

Chefs in Schools: A school food revolution

What do your pupils eat at lunch and what impact does it have on them? **Hilary Priest** explains the journey that has revolutionised the quality of meals and so much more at The Grove Primary School

I have been headteacher at The Grove School for nearly 17 years. It is a local authority maintained school in Totnes, Devon.

Totnes is well known for having a “foodie” culture with many coffee shops, unique food providers, and a sensational food market. It is also known for being a little unusual at times (often likened to a lesser Glastonbury), but also for embracing everyone from every culture and background.

Totnes has the usual make up of any semi-rural town with many housing association tenants, lots of low-paid employment (in those coffee shops), quite a lot of unemployment, and higher levels of free school meals than you’d think.

The school is amazing – it has always had a very special feel and it has a long history of headteachers and staff who have loved and cherished it and the children. I knew I had landed on my feet inheriting The Grove as my second headship.

And then I saw the school dinners. We were contracted to a meal service company (no names), and we had literally no kitchen for a school which at the time had 210 children.

Our food was made in another school and shipped in, served in a “Devon Lady” mobile room. To be completely honest, it was grim. Jamie Oliver’s whinge about Turkey Twizzlers was right on the mark.

Add to that what happens when you bulk pack and ship food to one school, move it a few miles down the road, and wait for a bit – it becomes more or less inedible! It brought to the fore a number of wider questions. Do you in your school see:

- The children flagging in the afternoons with energy levels taking a hit?
- The children struggling to concentrate after lunch?
- Behaviour deteriorating as the day progresses – especially for those tricky pupils?
- Hungry children whose parents ram food at them as soon as they leave school in a bid to avoid a “hanger” moment on the way home?
- Children who look pale and a tad unwell – like they haven’t slept properly?
- Obesity (or malnutrition) in children?



Well-deserved: (from left) The Grove Primary School headteacher Hilary Priest, school chef Marco Piloni, chair of governors Ian Stewart, and Nicole Pisani, a co-founder of Chefs in Schools, celebrate at the Excellence in School Food Awards

And to top it all off, are you losing money from your very tight budget to subsidise school meals?

If this feels familiar, then taking a look at what your children are eating at lunchtime might be worth the time – it certainly was for us.

Perhaps you’d like to start developing foodies in your children – pupils who won’t just eat indiscriminately whatever is put in front of them, but who actually develop their taste buds and understand the message that you are what you eat.

Our school’s journey

Eleven years ago we started on this exact journey – but as I discovered, it is not the easiest of paths.

We dropped our catering contractor and went it alone. We installed quite possibly the smallest school kitchen ever seen, making ends meet by purchasing second-hand equipment.

We found a good home cook and had lots of help from parents, and we started to feed the children some tastier things. We even managed to get Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall to open our new kitchen (although he couldn’t fit inside as only one person at a time could work in there – maybe two if they didn’t move too much).

Did this fix the issue? No, of course not – but it was a start. However, it seems that the food you serve depends on a number of factors which we hadn’t at that point quite got into alignment:

1. The quality of the cook is essential.
2. The quality of the ingredients is very important.
3. An understanding that children need to gradually educate their taste buds – you can’t just change the menu overnight and expect whitebait to be eaten by children who are used to fish fingers.
4. The need to align what parents want their children to eat with what the children want to eat.
5. The whole school needs to be passionate about food and understand the impact that the whole canteen experience has on a young child – emotionally, physically, socially, educationally...
6. The leadership of the school needs to put in a lot of work and maintain this focus as a priority – which is easier said than done when you consider all our competing priorities as school leaders.

I think what we did back then was very unusual as we employed a “front-of house” manager to work on the whole “dining experience”. I was also blessed with a parent who used to work for Heston and another who worked for Rick (yes really!) and with their support we put lots of work into the dining experience.

This is vital as the dining experience interconnects with what you actually eat. Food from a blue plastic partitioned tray does not taste as good as food from a white plate – fact!

We continued for some years on this journey with ups and downs. We had different cooks and food that was definitely better than that which the contractor had been supplying, but it was still nothing like the vision we had and we still struggled with some of the challenges mentioned above.

We had, over time, become very secure in our direction and what we wanted to achieve and at times had got very close to it. Having an in-house kitchen meant that we stopped losing money from meals. Most meals were edible (and some really tasty) and the meal uptake was better.

However, the carb-count was still way too high and, depending on the confidence and quality of the cook, we were still relying too much on processed foods.

But we did create a much nicer dining experience and in 2015 we were blessed with a new school build – they built us a lovely new kitchen and a large school hall to eat in. We also gained an extra 105 children to make us a school of 315.

