


CHEFS IN SCHOOLS 

**THE SCHOOL
FOOD STANDARDS:
WHAT PARENTS
WANT FOR THEIR
CHILDREN**



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the development of this report.

Special thanks to **Survation**, **The Food Foundation**, **School Food Matters** and **Bite Back** for their contributions of data, feedback and expertise. Their input has been instrumental in ensuring the accuracy and relevance of this work.

Survation.



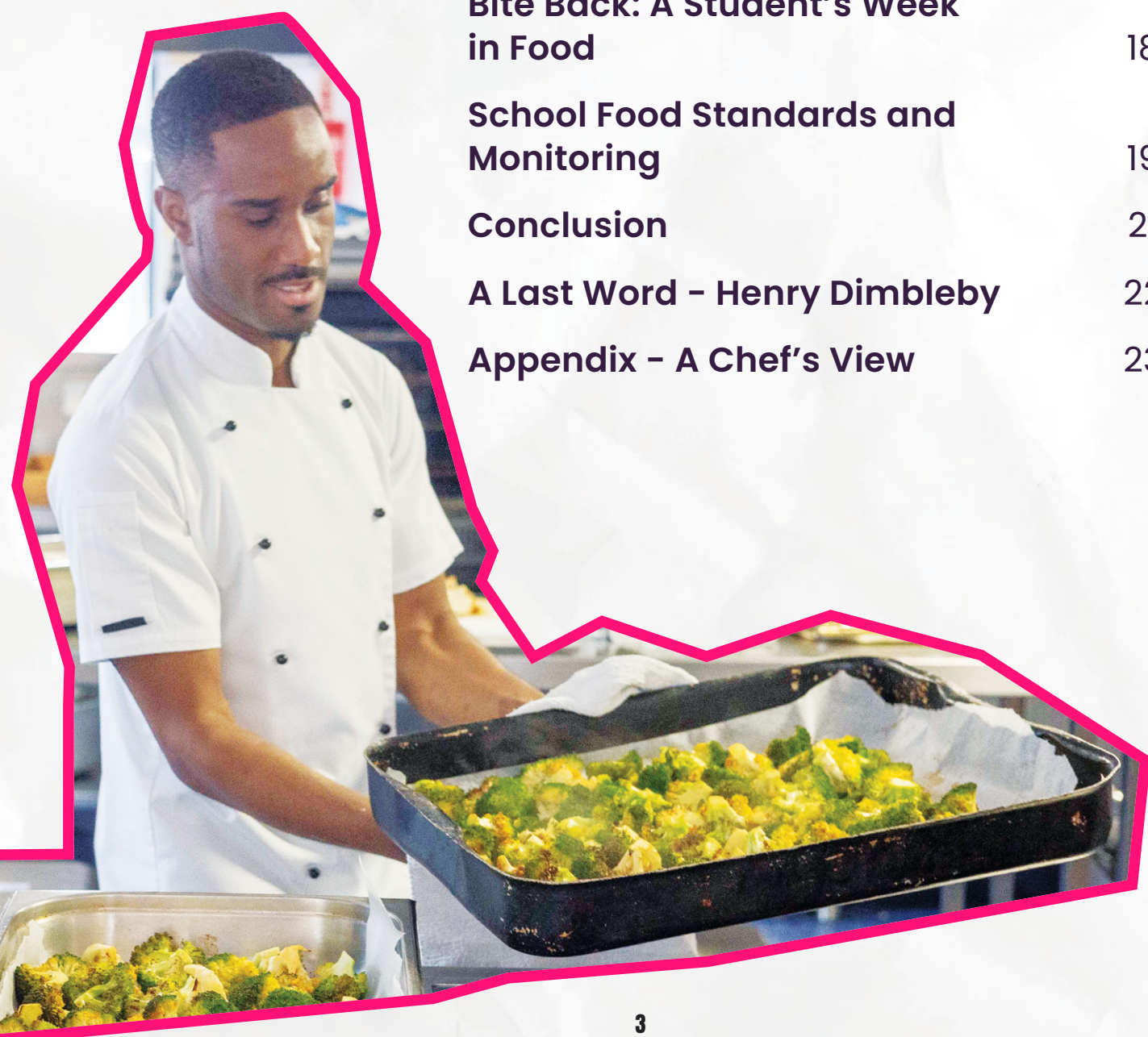
We also appreciate the perspectives of **Emmanuela** and **Jake Barwood** who provided invaluable insights.

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EXECUTIVE

SUMMARY

“ We are at a pivotal moment of need and opportunity. Food-related ill health is limiting the lives of millions of us - including our children. Fuelling this crisis is the food environment children face, which is a wild west of low-nutrition junk food. Even in schools and educational settings, children are not protected.

Yet, it is exactly these settings where we can stem the tide of junk food and equip children with the knowledge and habits to feed themselves well for life. Recent government commitments reflect a recognition of the opportunity that exists in schools. Now we call on the Government to be bold in its expectations for school food, to raise ambition and set a high baseline for standards.”

Naomi Duncan, Chief Executive, Chefs in Schools



“ We welcome the Government’s commitment to update the School Food Standards. The existing standards were introduced to make sure children developed healthy eating habits, enjoyed tasty food and had the energy and nutrition they needed to learn. Eleven years on, this simply isn’t the reality for many pupils across the country.

