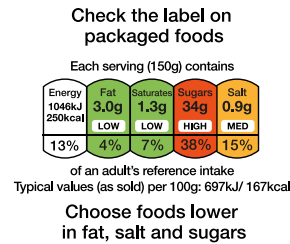
of parents don't know how to feed their children a healthy diet ^[3]

Following the brilliant basics of The Eatwell Guide

The best, proven recommendations for a healthy, balanced diet are outlined in The Eatwell Guide. This government-backed model, published by Public Health England in 2016, was created to represent the principles of a healthy and sustainable diet. It describes a diet that is rich in foods from plants, whilst including some meat, dairy, fish and eggs.

It focuses on what matters most when it comes to a healthy diet.

It presents the five main food groups in a visual, easy-to-understand format, detailing the recommended proportions for providing the wide range of nutrients our bodies need for optimum health.



Source: Public Health England in association with the Welsh Government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland.
@Crown Copyright 2016.

The core recommendations from The Eatwell Guide

- Eat at least 5 portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables every day.
- Base meals on potatoes, bread, rice, pasta or other starchy carbohydrates; choosing whole grain versions where possible.
- Have some dairy or dairy alternatives (such as soya drinks); choosing lower fat and lower sugar options.
- Eat some beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins (including 2 portions of fish every week, one of which should be oily).
- Choose unsaturated oils and spreads and eat in small amounts.
- Drink 6-8 cups/glasses of fluid a day.
- Reduce consumption of food and drinks high in fat, salt or sugar.

This clearly demonstrates that the most important factor regarding healthy eating is variety. A varied diet ensures the consumption of all the vitamins and minerals essential to keep the mind and body in good condition.

The expert information in this guide is aligned with Sodexo's nutritional approach to school meals and menu development, as it should be to the average diet of any individual over the age of 5. However, recent research has shown that less than 1% of people follow all of the recommendations it outlines^[5], highlighting the importance of school meals that share these sound principles.

Following The Eatwell Guide, by consuming a diet with less meat and higher amounts of plant-derived foods, offers further environmental benefits by reducing the greenhouse gas emissions and land use associated with meat production. A review by The British Nutrition Foundation suggested that for adult diets this could be between 20% and 30%^[6].



Enhancing performance and fuelling the future

It's clear that a nutritious diet will improve the health of children and young people, but it can also lead to significant benefits beyond their physical wellbeing.

As far back as 2014, a report by Public Health England ^[7] confirmed that pupils with better health are likely to achieve more academically, as well as fare better socially and emotionally. Pupils who were previously underperforming saw an even more noticeable growth in academic achievement, highlighting the negative impact of poor food choices.

It all comes back to diet

The positive development of future generations can be fuelled with good nutrition, and school meals play a crucial role in this. Not only do they help the child's physical and mental health and performance, they also determine good eating habits for life.

Findings from a study published in the BMJ Nutrition Prevention & Health in 2021 suggest that public health strategies to optimise the mental well-being of children should include promotion of good nutrition ^[8].

And by providing them with a varied diet, school meals help children to explore new types of food, including choices that benefit the world at large. It can open them up to more sustainable options that reduce carbon emissions in a long-lasting, meaningful way.

With many parents suggesting that they lack the knowledge and resources to feed their children optimum diets, we must all step up and accept the critical roles we play as stakeholders in this quest.

School meals don't just put fresh, healthy food on the plate, they can make a positive social impact on all members of both the school and local community.





Packed lunches are still dominated by sweet and savoury snack food and sugary drinks. Children who take a packed lunch into school are at a greater risk of not getting sufficient nutrients compared to classmates who have a school meal.”

