

Reducing food waste in schools

Improving the dining experience



Introduction

Aim: This intervention aims to reduce food waste by making changes to help the school dining experience feel more relaxed and to create a pleasant environment in which pupils feel more able to enjoy their food.

Rationale: "For many children issues around queuing, short lunch hours, unplanned seating arrangements, multi-purpose halls and poor ambience are often more important than the food itself."

'A fresh look at the school meal experience', Second Edition, School Food Trust

A large number of adults and pupils involved in WRAP's research into food waste in schools described how the dining experience at their school was not conducive to pupils enjoying their meal. Pupils described throwing away uneaten food as they rushed to leave the canteen, either due to 'pull' factors resulting in them rushing to take part in something outside of the dining hall (e.g., lunchtime clubs, socialising with friends), or 'push' factors making spending time in the dining area unpleasant (e.g., noise levels, a crowded or unfriendly environment). Staff reported that the demands of serving everyone during a single hour led to lunchtime being an exercise in logistics rather than a pleasant sociable experience where food is valued and enjoyed.

Time pressures can result in food being thrown away in both primary and secondary schools. Sometimes pupils spend so long queuing that they do not have enough time to eat all of their meal. At the end of a sitting, pupils may have to be hurried along to allow other pupils into the dining hall, or because it needs to be cleared for afternoon lessons. In schools with younger pupils, some staff reported having insufficient time to interact with children to encourage them to eat their food, resulting in large amounts of food being wasted.

If a school can provide a calmer eating environment where food can be served and eaten at a steadier pace, this will result in more food being consumed and probably better digested as well. Improving the dining experience could result in a reduction in food waste, as well as having many other advantages such as improved pupil behaviour.

How can my school improve the dining experience and waste less food?

1. Form an action group

Research shows that good communication between the key people in the school is essential in tackling this issue, so setting up a small working group is advisable. You could use an existing group or set up a new one, but it will ideally need to have both adults and pupils on it. This group could include the business manager, caretaker, chef, a mid-day meal supervisor and representatives from the School Council or Eco Group. If you have a Healthy Schools coordinator, they could be an obvious choice to lead the group, and involvement from a parent representative and a governor would also be beneficial.

I was astonished by the fantastic response we had to the questionnaire that we sent out to parents! Our school council also had a strong role to play, letting us know what our children think about school food and the whole dining experience. We found out that children need to know what is on the menu for the day before they get to the servery hatch - we hope this will quicken up the queues. The children also told us that they do not like airline trays, and that they need good cutting knives so that they can eat meat etc easily - otherwise the food remains uneaten and is thrown away.

Business Manager, Jubilee Primary School, Hackney

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2. Identify your priorities

Discuss the issues surrounding your school's dining experience with your action group. You may decide that a survey would be helpful to find out more about pupils' opinions, including why they think food gets wasted. In schools with young pupils it might also be appropriate to consult parents to find out what their children tell them at home about the experience of school meals.

Having identified your key issues, look through the list of questions below to identify those which you recognise as issues at your school. Then, as a group, decide what your school will prioritise for action.

- a. How can we shorten queues?
- b. How can we make the queue less stressful?
- c. How can we ensure pupils have enough time to sit and eat whilst keeping behaviour in check?
- d. How can we get the school staff to sit amongst pupils and enjoy their lunch?
- e. How can we make best use of a small space? What about staggering lunchtimes?
- f. How can we reduce the noise?
- g. How can we make it feel like a dining room, when it needs to be used for other purposes too?
- h. How can we make the space feel inviting?

3. Plan your activities

A range of activities and case studies to give schools ideas about how to make improvements to the school meal experience is included in the School Food Trust's publication, 'A fresh look at the school meal experience' Second Edition.

<http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/schools/resources/a-fresh-look-at-the-school-meal-experience-second-edition>

To address your priority issues, you can plan your activities from this guide, or your group may have its own ideas. Remember that the aim is to improve the dining experience in order to reduce the amount of food that is wasted at your school.

Be realistic about time-scales and budgetary demands; some improvements to the dining experience will take considerable time and investment and should be incorporated into a medium or long-term plan. Other changes can be made quickly and without spending large amounts of money. If possible identify some of these 'quick fixes' even if your main focus will take longer to implement.