As work begins to update the School Food Standards, we are calling on the Government to ensure the revised standards are **stronger and much more ambitious**. We are also calling for the implementation of standards to be **monitored in every school by the Food Standards Agency** to ensure every child has the nutritious, delicious school food they need to be healthy, happy and to thrive.

This report shares new polling with parents, alongside insights from school chefs, young people and the wider school food sector. The polling makes a clear case to government: Across regions and income groups, parents want stronger school food standards, properly enforced.

MORE NUTRITIOUS FOOD. LESS JUNK.

This report also sets out Chefs in Schools’ vision for revised school food standards including specific changes needed to realise the full potential of school food. Our vision [page 11] is informed by our own work in schools and backed up by parents, food educators, nutritionists, teachers and chefs.

We are calling for school food that fuels the future, excites pupils and offers an education about varied diets. The revised standards must be clear on processed proteins and get packaged junk food, high in sugar, salt and fat, off the menu entirely. These asks are supported by parents – who believe school food should be fresh and nutritious. **96% of parents** we polled with Survation feel it's important that school meals are prepared with fresh or nutritious ingredients. And **over 80%** would look more favourably on a government that ensures **fresh, high-nutrition meals**.

At the same time, **two thirds of parents (66%)** are concerned about the possibility of junk food being offered to a child in secondary school every day. **78% of parents** said that when their child makes food choices without guidance, they are likely to pick items high in sugar, salt and fat. Which is why we are suggesting specific updates to the standards that limit the sale of desserts, cakes or biscuits and which address the proliferation of snack and 'grab and go' items which are high in sugar, salt and fat.

To ensure no child is missing out, revised standards must be accompanied by a clear and consistent process for monitoring and accountability, with regular inspections and transparent reporting. Our polling shows strong support among parents for this. Over **three quarters (78%)** say they want the Government to actively inspect and enforce the School Food Standards in every school.

What's clear from the polling with parents is that the quality of school food is not a niche issue. Concerns about junk food and a desire for fresh, nutritious food are shared by parents – irrespective of region or income level.

You can read the full polling insights on pages [7-11](#).

TIME FOR ACTION

There is great school food out there (including ours!) but in too many schools, the food on offer is falling short. This report shines a light on the current reality of school food [[pages 15 to 17](#)] and looks to a brighter future where the incredible potential of school food is properly realised.



Quality school food is an investment in children for the long term. It not only supports good health – but it also helps children to be happy, to do well in school and to reach their potential. This is understood by parents, young people and experts alike. Now it's up to the Government to put the right school food standards in place – so that food served at breakfast, break time, lunch or after school – helps ensure every child can reach their full potential.

ABOUT US

Chefs in Schools is a charity founded in 2018 to transform school food, school food culture and food education, particularly in areas with high socio-economic deprivation. The charity supports schools through onsite programmes, online training and providing guidance to improve school meals and children's health through [resources like the School Food Toolkit, Food Education Toolkit and Breakfast Club Guides](#).

Co-founded by Henry Dimbleby, Nicole Pisani, former head chef at Ottolenghi's NOPI, and Louise Nichols, Exec Headteacher at LEAP Federation – the charity has helped over 100,000 children access better school food and food education, proving that exciting, nutritious school meals are possible on a tight budget. Backed by top chefs and food leaders, Chefs in Schools also campaigns for lasting school food reform and has won several national awards for impact.

THE SCHOOL FOOD STANDARDS: A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE AND CALL TO ACTION



by **Emmanuela**

This report focuses on new polling with parents as well as insights from those who work in school kitchens. However, we want to begin with the voice of those most affected by school food – young people.

There's a quiet calculation that happens most days at lunch, one that shouldn't exist at all. For me and my peers on Free School Meals, it often means choosing between food or a drink. It means scanning limited options and picking what is most likely to get you through the afternoon. More often than not, that choice comes down to meals of processed fillers as opposed to real food, with freshness, flavour, and substance. It's not a crisis often spoken about: it has simply become the background rhythm of school life for too many.

A quality school meal shouldn't be regarded as a privilege. It should be a baseline: fuel that enables young people to think clearly, engage fully, and maintain physical and emotional wellbeing throughout the day. But too often, this isn't the reality. I've sat beside people who pretend they aren't hungry to avoid the embarrassment of a school meal that doesn't stretch far enough. I've skipped lunch more times than I can count when the food felt more like a compromise than nourishment: overcooked, under-portioned, or simply un-stomachable.

The School Food Standards, introduced in 2014, were meant to ensure every child could access food that supports health, focus, and long-term development. However, more than a decade later, this promise hasn't held. Our

understanding of nutrition has moved on, but many school kitchens haven't. At the same time, junk food is more visible and accessible than ever, both inside and outside the school gates. In secondary schools lunch breaks are getting shorter, which means the fastest option, not the healthiest, often wins. The result is a culture where convenience displaces care.

This isn't to say good school food doesn't exist: it does. There are schools serving fresh, balanced, and appealing meals with the time and space to enjoy them. But access to quality varies widely, shaped by postcode, funding, and local priorities. That inconsistency undermines the very purpose of national standards. The Government has committed to updating these standards, presenting a crucial opportunity for meaningful progress. However, if that update fails to confront the disparities in provision, it risks entrenching the very inequalities it was meant to redress. The provision of a nourishing and satiating meal to every child should be a given.