Dr Charlotte Evans
School of Food Science and Nutrition
University of Leeds ^[4]

2 CATERING TO INCREASINGLY DIVERSE NEEDS

WHEN IT COMES TO DEVELOPING MENUS, INCLUSIVITY HAS BECOME AN IMPORTANT DRIVER COVERING A HUGE RANGE OF FACTORS. THESE INCLUDE CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, ALLERGEN SENSITIVITY AND INTOLERANCES, AS WELL AS ETHICAL EATING CHOICES, SUCH AS BEING VEGETARIAN OR VEGAN.

Rewind a few years and most people's understanding of these needs and preferences would have been limited or largely non-existent.

Yet today, an increase in awareness has led to a more progressive attitude in wider society, and inclusivity is now rightly acknowledged as one of the key pillars of success in the provision of school meals.

Ensuring no child is left out because of their specific needs

The ultimate goal is simply to make sure every single child has a choice at mealtimes. If a pupil is left feeling singled out, different or separate from their classmates, it's highly likely they will opt out of school meals entirely. Ensuring every child feels involved and catered for will increase take-up of school meals, leading to improvements in the health and academic achievement of young people.



Developing more inclusive options in schools has led to dramatic changes in terms of the food choices offered on menus. There has been a significant increase in vegetarian dishes and a drive to make meals vegan where possible, to not only appeal to children with those preferences but normalise those choices.

The same principle applies when addressing the varied cultural backgrounds and religious views among pupils and the local community, where alternatives should be offered when particular ingredients are prohibited or avoided.

The introduction of Natasha's Law ^[9], which came into force in October 2021, has also shone a light on the growing issue of food-related allergies in children. And it's a significant cause of anxiety for parents whose children suffer. This new law cements the necessity to exclude potentially hazardous ingredients, label food clearly and remove any risk of cross-contamination.

It has resulted in specific changes in menu development. Examples include reducing the use of dairy by replacing ice cream with sorbet, or implementing a nut-free policy. It's also a good idea to let children customise their own dishes, so they can have what they want but without any elements which they don't like or have a sensitivity to.

Aligning menus with insight and food trends

As well as making vital modifications in response to specific health and cultural needs, it's important to appeal to the ever-changing tastes of young people. Influenced by their peers, parents and the high street, young people expect to see more contemporary choices reflecting the food trends of the world around them.

As food providers, we must stay attuned to these influences, using insight to inform the menus we create. This means testing and refining dishes by working with sample groups of pupils, tailoring menus to better suit the demographic of the school, as well as working with suppliers on new product innovations that will excite children and young people.

Aligning menu options with the latest food trends will inevitably encourage more participation in school meals. We need to plug in to the fact that children are becoming increasingly interested in the popularity of global cuisines, boosted by what they see and share on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube.

Food providers who overlook emerging trends, do so at great risk of becoming disconnected from what people want.

438%

increase in children's A&E admissions caused by food allergies since 1998 ^[10]



“

Young people want healthy and sustainable diets to become accessible and affordable for all. The barriers that prevent people from being able to achieve this diet should be addressed and removed. They want to see less disparity in local food environments, action on the relative price of healthy and unhealthy food, investment in healthy food businesses and schemes to enable healthy eating for low-income households. In the long-term, they call for systemic change, reducing wealth inequality to address the root causes of food and health inequalities.”

The National Food Strategy
Youth Consultation Report ^[11]



Addressing the challenges of food poverty

We must all face the day-to-day realities of food poverty, an issue ever more visible due to the campaigning efforts of footballer Marcus Rashford. And the provision and uptake of free school meals is not to be undervalued.

We all play a role in this.

Given the astonishing fact that over 20% of pupils in England are eligible for free school meals ^[12], we must work together to maximise uptake and reduce the stigma associated with it for many proud families. It could be the only healthy meal those children have all day, and it will have a direct impact on their health and wellbeing.

20.8%

of pupils in England were eligible for free school meals in January 2021 ^[12]

Consistently communicating the health benefits of school meals to parents is a must, as is ensuring that those pupils who don't need to pay are not labelled or identified in any public way. Thankfully the days of separate queues and meal tokens are long gone, with digital systems and ordering tools enabling direct communication with parents, whilst honouring the privacy of any pupil's individual needs and status.