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Activity options

A. How can we shorten queues?

To create a relaxed environment in which pupils eat as much of their food as possible and therefore reduce the amount of food being wasted, it is important to reduce queue times to a minimum. Reducing queuing could also reduce the number of duty staff needed for lunchtime supervision.

Click here to go to '[A fresh look at the school meal experience](#)' Please see page 24 for ideas around:

- Staggered lunchtimes
- Cashless system
- Multiple points
- Label food and clearly display menu
- Meal deals
- Grab and go

B. How can we make the queue less stressful?

The longer the pupils have to queue the more stressful it can become. Shortening the time spent queuing is the obvious solution but there are a number of other ways to reduce stress. More relaxed pupils will create an atmosphere more conducive to eating and therefore less food will be wasted.

Click here to go to '[A fresh look at the school meal experience](#)'

Please see page 26 for ideas around:

- Know your customers
- Know your product
- Cashless systems
- Avoid unnecessary blocks
- Earlier lunchtimes
- Bring the queue inside
- Easy to manage queues
- Family service

C. How can we ensure pupils have enough time to sit and eat whilst keeping behaviour in check?

Many pupils tend to view the eating of their mid-day meal as something to get over and done as quickly as possible in order to rush off to play or socialise. It is possible to turn this round so that the meal itself becomes the time for socialising, the children enjoy the time spent eating resulting in less food being wasted.

Click here to go to '[A fresh look at the school meal experience](#)'

Please see page 28 for ideas around:

- Length of lunch break
- Pre-ordering lunches
- Eating and social times
- Extended school activities

Changing to two sittings has taken away the sense of urgency to finish lunch and get outside. Now all children in the sitting stay for the same amount of time, this means children do not rush their food, and having fewer children on the playground has improved the play opportunities. Following pupil requests, children now sit with their friends, there are no 'dinner tables' and 'sandwich tables'. The canteen is cleared up AFTER lunch, not during - this was a huge problem before and made the lunch experience unpleasant.

Deputy Headteacher, Oldfield Park Junior School, Bath and North East Somerset

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D. How can we get the school staff to sit with pupils and enjoy their lunch?

This may seem a long shot as staff may be reluctant to spend their much-deserved lunch break supervising pupils. However, if pupils can see their teachers sitting alongside colleagues or pupils and enjoying a school meal it sends a strong message about the value of school meals as a sociable experience.

Primary pupils will probably enjoy eating alongside their teachers. Adults can model how to enjoy lunchtime at school, eating at a reasonable speed and chatting sociably. They will also be in a position to encourage children to try unfamiliar foods or finish the food on their plate. Older students may be less keen to eat at the same table as their teachers. However, having a table for teachers in the canteen could contribute to a calmer dining experience, thereby encouraging pupils to eat their food instead of throwing it away.

Click here to go to '[A fresh look at the school meal experience](#)'

Please see page 46 for ideas around:

- Attractive environment
- Alternative breaks
- Rota system
- Part of the curriculum
- Special offers

E. How can we make best use of a small space?

What about staggering lunchtimes? Many schools struggle with insufficient space to seat everyone in the available time. If it is feasible to stagger lunchtimes, you could provide pupils with more time to relax and enjoy their food. Pupils can be encouraged to socialise more during their meal (rather than outside the dining hall afterwards), resulting in more food being eaten and less discarded into the waste bins.

Click here to go to '[A fresh look at the school meal experience](#)'

Please see page 10 for ideas around:

- Staggering lunchtimes
- Flexible system
- Review length of lunch break
- Maximise room
- Classroom dining
- Outside space
- Mobile food server

F. How can we reduce the noise?

Could it be that noise levels in the dining hall are not conducive to socialising and enjoying the dining experience? An acceptable noise level needs to be determined by each school. However, the aim should be to encourage talking during mealtimes to ensure that lunch breaks become a sociable occasion where pupils want to sit and eat their food. Concerns over noise should only arise if it reaches such a level that pupils and staff can only be heard by shouting to each other.