School food cannot be an afterthought. If we are serious about equity, about long-term health, about giving every child the chance to thrive, then meals must be part of that conversation. Not just edible. Not just cheap. But good: in quality, in dignity, and in what they enable.

Emmanuela, 17, Food Ambassador from London



WHAT PARENTS SAY

Working with Survation, we polled 1,000 parents of school children in England, in May 2025, to gather their thoughts on school food. The polling reveals clear and consistent views about what needs to change.

PARENTS EXPECT FRESH, **NUTRITIOUS** FOOD AT SCHOOL

It's clear parents care about what their children are eating at school. They don't want junk food available every day. What they do want is food made with fresh, nutritious ingredients – because they understand that the food children consume helps them to thrive, learn, grow and foster a lifelong love of good food. And they want to know any standards are being monitored.

96%

of parents said it is important that school meals are prepared with fresh and/or nutritious ingredients.

82%

believe that fresh ingredients in school meals are essential for their child's health, growth and ability to learn.

76%

said the food a child eats in school plays an important role in shaping their long-term eating habits and food preferences.

Parents on the problems that need fixing:

“ My daughter complains of the lack of choices she likes (and she is not picky about food). I worry that in any large canteen with pricing pressures standards inevitably slip, especially when there is no competition (at least in the short term). ”

“ My daughter doesn't eat meat and there only chips or other junk foods, not much choice. [There's] nothing healthy so goes to Morrisons at lunch or takes packed. ”

PARENTS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE **QUALITY** OF SCHOOL FOOD

Our polling revealed real concerns about both the quality and cost of school food.

35%

of parents who provide packed lunches said they do so because they believe the food is better quality.

44%

of all parents named either cost or nutrition as their biggest concern about school meals.

OVER **50%**

said school lunches are either too expensive or were never affordable.

PARENTS ARE WORRIED ABOUT **JUNK FOOD** IN SCHOOLS

Schools are a critical environment where food can shape lifelong behaviours. Parents want to see the government pay close attention to the prevalence of junk food in schools when reviewing and updating standards.

78%

of parents said that when their child makes food choices without guidance, they are likely to pick items high in sugar, salt and fat.

66%

of parents expressed concern about junk food being available to their child every day in secondary schools.

38%

of parents reported that their child buys juice at school, and 20% said their child buys fizzy drinks.

Parents on the problems that need fixing:

“ The meals are just junk food, it's always a dessert which is wrong. It's a lot of pizza, burger, chips and rubbish. Horrible cardboard food. No variety for vegetarians, which we are. ”

“ They are given pizza and bacon sandwiches daily. ”

PARENTS WANT **GOVERNMENT** ACTION TO IMPROVE SCHOOL FOOD

Our polling revealed strong support for increased government involvement in initiatives to improve the quality of school food. We found overwhelming expectations from parents that government not only ensures school meals meet nutritional requirements but that it actively oversees compliance through some form of inspection or enforcement. Parents have a clear understanding of the importance of equipping school kitchen teams with proper training in nutrition to improve quality. Importantly, parents view government action on school food as a key indicator of its commitment to child health and wellbeing, suggesting meaningful reforms could also improve public trust.

78%

said the Government should actively inspect and enforce the School Food Standards in every school.

83%

would support the introduction of an official "School Food Quality Inspector" to grade schools on nutritional quality, with results published publicly.

80%

think the Government should make training in child nutrition and healthy food preparation mandatory for school chefs.

83%

believe the Government has a responsibility to ensure school meals are nutritious and help support children's health, growth and learning.

81%

said their view of the Government's commitment to children's health and wellbeing would improve if it took action to provide fresher, higher-nutrition school meals.

Parents on the problems that need fixing:

“ Children come home hungry every day; they're not being given what is on the menu but mostly jacket potatoes (just a half a potato) and pasta instead. ”



PARENTS WANT TO BE **PART OF** THE SOLUTION

This polling highlights that parents are eager to play an active role in improving their children's school food. A significant portion of parents take the initiative by looking at school menus and engaging in conversations with their children about meals, demonstrating a strong desire to stay informed and encourage healthy food choices. This involvement reflects a broader willingness among parents to collaborate with schools and policymakers to ensure that children receive healthier, more nutritious meals during the school day.

63%

of parents said they would like to be involved in shaping what children eat at school.

41%

check school menus themselves, and **59%** talk to their child about meals to stay informed.

CROSS-INCOME AND **REGIONAL** SUPPORT FOR CHANGE

Across income brackets and regions, parents overwhelmingly believe it is important that school meals are prepared with fresh and/or nutritious ingredients. Nationally, more than 90% of parents are in agreement with this, in some regions this rises to 98%. There is even closer alignment when we compare this response across income brackets, with levels of support ranging from 93% all the way up to 98%.¹ **School food quality is not a niche issue** – it's something that matters for all parents.

Parents across the income and regional spectrum also feel strongly that government has a responsibility to ensure school food is nutritious and helps support children's health, growth and ability to learn: with strong support for this ranging from 74–88% across regions and 78–84% across income brackets.² This should embolden decision makers to enact real and substantive change and ensure that government gets this right. Our School Food Vision [page 11] outlines what we argue this change should look like.