A welcoming, enjoyable environment in which to relax and eat

Where pupils eat can be just as important as what they eat, with a welcoming, happy dining environment serving as an effective way to encourage children to enjoy school meals rather than eat elsewhere.

Research continually proves that children prefer to eat in a modern, food-focused space that helps establish mealtime as a break from their studies and the time to relax with friends.

This doesn't simply mean the dining room should be a typically bright, colourful space. It's important that all the senses are considered, especially sound, to avoid the potential sensory overload of boisterous, noisy dining rooms.

The issues around inclusivity in terms of school meals are complex and multi-faceted, ranging from the micro to the macro, but it's vital to address them all to ensure no child feels left out at mealtimes. All these elements must come together to ensure maximum effect.



Making the food we provide in schools healthier and relevant to pupil's expectation is only half the battle. Young people want to enjoy the dining experience and environment. When you have a bright, safe and pleasant social dining space, eating with friends, then they are more likely to want to eat a school meal."

Rosemary Molinari
Head of Health and Wellbeing
Sodexo Schools & Universities
UK & Ireland



3 IMPROVING SUSTAINABILITY AND REDUCING WASTE

CONCERN ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE IS ONE OF THE MODERN WORLD'S MOST PRESSING ISSUES. IT AFFECTS EVERYONE, BUT NONE MORE SO THAN TODAY'S CHILDREN AND TEENS, WHOSE FUTURE DEPENDS ON IT. THEY ARE THE SUSTAINABILITY GENERATION, WITH AN ACUTE AWARENESS OF THE PROBLEM AND AN INCREASINGLY LOUDER VOICE ECHOING THEIR CONCERNS ACROSS THE WORLD.

Although there has been a push towards a more environmentally friendly way of life for many years, the global pandemic throughout 2020/21 has sent this into overdrive. And at the heart of it all is the sourcing and sustainability of food, prompting the young to be more open and receptive to alternative choices.

By working in partnership with forward thinking food providers, schools can have a measurable impact on reducing their carbon footprint. From switching to more sustainable ingredients to sourcing more ingredients locally, there are multiple aspects to consider.

Incremental changes are required.

And let's not forget the combined impact of thousands of children being introduced to more sustainable food options every day at school. It will have a huge influence on their knowledge, awareness and choices outside of school and throughout their future years.

59%

of children and young people are really worried about climate change^[13]





80%

of 16 to 25 year olds in the UK agree that people have failed to care for the planet ^[14]

Evolving the food system through awareness, innovation and education

Reducing the focus on meat and fish and gradually exposing pupils to plant-based and protein-rich ingredients is an effective way to offer a healthy, viable alternative. At the same time, it's essential that school meals are appealing, varied and cost-effective to produce.

Sodexo has committed to at least a third of menus being plant-based by 2025, ensuring a balance of sustainability and choice. This will be supported by initiatives beyond the kitchen door, such as developing teacher toolkits in conjunction with The British Nutrition Foundation.

We're proactively building the awareness and knowledge of all our school cooks, so that this shift is operationalised, not just a theoretical promise.

It takes more than just developing new plant-based menus. We also need to educate teachers, parents and pupils about the more sustainable choices they can make with our help. For example, taster sessions where the top meat-based dishes are made from 100% plants, grains or vegetables. In blind taste tests, the majority preferred the new version or didn't notice the difference. Encouraging kids to try alternatives is sometimes all it takes.

"People need to be educated more on what a balanced diet can consist of, because not all your protein needs to come from meat. I have a healthy balanced diet while being vegan."

NFS Young People
Consultation Report 2020 ^[11]

A proactive reduction in food waste

Around a third of all food produced globally is wasted, meaning vast amounts of unnecessary carbon emissions. New solutions to this huge problem are urgently needed, whether that be through technology, or by changing the way we do things.