Click here to go to '[A fresh look at the school meal experience](#)'

Please see page 14 for ideas around:

- Acoustic sound panels
- Acoustic ceilings
- Flooring
- Chairs and curtains
- Soft music
- Communication signs

Top tips from schools

- Go back to basics to identify quick wins. Is the cutlery clean? Are the knives sharp enough for pupils to cut their meat? Small changes with only minimal financial outlay can make a big difference to pupils' dining experience.

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G. How can we make it feel like a dining room, when it also needs to be used for other purposes?

Making it feel like a dining room, café or bistro, may involve some capital outlay but if resources allow, your school may like to switch to china plates and bowls if they currently use plastic. Combine this with jugs of water on tables or bowls of bread on each table and you are already improving the quality of the dining hall. This in turn makes pupils start to enjoy the environment, leading to more time spent eating the food which they have been served.

Click here to go to '[A fresh look at the school meal experience](#)'

Please see page 16 for ideas around:

- Stackable tables
- Tablecloths
- Table settings
- Menu boards
- Decoration
- Planning

H. How can we make the space feel inviting?

Members of your action group will bring different viewpoints and ideas on how to make the dining hall inviting. The group can share experiences, for example, of other eating establishments (such as cafés) that they feel have an atmosphere conducive to sociable eating.

Click here to go to '[A fresh look at the school meal experience](#)'

Please see page 20 for ideas around:

- Place of relaxation
- Dining space identity
- Name the dining space
- Inspiration
- Display students' artwork
- Lighting
- Temperature
- Colour of the walls
- Floors
- Defined zones
- Check the seating
- Younger students

4. Implementing your activities

Having planned out your activities to improve the dining experience and reduce food waste you will need to think about the following:

Raising awareness in school

A high profile awareness-raising campaign is likely to have the greatest impact, so we recommend launching this intervention at a whole-school level, telling everybody in the school community what you are doing and why, and encouraging involvement from everyone. You will need to consider:

What message to communicate

As well as telling adults and pupils about the specific activities/changes that you are planning, decide what reasons to give them for introducing them, i.e. improved dining experience, improved diet and reduction in food waste. If pupils have been involved in the decision-making and planning, then share this information with the rest of the school and consider ways these pupils can be involved in the awareness-raising campaign.

How to communicate the message

You may want to do a special launch to celebrate the changes made to the dining area and at this point get some feedback from pupils on how they like the changes. It is recommended that the launch is promoted through assemblies (whole-school, Key Stage or year group) and if appropriate to your school, parents could be invited to assemblies, as well as including an article in your parents' newsletter and/or website.

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Curriculum links

Maths / ICT

Using appropriate ICT, pupils can design a questionnaire to survey pupils' experiences of the dining experience. Analysing the results, and representing them graphically, will use a range of mathematical skills.

English

Pupils can write articles for the school newsletter or website, or perhaps a local newspaper, outlining the problems associated with food waste and what their school is doing to reduce it.

Geography

Pupils can investigate where food comes from and how it is transported from its country of production to the UK.

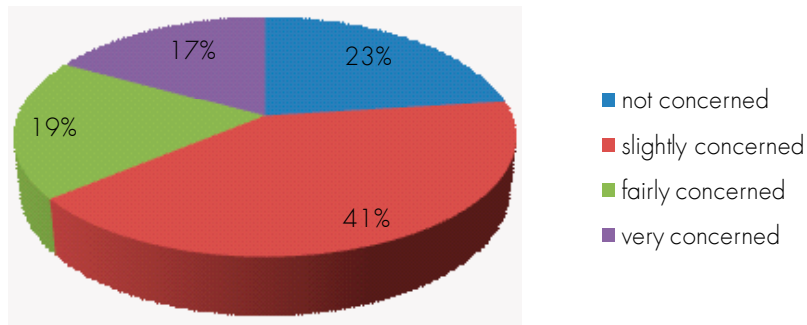
Pupils can investigate what happens to food if we throw it away, and how it impacts on the environment.

Citizenship

Pupils can debate the global issues surrounding food waste, taking on the roles of different people involved in the production, transportation, preparation and consumption of food.

Examples of the type of charts pupils might create following a pupil survey

Percentage of pupils who are concerned about canteen noise



Percentage of pupils who are concerned about canteen queueing times