¹ <https://chefsinschools.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Chefs-in-Schools-May-2025-Survey-Summary.pdf>

² https://chefsinschools.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Chefs-in-Schools-May-2025-Survey-Summary_Region_Income.pdf



OUR VISION FOR SCHOOL FOOD: NOTHING SHORT OF TRANSFORMATIONAL



When pupils sit down together for a filling, nutritious and delicious lunch, amazing things can happen. It's a chance for learning and to develop healthy food habits for life. It can have a positive effect on school culture and behaviour. And importantly, it provides a chance to share the joy of eating good food, with peers and adults alike.

Too often, food in schools mimics the wider obesogenic food environment. Children can be pushed into wasting money on cleverly branded, processed foods that make large profits for food companies. Schools have an opportunity to shape food culture – rather than be passive recipients of it. They can be where every child is given the opportunity to access affordable, nutritious food.

To exploit the huge potential of school food, the revised standards must be robust, ambitious and improve the state of play. Above all else, the update must include a proper system of monitoring and compliance.

- **EVERY CHILD** should be able to eat their school meal in a pleasant environment, with sufficient time to enjoy their food and recharge.

- **EVERY MEAL** should be made with fresh, nutritious ingredients by chefs and kitchen teams who are properly trained, recognised and remunerated.

- **EVERY SCHOOL** should seize the opportunity to make lunch an important part of children's learning and development.



SPECIFIC REFORMS TO THE SCHOOL FOOD STANDARDS

	WHAT'S NOT WORKING RIGHT NOW	WHAT DO PARENTS SAY?	OUR VISION FOR REVISED STANDARDS
MONITORING	Currently there is no monitoring of the standards.	<p>Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the government monitoring school food standards.</p> <p>83% support a formal quality inspector that grades nutritional quality of school food.</p>	<p>Accountability and monitoring must be baked in to ensure quality. The Food Standards Agency should monitor compliance during their regular kitchen inspections. Ofsted should ask governors how they are ensuring the school complies with the standards.</p>
PACKAGED JUNK FOOD	There is currently no explicit standard regarding this. Packaged junk food is a familiar sight in secondary schools – including high street brands.	<p>Over three quarters of parents³ recognise that the food children eat in school, helps shape their eating preferences and habits.</p> <p>In total, 80% of parents back restrictions on junk food in schools so long as overall food quality is improved and/or meal sizes remain the same.</p>	<p>Government has already boldly implemented a <u>junk food ad ban</u>⁴. Our vision is that this bold thinking is applied to schools – making these junk food free zones.</p> <p>Pre-packaged processed foods which are high in sugar (or NSS alternatives)⁵, salt and fat should be taken off the menu entirely.</p>
DRINKS	<p>Current standards allow combination juice drinks that are high in sugar.</p> <p>Free drinking water is mentioned in the standards but the regulations don't specifically state this should be offered in dining rooms, therefore it often isn't in secondary schools.</p>	<p>Nearly half of parents (44%) say their child buys bottled water at school. A fifth of parents reported their children buying fizzy drinks.</p>	<p>Children are being encouraged to buy cleverly branded drinks, which offer little to no nutritional value, instead of spending their money on food. Many of these are high in sugar or sweeteners.</p> <p>Our recommendation is that the only drinks for sale should be unsweetened, unflavoured milk.</p> <p>Plain or naturally flavoured water must be available for free in school dining rooms.</p>

³ <https://chefsinschools.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Chefs-in-Schools-May-2025-Survey-Summary.pdf>

⁴ <https://healthmedia.blog.gov.uk/2024/12/06/here-are-the-facts-about-our-junk-food-ban/>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sacn-statement-on-the-who-guideline-on-non-sugar-sweeteners/sacn-statement-on-the-who-guideline-on-non-sugar-sweeteners-summary>

Continued



	WHAT'S NOT WORKING RIGHT NOW	WHAT DO PARENTS SAY?	OUR VISION FOR REVISED STANDARDS
PROTEINS	<p>Current standards set a minimum requirement for meat and poultry that excludes vegetarian schools. There is no limit on highly processed proteins that are often the default for vegetarian pupils.</p> <p>The number of days on which dairy can be offered as a protein source to vegetarians is restricted.</p>	<p>Parents were very clear – food should be fresh and nutritious.</p> <p>Over 80% would look more favourably on a government that ensures fresh, high-nutrition meals.</p>	<p>Whilst the evidence on ultra-processed food is as yet unclear, parents are clear that food should be both fresh and nutritious. Many processed meat alternatives are high in salt and additives, to replicate the flavour of meat.</p> <p>Our recommendation is that all school breaktime snacks and lunch meals contain a whole, minimally processed protein as the primary protein source (e.g. meat, poultry, pulses, lentils, egg, fish, dairy) – at least four different protein sources per week.</p> <p>We recommend that cheese is only offered on two days per week, to encourage a wider variety of foods – especially at breaktime, when the default is often pizza, panini and toasties.</p>
FIBRE	<p>Current standards require that one or more portions of vegetables or salad are offered as an accompaniment every day, with a variety across the week. It isn't clear that this requirement applies to snack or grab & go food, which is the norm in secondary schools.</p> <p>Standards stipulate that wholegrain starchy foods should be provided once per week.</p>	<p>The polling data is clear, both that parents want to see healthier food offered, but that this shouldn't mean smaller portions or less food offered.</p> <p>As parents do at home, school chefs have to balance the desire to get children to consume high fibre foods, with the challenge of encouraging children to eat foods that are not always familiar to them.</p>	<p>Standards should encourage variety and enable creativity. We recommend that the standard for vegetables is expanded to make clear that fruit, vegetables or salad must be offered with every meal, whether this is at breakfast, break, or lunch. Guidance should encourage schools to offer free to access salad bars as a way of complying with this standard and minimising waste.</p> <p>We recommend that all starchy foods (excluding pastry and potatoes) are at least 25% wholegrain, and that potatoes are only allowed as a starchy accompaniment twice per week.</p>