For example, in 2019 Sodexo launched WasteWatch, powered by Leanpath as part of its commitment to cutting our food waste in half by 2025. This computerised food waste prevention system has been shown to reduce waste by up to 50%, even in sites where it was already low.

It enables our teams to easily capture food waste data, providing the insight to inform operational and behavioural changes to help end avoidable food waste ^[15].

We have an ongoing commitment to the Wasteful to Tasteful initiative, because although the quality of ingredients matters, the cosmetic imperfections do not. We now use 'wonky veg' in our school meals which would not have made it onto supermarket shelves, saving 15 tonnes of perfectly fine fruit and vegetables from landfills in the first two years alone ^[16].

Applying standards across the whole supply chain

Reducing carbon footprint is a top priority when it comes to sourcing, so UK suppliers are at the forefront and seasonal produce is used wherever possible. But choice and excitement at mealtime cannot be overlooked, so menu development now aims to balance global cuisine with local foodstuff. For example, an Indian-style curry made with British lamb and other homegrown ingredients.

At every stage of the supply chain, Sodexo's approved food producers are held to the strict quality and sustainability guidelines administered by bodies like LEAF and the Soil Association. Other standards are also in place, such as a ban on all unnecessary additives and a requirement to use high-grade produce, ideally sourced from across the UK and as local to the individual school as possible.



We know that Generation Z are increasingly turning towards vegan and plant-based diets to improve their health and reduce their impact on the environment."

David Mulcahy
Food Innovation & Sustainability Director
Sodexo Schools & Universities
UK & Ireland





SODEXO.COM

We are proactive in reviewing the sustainability credentials of every item on our menu to ensure we are building in better sustainability from the outset.

The search for solutions doesn't end there. Other potentially groundbreaking approaches include the use of vertical farms which could bring crop-farming to UK cities, and underground farms to produce ingredients that were traditionally grown overseas and needed to be shipped or flown in.

These innovations and initiatives like The Future 50 Foods programme will help shape the sustainable future of school meals, and ensure they appeal to increasingly more informed children and young people.



We need to accelerate the fight against food waste for the sake of humanity and in light of hunger worldwide. The rapid deployment of WasteWatch powered by Leanpath is our rally cry across Sodexo to do our part, while engaging with our clients and the consumers we serve."

Claire Atkins-Morris
Director of Corporate Responsibility
at Sodexo

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THE FUTURE 50 FOODS

The current practices of growing and producing food are not sustainable in the long term. There is an over reliance on a small range of crops and we depend heavily on resource-intensive animal-based foods.

Knorr and WWF have joined forces with Sodexo and other leaders in nutrition and sustainability to address this issue by developing The Future 50 Foods. This is a list of plant-based foods we should eat more of because they are nutritious, accessible, taste good and have a lower impact on our planet compared to animal-based foods.

Total agriculture accounts for a quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions, of which approximately

60%

is due to animal agriculture

75%

of the global food supply comes from only 12 plant and 5 animal species



FEEDING THE FUTURE

4 ENABLING EDUCATION WITH A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

INSTILLING HEALTHY EATING HABITS EARLY ON IN LIFE IS FUNDAMENTAL TO A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL EXPERIENCE, ESPECIALLY WHEN THERE IS A CLEAR LINK BETWEEN FOOD PROVISION AND LEARNING.

Applying a whole school approach means food, nutrition and sustainability are part of the ongoing conversation across the school. A shared philosophy that leads to cyclical improvements.

Having established a consistent message about healthy eating, it is important to engage children and teachers in educational activities that broaden their knowledge and understanding. The benefits of this stretch far beyond the school gates.

Embed the story of food in all aspects of the school experience

There are a multitude of ways that food education can be embedded across a school. From taster sessions that encourage children to try new things, to point of sale, the school website, parent comms, cooking demonstrations, classes, assemblies, newsletters and so on.