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Chefs in Schools

For us, our missing link was how to align all these factors while redesigning our curriculum, managing a shrinking school budget, preparing for Ofsted, and everything else that was filling up our school improvement plan.

We didn’t have an answer to this as we were all so busy. We knew exactly what we wanted but had no way of bringing it completely into reality.

We found ourselves in 2022 and at a bit of a low point with regard to the quality of meals and ingredients. Covid did not help as school meal numbers dropped as did the passion for cooking in our kitchen. We needed a catalyst and it was at this point we came across a charity called Chefs in Schools.

Established in 2018, Chefs in Schools offers online and on-site training, guidance, and support to help schools create and serve high-quality meals. It offers food education resources too.

They work in London, the South West and Yorkshire and reach more than 30,000 pupils a day. Chefs in Schools has shown that it is possible to make high-quality school meals for 75p in primary schools and 90p in secondary schools.

It was with the support of this incredibly driven charity that the changes we wanted to create became reality. They had the direction and drive, great links for procurement, lots of practical ideas, quality training, and the food planning that we needed. A group of selfless souls whose main aim is to get children eating quality food that they love and which keeps them going until the end of the school day and their evening meal at home.

We said yes to working with them in early December 2022 and two days before the Christmas break we had interviewed and employed our professional chef: Marco Pilloni – an acclaimed chef who had cooked for the Queen and worked in Michelin-starred restaurants. He started on January 4 ready to cook for the children on January 5.

So what have we learnt – especially since working with Chefs in Schools?

1. Employ a chef (Chefs in Schools helped with this) and make sure your staff share your vision.
2. Sell the vision to the children (the fact that Marco had cooked for Queen Elizabeth II and that he could hand throw his pizzas – he’s Italian – really helped give us some quick early wins).
3. Sell the vision to the parents: You have to find alignment with what parents want and what children want. A good example is that a surprising number of parents wanted their children to eat roast dinners, but we found that most pupils didn’t like roast dinners. Conversely, many parents think children won’t like soup and that it won’t fill them up – we have found the opposite to be true, especially if it is good quality and served with a variety of yummy salads and home-made focaccia.
4. Make sure that your menu is not too scary. As I mentioned above, perhaps don’t put whitebait at the top of your menu to begin with.
5. Get your chef to understand that cooking for children is completely and utterly different than cooking in a restaurant – the children will give blunt and honest feedback freely and will not wait patiently for their meal while sipping on something cold!
6. Get your chef to understand that cooking for more than 300 children is not the same as cooking in a restaurant – pasta in bulk is difficult!
7. Develop the taste buds of your children. We found that giving out stickers for trying something new worked a treat in key stage 1.
8. Get your parents involved. We launched “Come Dine with your Child” for school lunches; we included photos of the meals in every newsletter and on the website.
9. Start to develop your menu. It does not have to be complicated. Keep



All images: Supplied

Cooking up a storm: Acclaimed chef Marco Pilloni (top left) arrived at The Grove Primary School via the Chefs in Schools initiative; a dish from the Grove menu (top right); and celebrity chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall opens the ‘smallest school kitchen ever seen’ (above)

things simple but high-quality. The chef can be more creative with sides – our salad bar is sensational.

10. Integrate food education. We have gone for “seed to plate” education and we are growing and cooking our own foods. Marco cooks with all the children and parents are invited in to learn too. We are developing a progressive cooking curriculum, and we want to run “cooking on a budget” family classes – the world is your oyster.

I should add a quick note here. Chefs in Schools helped us to transform our kitchen, menus, and food education – but if schools aren’t ready for such a big change, the charity offers shorter training courses with tips and tricks about food preparation and getting lots of vegetables into school food.

Most importantly, they teach kitchen teams how to talk to children about food. It is a great starting point no matter what level your ambition.

Final thoughts

In January we were proud to win the Excellence in School Food Awards, which were run by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Food. We have also recently been featured on the BBC’s Food Programme in an episode focused on improving school food (see below).

But most importantly, our school has thrived. We don’t make a financial loss even though we have to pay the salary of an amazing chef. And our children are lively and can concentrate all day – they aren’t hungry by the time the school day ends, their outcomes have improved, and so have their life chances and skills.

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• Hilary Priest is headteacher at The Grove Primary School in Totnes.

Further information & resources

- APPG on School Food: <http://schoolfood.org.uk/>
- BBC: *The Food Programme: The fight to improve school food, 2024*: www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001zdt0
- Chefs in Schools: <https://chefsinschools.org.uk/>