Continued 

	WHAT'S NOT WORKING RIGHT NOW	WHAT DO PARENTS SAY?	OUR VISION FOR REVISED STANDARDS
SWEET TREATS	Current standards allow high sugar desserts to be offered every day, provided they also contain fruit twice a week. Cakes & biscuits can additionally be sold at lunchtime.	<p>Over three quarters of parents said that when their child makes food choices without guidance, they are likely to pick items high in sugar, salt and fat.</p> <p>A total of 83% of parents support items such as cookies or sugary desserts being restricted in schools provided quality and meal sizes are sufficient – a quarter of those parents support them being removed entirely.</p>	<p>We know from our work in schools that children of all ages will eat fruit for dessert, provided it is fresh and tasty. We also recognise that there are solid nutritional reasons for encouraging children to consume calcium.</p> <p>Our recommendation is that desserts, cakes or biscuits, which have their place in a balanced diet, should only be offered as part of a meal, a maximum of twice per week. On other days and at other meal times, fruit (other than dried) or unsweetened yoghurt should be the default. A portion of honey or jam could be offered with yogurt.</p>
SCHOOL DAY	There is ambiguity and confusion around which standards apply when. Loopholes allow some standards to be bypassed.	81% said their view of the Government's commitment to children's health and wellbeing would improve if it took action to provide fresher, higher-nutrition school meals.	<p>A Whole School Approach to food means considering the food provided at every mealtime in the round, whether this is delivered by the same or different providers. Standards should be applied to all food served throughout the school day, including breakfast, breaktime and after school.</p> <p>New standards should be explicit that rules on protein, vegetables, sugar, fat and starchy foods etc apply to grab-and-go/snack items.</p>
BUYING STANDARDS	There is no mention of buying standards.		Introduce ingredient quality controls aligned with Government Buying Standards (or a school specific alternative).

The standards must enable menus that reflect the diversity within a school's community, consider the lunch experience and give school chefs the freedom to serve nutritious food children want to eat. There is nothing wrong with pizza or fish and chips – both can be made well and packed with nutrients, they just shouldn't be available every day. Quality and variety are what matter. Supplementary guidance should also be included to ensure that catering and curriculum align. What children learn in class about varied diets and sustainability must be reflected on menus.

To show it's possible to beef up standards and have great, tasty food that kids love, we've produced some example menus that would comply with these standards – you can find them on our website at chefsinschools.org.uk/FeedThemWell.

An ambitious vision for school food requires ambitious baseline standards. These new standards must be coupled with guidance and training that sets the tone for school food culture. With a minimum standard in place, schools can be encouraged to build towards brilliant. Standards must allow innovation and creativity so food is exciting to eat and delicious. Some of the current standards aren't working, our recommendations on the prior pages set out what needs to be addressed.

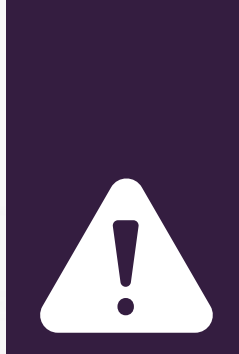
Transforming school food means empowering kitchen teams to serve up incredible food. They are a skilled workforce, perfectly placed to ensure every child has the food they need to thrive. School chefs and catering teams **must play a part in reviewing the standards**. Their insights will ensure the new standards are inspiring, allow creativity but are also practical and possible.

Through our work in schools we've found lots of great ways to get children trying and enjoying nutritious, delicious foods. For example, we know from experience that free salad bars allow young people to experiment with new, nutritious foods without a risk they might not like them and therefore go hungry. Providing free fruit is also another winning approach. With the right baseline standards in place, kitchen teams can innovate and find what works for them.

This is about much more than food. It's about setting children up for life. Schools are an opportunity to reach every child and pass on a love and understanding of varied diets. Investing in children – and our society – means changing how we think about school food. That means more real food, cooked from scratch. It means keeping junk food out of schools. And it means understanding that food is an important part of every child's learning experience.



**CHILDREN ARE
OUR FUTURE,
SO LET'S FEED
THEM LIKE IT!**



PROBLEM AT A GLANCE



Why is bold change needed? Every day, millions of children in England eat at least one meal at school. For many, it might be their only meal of the day.

Every interaction with school food is also a chance to educate children. But too often, this incredible potential is being wasted.

Too many children are still being served food that's ultra-processed, low in nutrition and not fit for purpose. The School Food Standards are not routinely enforced, and in many secondary schools, unhealthy options are available to pupils every single day. Let's take a closer look at the problem.

“ The meals are prepared off site and are frozen. They are then heated for the children. They are ultra processed in my opinion and I am very disappointed in them. ”

Parent Quote, 2025 Polling

“ Probably the worst offending food is the breaktime food. It is almost all entirely beige - and it's the same every day. It's pastries, bacon sandwiches, donuts, pizza slices, paninis... And that's what kids are eating every day. ”

Adam Bernstein, Chef Trainer, Chefs in Schools

School kitchens are stretched. The workforce is undervalued and school chefs are not required to have training in nutrition — despite feeding children at a critical stage of development.