But whatever the methods used, remembering to tell a good story around food makes all the difference. The message is more likely to result in change if children can get involved, so teaching materials and activities need to be fun, engaging and interesting.





Partnerships to accelerate positive outcomes

In recognition of the importance of educating young people, Sodexo has formed the Healthy Futures Partnership, working with The British Nutrition Foundation. As the cornerstone of our social value strategy, this initiative will help empower staff to deliver food education in schools through training and resources. This ensures that the information taught in lessons reflects the reality of all food experiences, including breakfast clubs, lunches and tuck shops.

The new partnership includes training all our front-line cooks in the nutritional value of the menu, as well as how to engage kids in the classroom.

This equips them with the skills to support teachers and develop practical curricula and extracurricular activities such as cookery clubs or gardening to grow herbs, fruits and vegetables on school grounds.

The British Nutrition Foundation will work with the staff to develop this exciting new offer, as well as independently monitor and report on its impact.

The partnership provides an updated evidence-based offer, staff with credible nutrition training, and a new structured programme for schools. The more we connect children to the story of the food they eat and the benefits it gives them, the more likely we are to influence their ongoing choices and behaviours into adulthood.

“ There’s a big push for schools to have a whole school approach, so what’s served in the dining room echoes what the teacher is teaching ... pushing the same consistent message ... our training and support will help them to understand how it applies to them meaningfully in their jobs.”

Roy Ballam
Managing Director
The British Nutrition Foundation

Reaching parents with a consistent message

Food education needs to go beyond the pupil-staff dynamic and also connect with parents, most of whom are keen to learn more about nutrition and healthy eating. As children become more informed about nutrition, this will inevitably impact their parents as they encourage them to cook healthier options at home.

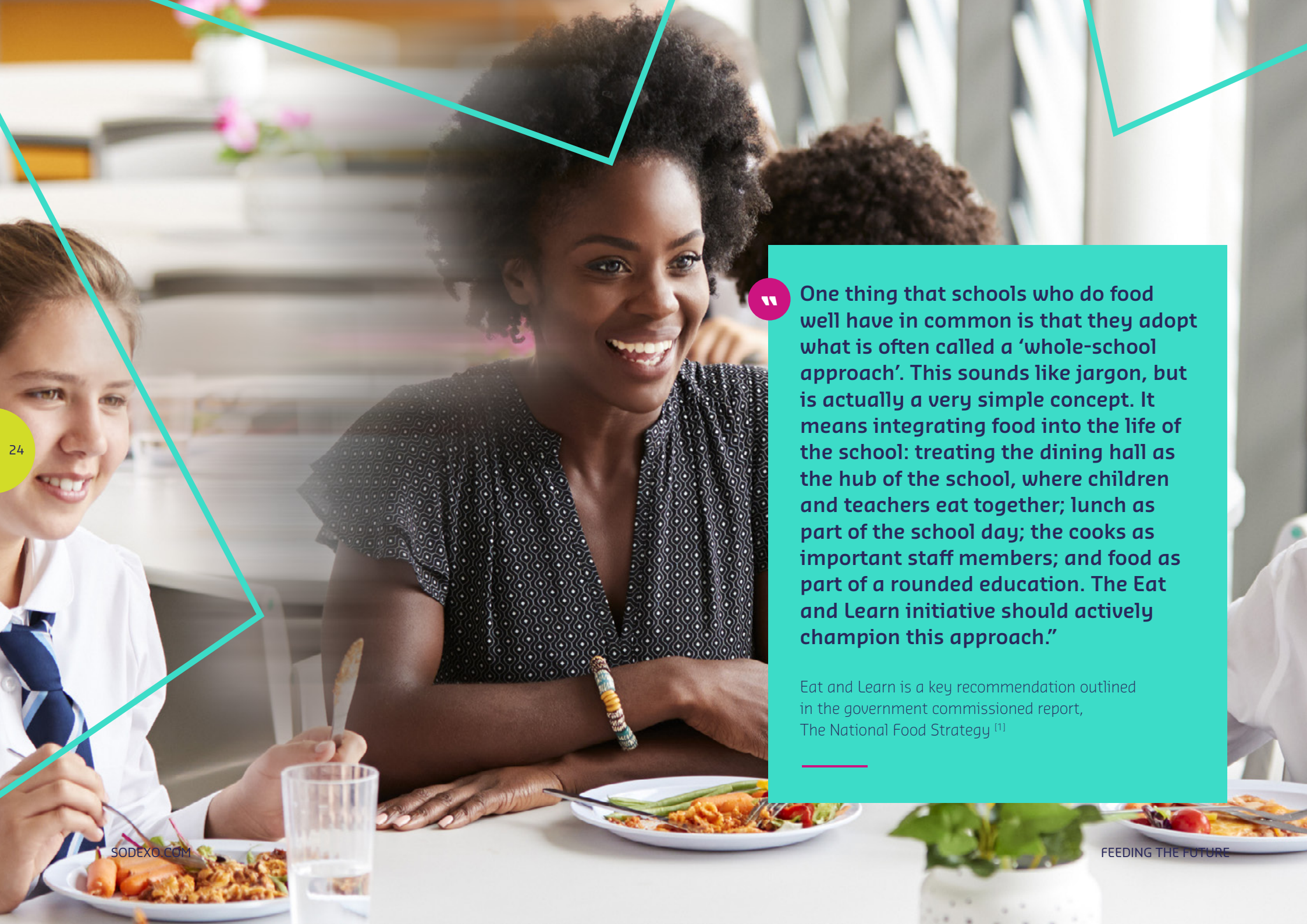
Direct communication with parents isn't always easy, with different schools facing different challenges in this area. School communications don't always get through and many parents already struggle with the amount of information they have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. But things are changing, with new platforms providing simple and effective tools to communicate successfully and fluidly with parents.