This matters even more now. With the cost of living crisis continuing to hit families hard, school meals have an even more important role in healthy development. But while need has grown, access to fresh, nutritious and affordable food in schools has not kept pace.

“ Our current food environment is set up to make processed foods accessible and affordable, and so it's vital that we protect school food environments to ensure children's health and wellbeing is being prioritised. School meals are not just about providing sustenance, they are about equity and opportunity. Access to nutritious school meals can help break down barriers to opportunity by boosting attendance, concentration, and attainment. ”

Isabelle Lloyd (RNutr), Nourish Project Officer at School Food Matters (SFM)

At the heart of this is a simple principle: no child should be held back because of the food they're offered at school.

We believe school food can be — and should be — a tool, an educational asset and a statement of what we value as a society. But that will only happen with leadership. With proper training, accountability, effective funding and standards that are followed — not just written down and then routinely ignored. And that is where these new standards must come in. Now that all children whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit will have access to a free school meal each day, it's more important than ever that the revised standards ensure quality school food becomes non-negotiable in the dining hall.



“ We shouldn’t just champion school meals— we should champion excellent school food. Food with dignity. Food that reflects care, culture and ambition, the same ambition that children in our schools have right now to thrive. ”

Amber Francis, School Head Chef & Winner of BBC’s Great British Menu 2025

A SNAPSHOT OF THE PROBLEM

Across the country, many hard-working school chefs craft fresh, nutritious meals from scratch. Food is prepared with love, served with care and wolfed down with appreciation by hungry school children. And yet, in too many schools, ‘junk’ snack food is served alongside limited portions of these homemade meals. With limited time, money and space to eat, children end up pushed towards the cleverly-branded ‘junk’ products. In some cases, the School Food Standards are being ignored. In other cases, ambiguity in the standards is allowing this junk to creep in.

To illustrate the challenge, we’ve listed three products currently available and marketed to schools. One drink. One snack. One sweet treat. These items all comply with current standards, but can be **high in sugar, saturated fat, salt or ultra-processed ingredients**. A growing number of these brands also market their products directly to children and young people via social media.

Two of the products are marketed towards secondary schools, one to primary schools. For each product, we’ve used government dietary recommendations for the corresponding age range.⁶

6" SAUSAGE ROLL, 120G PORTION

Marketed to secondary schools

- **Number of ingredients:** 21
- **Calories:** 360 kcal. 14% of recommended intake for an 11-16 year old male and 18% for an 11-16 year old female.
- **Saturated fat:** 9g. 29% of recommended intake for an 11-16 year old male and 37% for an 11-16 year old female.
- **Salt:** 0.8g of salt. 14% of recommended intake for all 11-16 year olds.

TROPICAL FIZZ DRINK 330ML

Marketed to secondary schools

- **Number of ingredients:** 11
- **Sugars:** 16g (equivalent to three teaspoons). 50% of recommended intake for an 11-16 year old male and 61% for an 11-16 year old female.

WRAPPED BELGIAN WAFFLE (One x 35g portion without any toppings)

Marketed to primary schools

- **Number of ingredients:** 17
- **Calories:** 157 kcal. 8.6% of recommended intake for a 7-10 year old male and 9.2% for a 7-10 year old female.
- **Sugars:** 9.27g (almost two teaspoons). 38.6% of recommended intake for a 7-10 year old male and 40% for a 7-10 year old female.
- **Saturated fat:** 3.5g. 15.9% of recommended intake for a 7-10 year old male and 16.7% for a 7-10 year old female.
- **Salt:** 6.9% of recommended intake for any 7-10 year old.

⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a749fece5274a44083b82d8/government_dietary_recommendations.pdf

These examples illustrate that even products that are currently compliant with the legal standards (and marketed as such) can take up significant percentages of children's daily recommended intakes of fat, sugar and salt.

While no food is inherently harmful if enjoyed in moderation, the reality is that children can and do purchase multiple items like this every single day. All three of these products also contain many ultra-processed ingredients. As Dr Chris van Tulleken explains in *Ultra-Processed People*,⁷ foods consisting of very low cost-ingredients are 'specifically engineered to drive excess consumption.'

School kitchens are tough workplaces, we know that – we work in them every day. Making every single product from scratch, although our ideal, may not be possible for every school. Equally, we believe that a balanced diet isn't one that demonises and bans particular foods – cake, burgers and pizza can all feature on a balanced menu. But products designed to drive excessive consumption of foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt, are far from a 'necessary evil'. They are designed to make profits for food companies and they do not belong in schools.

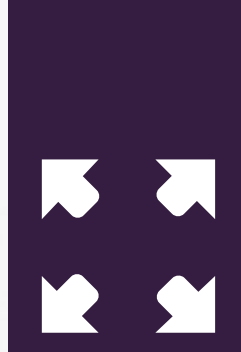
The new School Food Standards should allow space for chefs and caterers to get creative and introduce children to a range of foods that offer nutrition and joy in equal measure.

ON THE GROUND: A STUDENT'S WEEK OF SCHOOL FOOD

Below is a real life example of what one young person ate throughout a week at their secondary school. This has been shared by a young activist who is campaigning with the organisation [Bite Back](#).