For example, outcomes from the rollout of School Food United, Sodexo's parent pre-order portal, look extremely positive. This online system allows parents to see the dishes on the menu that week, including information on their nutritional value.

The system prompts discussions between parent and child at home about the food choices available at school that week. This helps ensure the child has a better understanding and more involvement in their food choices, resulting in less waste at mealtimes.

With an easy-to-use, clean and simple design, School Food United provides a great opportunity for education, feedback, surveys and an ongoing dialogue between school and parent.





One thing that schools who do food well have in common is that they adopt what is often called a ‘whole-school approach’. This sounds like jargon, but is actually a very simple concept. It means integrating food into the life of the school: treating the dining hall as the hub of the school, where children and teachers eat together; lunch as part of the school day; the cooks as important staff members; and food as part of a rounded education. The Eat and Learn initiative should actively champion this approach.”

Eat and Learn is a key recommendation outlined in the government commissioned report, The National Food Strategy ^[1]

5 EXPLORING NEW WAYS TO INCREASE EFFICIENCY

THE PURSUIT OF EFFICIENCY PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE SUCCESS OF SCHOOL MEALS, AFFECTING EVERY STAGE OF THE PROCESS. WE MUST CONTINUALLY IMPROVE THE WAY IN WHICH FOOD IS PRODUCED, COLLECTED AND CONSUMED IN ORDER TO EXPAND CAPACITY AND ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE.

Delivering healthy meals quickly, cost effectively and with minimal waste is the current driver of change. Fuelled by the knowledge that a school meal is often the most important meal of a child's day.

Whether through the use of web-enabled technology, or optimising operational practices, there are numerous improvements we are starting to see make a difference. And with any enhancements we make, it's important to use the insight and learnings from trials to inform the wider rollout.

Since the start of the 21st century, most efficiency improvements have been slow and gradual. However, the repercussions of the global pandemic have prompted both schools and their providers to identify new ways of doing things and mobilise them quickly.