DAY	FOOD EATEN AT SCHOOL	NOTES	IMAGE
	Hot chocolate Stir fry Cost estimate = £3	<i>"Hot chocolate has a very sweet taste, otherwise warm. Stir fry felt rubbery and was bland."</i>	
	Hot chocolate Margarita pizza Brownie Cost estimate = £4	<i>"Hot chocolate was very sweet and warm. The pizza was greasy and a bit cold, along with it being very small. Brownie was soft and a bit cold."</i>	
	Pancakes Chicken and chips Chocolate Cupcake Cost estimate = £5.10	<i>"Pancakes were plain, a little bit warm, and soft. Chicken was greasy and the chips were dry and cold. Chocolate cupcake was sweet and very soft."</i>	
	Fruit Pizza panini Cost estimate = £3.10	<i>"Pizza panini was very filling and tasted good. A bit on the greasy side. Fruit was not fresh, it tasted like it was a day old."</i>	

⁷ C van Tulleken, *Ultra Processed People*, 2023



SCHOOL FOOD STANDARDS AND MONITORING



School Food Standards in some format or other have applied to cooked school lunches since 2006, with the last update more than a decade ago in 2014. These standards established a minimum baseline for the nutritional quality of school meals in England, limiting items such as confectionery, fried foods and soft drinks. At the time, the introduction of these standards marked significant progress in moving away from highly processed, nutritionally inadequate food options. In contrast, a 2016 study found that only 1.6% of packed lunches met the same nutritional standards.⁸

In the decade since, the food landscape has changed dramatically. Rising levels of childhood obesity, increased awareness of ultra-processed foods and growing food insecurity have outpaced the standards. The standards are also inconsistently applied, rarely enforced and fail to meet the needs of today's children.

Any update to the standards will not have a significant impact unless they are monitored.

“ Through my time working as a nutritionist in schools, I have seen firsthand the impact School Food Standards can have on improving the nutritional value and the quality of school meals. However, this is not the case in all schools - mainly because the Government doesn't monitor school food, leading to inconsistencies in the quality of the meals provided. We strongly urge the Government to introduce a monitoring system to ensure the standards are implemented and followed in all schools, so every child and young person can access high quality nutritious meals. ”

Isabelle Lloyd (RNutr), Nourish Project Officer at School Food Matters



Due to a lack of monitoring, it is difficult to know exact levels of compliance or how many children are being served meals that don't support their health, growth or ability to learn. However, the Food Foundation's 2023 Broken Plate report

highlights only a quarter of secondary schools in England are known to be meeting "nutritional school food requirements."⁹ Our own experience, whilst anecdotal, suggests that compliance is low in secondary schools.

⁸ Evans, C.E.L., et al., 2020. A repeated cross-sectional survey assessing changes in diet and nutrient quality of English primary school children's packed lunches between 2006 and 2016. *BMJ Open* 10, e029688. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2019-029688>

⁹ https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/FF_Broken_Plate_Report%202022_DIGITAL_UPDATED_2023.pdf

“ This new polling from Chefs in Schools clearly demonstrates overwhelming demand from parents for better school food. Raising the bar on School Food Standards and proper monitoring are fundamental to achieving this; going even further, government should update procurement rules to prioritise British produce – not only helping children get more fresh, minimally processed food but also supporting British farmers and boosting the local economy. We hope to see government seize this opportunity to transform school food provision for the better. ”

Shona Goudie, Policy and Advocacy Manager at The Food Foundation



HEALTH, BEHAVIOUR, WELLBEING AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

A body of research highlights why the new standards must be monitored to ensure every child benefits fully from any improvements. An Imperial College London study found that: “British children consume 65% of their daily calorie intake as ultra-processed foods.” In children, “UPF is associated with an increased risk of being overweight or obese in later life.”¹⁰ Poor school food isn’t just a missed opportunity—it will contribute to the wider public health challenge. The National Food Strategy¹¹ writes that children living in the poorest areas are four times more likely than children from the richest areas to be severely obese when they arrive at primary school. They are five times more likely to be severely obese when they leave it.¹² Widespread anecdotal evidence points to a positive correlation between nutritious school food and improved attainment and behaviour in school. In 2021, in a report investigating the association between poor mental wellbeing and low nutrition in school children, a “strong association” was found between higher combined fruit and vegetable consumption” and “higher wellbeing”.¹³

SUMMARY

This growing body of evidence makes one thing clear: the case for monitoring the standards is stronger than ever. With the expansion of free school meals to all children in families receiving Universal Credit, it is vital they reflect modern nutritional science and meet children’s needs. This recent polling shows 78% of parents support the active inspection and enforcement of these standards in every school.¹⁴

¹⁰ Parnham, J. C., Chang, K., Rauber, F., Levy, R. B., Millett, C., Lavery, A. A., von Hinke, S., & Vámos, E. P. (2022). The Ultra-Processed Food Content of School Meals and Packed Lunches in the United Kingdom. *Nutrients*, 14(14), 2961. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14142961>

¹¹ <https://www.healthactionresearch.org.uk/obesity/national-food-strategy/>

¹² NHS Digital. (2020). National child measurement programme, England 2019/20 school year. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2019-20-school-year/deprivation>

¹³ Hayhoe, R., et al., 2021. Cross-sectional associations of schoolchildren’s fruit and vegetable consumption, and meal choices, with their mental well-being: a cross sectional study. *BMJ Nutrition, Prevention & Health* 4. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjnp-2020-000205>

¹⁴ <https://chefsinschools.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Chefs-in-Schools-May-2025-Survey-Summary.pdf>



CONCLUSION

A CLEAR CASE FOR CHANGE

KEY FINDINGS - A REMINDER OF WHAT PARENTS WANT

96% of parents say it's important that school meals are fresh and nutritious.