Less waiting and more control

Speed of service at mealtimes is one of the key challenges for many schools. This is especially the case for those with a large population, yet limited space and resources.

Anything that can be done to eradicate long queues at mealtimes delivers numerous benefits, including greater participation and uptake.

There is pressure to shorten mealtimes and minimise impact on effective curriculum delivery. Yet children need this break to rest and refuel, so they perform at their best during the second half of their day. Good nutrition delivers better performance.

Technology is starting to play a more important role.

Deploying easy-to-use, web-based pre-ordering systems reduces the need to queue and wait for food to be packaged, as each meal is made to order for each child. It also ensures that the kitchen only makes what has been selected, which minimises waste and optimises the budget.

In other food service sectors, such as hospitality and universities, we are also starting to see the introduction of app-based solutions. Incorporating useful functionality such as scan and go, pre-ordering and prepayment, we are likely to see this arrive in secondary schools soon.

With the vast majority of teenagers now owning a smartphone, such apps will enable them to access pre-packaged meals at the touch of a button, and provide them with relevant information to influence their choices and behaviours.

ONE KATSU CURRY, THREE METHODS OF SERVICE

When it comes to menu development and meeting diverse needs and preferences, there is a lot you can do in the way a single dish is served. Let's take the increasingly popular chicken katsu curry for instance, which can be easily adapted to meet the needs of different age groups.

- Key Stage 1 children are not keen on sauces, so we separated it from the chicken and served it as a dip on the side.
- Key stage 2 children were fine with the sauce, so were happy for it to be served altogether as such a dish normally would be.
- Secondary school children preferred it as a takeaway, so it was served in a handy recyclable container, with extra dressing on the top.

Same dish, same ingredients, same cost, but served up in three different ways.



Experimenting with different formats

New food delivery models enable pupils to collect their meals quickly and from different locations. This also facilitates social distancing and helps pupils make the most of their lunchtime break.

Pre-packaged food available to 'grab & go' is becoming more common, especially in secondary schools. It's quicker for the kitchen, and saves time while being more flexible for the children. Collection points can be sited across the school, allowing pupils to collect their lunches at an allotted time and eat their food at different points around the building, or outside.

At Sodexo we are exploring a number of these innovative delivery formats. This includes outdoor 'street food' style trucks positioned in the school grounds, mobile carts, food lockers and the use of 'scan & go' technology.

Such initiatives help remove the temptation to visit local shops and takeaways where teenagers are more likely to pick up less healthy options.

However, there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to this. Each school is different, with space and resources unique to them. And in some instances, schools take a different approach to mealtimes altogether.

The 'family dining model', where everyone sits down to eat lunch together at the same time, is one example. Scheduled separate sittings facilitate larger pupil numbers, and the fact each sitting lasts for a specific time means children are less likely to rush their food. They eat more and potentially waste less.

25%

of secondary schools
report lunchtimes of

35 MINS
OR LESS ^[17]

Clever menu development expands tastes

With greater use of data and technology, comes better insight into the needs and behaviours of pupils when it comes to food. It also provides new channels of communication and influence over making healthier choices and trying new things.

Expanding the menu to reflect trends and offer healthier and more sustainable options is also a key aspect of ongoing innovation. With a more thoughtful approach to menu development and a better understanding of what children like, we can tailor the appeal of the same core dish for different age groups.

Offering taster pots for new dishes is a good way to get children to try new things without the risk of not liking it and going hungry. Likewise the development of 'fakeaways' (healthy versions of popular takeaway dishes), inspired by what we see trending on social media, encourages better choices without compromising on flavour.

Lunch breaks have been getting shorter

A study conducted over multiple decades by UCL's Institute of Education found that in 1995, 30% of schools reported lunch breaks of less than 55 minutes. Now, that figure has risen to 82%. And even more alarming, is that a quarter of secondary schools reported lunchtimes of 35 minutes or less ^[17].



“

TikTok is currently shaping comedy, fashion and popular culture, so why not school meals? The food served in UK schools has come a long way in recent years. Health, convenience, and social media have all played a significant role in influencing the types of foods young people want to try and their relationship with food.”

James Mundy
Food & Retail Transformation Director
Sodexo Schools & Universities
UK & Ireland

COMBINING INITIATIVES TO MAKE AN IMPACT

SUCCESSFULLY PROVIDING HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS TO AS MANY CHILDREN AS POSSIBLE HAS A DIRECT, POSITIVE IMPACT ON THEIR WELLBEING AND PERFORMANCE. AS WE HAVE OUTLINED IN THIS REPORT, THE NUTRITIONAL VALUE OF INGREDIENTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF APPEALING MENUS ARE KEY, BUT THERE ARE VARIOUS OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER.

All stakeholders should be aware of these fundamentals and embrace new approaches and ideas. When we see the bigger picture, we appreciate how school meals can influence the attitudes and behaviours of the next generation.

Promoting a well balanced, varied diet through the meal choices available is critical, but it's only one part of the story. What matters most is building on this with opportunities to educate the whole school community, embedding sustainable practices across the supply chain, and experimenting with different formats for food service and collection.

Inclusivity might not be an obvious challenge for some, but in our experience, it takes very little for children to feel left out or separate. Schools need to make a conscious choice to remove barriers and cater to all. Every pupil can thrive when they do.

Better meals mean better performance in the classroom. But what matters most is creating an environment where children can understand and embrace healthy, varied choices that are good for both body and mind.

We are not just feeding children today, we are feeding and nurturing their future, humanity's future and the future of the planet.



SOURCES

Below we have compiled the full list of sources, articles and reports referenced throughout this document for your ease. The numbers listed below refer to those highlighted at the relevant points within this report.

If viewing this document digitally, you can click on each one below to be taken to that specific item online.

1 The National Food Strategy	7 The link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment Public Health England	13 Young People's Voices on Climate Anxiety, Government Betrayal and Moral Injury University of Bath
2 Children feel healthier since returning to school The British Nutrition Foundation	8 The association between dietary choices and mental wellbeing among schoolchildren BMJ Nutrition, Prevention and Health	14 Climate change - young people very worried The BBC
3 Two thirds of parents say they don't know how to feed their child a healthy diet The Independent	9 Natasha's Law UK Food Labelling Resource	15 WasteWatch powered by Leanpath - The fight against food waste Sodexo
4 Children's packed lunches lack nutritional quality Leeds University	10 Food anaphylaxis in the United Kingdom: analysis of national data, 1998-2018 British Medical Journal	16 Wasteful to tasteful - Rescuing nutritious food from going to waste Sodexo
5 Less than 1% of the population follow all the recommendations in The Eatwell Guide The British Nutrition Foundation	11 Young People's Consultation Report The National Food Strategy	17 Break time cuts could be harming children's development UCL Institute of Education
6 Following the Eatwell Guide could reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of adult diets by 30% Nutrition Insight	12 Over 20% of pupils in England are eligible for free school meals Gov.uk	

WHAT MATTERS MOST TO YOU?

SODEXO IS COMMITTED TO MAKING A POSITIVE IMPACT ON OUR PEOPLE, OUR COMMUNITIES AND OUR PLANET. WE ARE A GLOBAL BUSINESS WITH MORE THAN 50 YEARS OF EXPERTISE AND INSIGHT, BUT ARE STILL CONTROLLED BY THE FOUNDING FAMILY, AND DRIVEN BY THEIR VALUES AND A COMMITMENT TO IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE.

The schools we partner with share that commitment, and we help them deliver what matters most to pupils and staff alike.

Get in touch to discuss how we can work with you to provide healthier, more sustainable food for your school.

[Find out more about Schools at Sodexo](#)

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QUALITY OF LIFE SERVICES