66% of parents expressed concern about junk food being available to their child every day in secondary schools.

82% believe fresh ingredients are essential for children's health, growth and learning.

83% support stronger government action to improve school food.

78% support the active inspection and enforcement of these standards in every school.

If the right support, guidance and checks are in place to ensure school food quality is good, there is a huge opportunity to fuel child health now and in the long term.

The message of this report is clear: parents want fresh, nutritious meals for their children, but the current system too often falls short. A government-led commitment to focus on child health is welcome, and ensuring every child can access and enjoy tasty and nutritious food in schools is a vital first step.

This report is not just a catalogue of problems; it offers a way forward. Grounded in expert evidence and lived experience, it sets out practical, achievable steps. Parents have spoken – they want to see government protect their children while they are in school. And we know from our network of school chefs, just how keen the people who work in school kitchens are to serve up tasty food that is good for the children they care so much for. The school food industry needs clear guidance from government and a level playing field to operate from. Commercial interests should not dictate the standards. Standards that meet children's needs should be set, tested and then funded effectively and appropriately.

We encourage the Government to ensure that reforms are bold and thorough, prioritising inclusive, affordable solutions. The new standards must guarantee that every child – regardless of circumstance – can access food that supports their health, wellbeing and ability to learn.

Kids are our future, let's seize this opportunity and feed them like it.

THE LAST

WORD

“ There is now robust evidence showing that giving children a proper cooked lunch improves academic attainment, as well as health and wellbeing. Hungry children can’t concentrate. They will fall behind. Too many children from hard-pressed families have been missing out on the nourishment they need, as well as the socialisation and pleasure that comes from eating a proper meal, together.

I’m glad the Government is finally updating the School Food Standards. I chaired the group that wrote them back in 2014. They were a big step forward then, but they haven’t kept pace with what we now know about nutrition. Worse, they’ve often been ignored or twisted to allow ultra-processed junk to creep back in.

Feeding children well is the bare minimum. But school food can be so much more — a daily lesson in how to live well. This is a great step in the right direction. ”

Henry Dimbleby,
Co-founder & co-chair of trustees
Chefs in Schools



ON THE GROUND

A SCHOOL CHEF'S VIEW OF THE CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

To complement the insights from our parent polling, we turned to Jake Barwood, a former chef and food educator recruited into a secondary school by Chefs in Schools, turned leading school food campaigner. Drawing on his work with Chefs in Schools and The School of Artisan Food, Barwood provides an insider's perspective on the key challenges facing school food in England – and practical solutions to help overcome them.

JAKE BARWOOD

was previously Head Chef and Food Educator at The Totteridge Academy, where he won Public Sector Chef of the Year in 2022. Most recently, Jake has been a Strategic Lead on the School of Artisan Food's Food Education Mapping Project, visiting 23 secondary schools across England, to understand how young people learn about food. Jake continues to work with Chefs In Schools and also delivers 'Thrills and Grills', a Holiday Activity and Food programme at the Food Museum, where students aged 6-11 can build food confidence and cooking skills in an outdoor setting.



INSIGHTS FROM A SCHOOL CHEF AND CAMPAIGNER



According to the DfE (2025), a child's healthy, balanced diet should consist of:

- Plenty of fruit and vegetables
- Plenty of unrefined starchy foods
- Some meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein
- Some milk and dairy foods
- Limited amount of food and drink high fat sugar and salt

Below, I outline the most pressing issues and propose practical solutions that can make a meaningful difference:

1. Leadership and Accountability

Many school leaders are unaware of the School Food Standards or feel they lack authority over what's being served, particularly when external caterers are involved. Governors, though formally responsible for compliance, often lack the time or visibility to enforce standards.

SOLUTION Encourage school leadership teams to work proactively with caterers to ensure compliance and create a positive food culture, with Governors asking for regular updates throughout the year.

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2. The Illusion of Choice

Menus often present the same few options, creating the illusion of choice. A student might eat the same sandwich or pizza all week, limiting exposure to new meals and flavours.

SOLUTION Streamline menus to offer fewer but higher-quality options that change daily, reducing waste and increasing engagement with healthy food.

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3. The Dominance of Snacks

Snack-based, high-fat, high-sugar items dominate break times, leaving the main meal of the day overlooked.

SOLUTION Introduce healthier, freshly prepared snacks that are both compliant and appealing. At The Totteridge Academy, I implemented options like biryani with crispy onions, marinated chicken wings with slaw, and bagels with creative toppings, reducing waste and improving satisfaction, within school budgets.

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4. Time and Environment Constraints

Time pressures and limited dining space lead to reliance on disposable packaging and rushed meals.

SOLUTION Prioritise communal dining experiences, reduce disposable packaging, and encourage staff to model healthy eating behaviours by joining students for meals.

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5. Sixth Form Non-Compliance

Non-compliant items such as sugary drinks and confectionery frequently reappear in sixth forms, undermining food standards and setting a poor example for younger students.

SOLUTION Apply the same standards to sixth form as the rest of the school, ensuring a consistent and healthy food offer.



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