

SCHOOL MEALS

September 2005

Jamie Oliver's TV series of early 2005 drew people's attention to the importance of school meals. Even though, Jamie, as 'the face of Sainsbury,' is no enemy of corporate influence in food production and health, it is true that low spending on ingredients and labour by the private companies that run school dinners has a major impact on children's health.

1. Introduction and History

1.1 Executive summary

The provision of school meals in Britain has been prominent in the media recently, especially since Jamie Oliver's television series in early 2005 drew attention to the poor quality of food served in many schools. Attention is linked to growing concerns with obesity amongst children and an array of physical and mental health problems associated with poor diet. Concern has been accompanied by a number of initiatives from government to grass roots to improve the quality of food, or at least moderate the worst excesses of poor quality. However, the root causes of the serious problems lie in the decision to privatise school meals provision along with other local authority services in the 1980s. It was judged that such services should be open to competition to ensure costs were kept down. Campaigners have focused on poor-quality meals resulting from under-paid and poorly trained kitchen staff, lack of kitchen facilities, reliance on wholesalers providing mass-produced pre-prepared food, and the lack of fresh ingredients. These problems can be directly related to the system under 'best value' in which driving down costs becomes the major motivating factor for local authorities obliged to run meals through a private company or to remain competitive with a privatised service.

The spotlight could be turned more strongly on the large multinationals to which many services are contracted: the Compass Group, Sodexho and Initial. This would reveal the costs of a system in which school meals are run by the private sector for profit. While these private companies are benefiting, food quality and nutrition is being undermined, with children's health the casualty. Unfortunately, what has happened to school meals can serve as a useful example to highlight the negative implications of encroaching privatisation in state education, and in public services in general.

1.2 History

School meals were provided as a charitable act from the mid-nineteenth century and expanded after the 1870 Education Act, amid rising concerns about undernourished children.[1] Manchester and Bradford began to provide school meals, and lobbied central government to legislate encouraging other local authorities to follow.[2] The Liberal government elected in 1906 introduced policies dealing with the poor health of Britain's children, with an urgency brought on by fears about the nation's capability for war and colonial conquests. These policies included the 1906 entitlement for local authorities to provide food for poor children. By 1945 1.6 million meals were



School meal provision was made compulsory, by the 1944 Education Act, which made it a statutory duty rather than optional entitlement for local authorities. This was part of the wide political shift of the 1940s under Labour that involved the creation of the welfare state and the NHS. In 1945 school meals were described by the Ministry of Education as having 'a vital place in national policy for nutrition and well-being of children.'^[4] A 1999 survey by the Medical Research Council suggested that despite rationing, children in 1950 had healthier diets than their counterparts in the 1990s, with more nutrients and lower levels of fat and sugar.^[5] Regulated nutritional standards, having been introduced in 1906, were standardised in 1966.

These provisions were removed by the 1980 Education Act of Margaret Thatcher's government. The act removed the requirement to provide school meals of any nutritional standard and statutory requirement to provide meals other than for eligible children of families on income support. Additionally, school meals were opened up to Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), obliging local authorities to open services to private sector competition and award contracts to the most 'competitive' offer. It 'transformed a free education service into a commercial operation.'^[6] Spending cuts increased charges, and half a million children lost the right to free meals, so uptake fell rapidly.^[7] Schools which had provided set meals switched to free choice cafeteria systems, with services outsourced to private companies. The Social Security Act of 1986 further ended entitlement to free meals for thousands of children.^[8]

What was lost in the 1980s was not just the right to school meals, but the principle of school meals as a state-owned public service, an activity of schools, and part of children's education. The companies that stepped in, and local authorities still owning services but now needing to compete with those companies, were driven not by concerns with children's health and education, but by requirements of competition, profit and cost-cutting measures which were bound to impact on the nutritional quality and social role of school meals.

Since 1997, changes have come in very slowly, but the principle of privatised service has remained intact. 'Best Value' has replaced the system of CCT. Value is often interpreted in narrowly financial terms, and money spent on managing centralised supplies of food that can be easily assembled by cheap labour, rather than on good quality ingredients or on labour. 'Best Value' is open to an interpretation that promotes health, environmental and social concerns, but this is not how it is generally used.^[9] Nutritional standards were reintroduced in 2001, but these were not considered to be sufficient by nutrition experts (see section 2.1 below)^[10] and came with insufficient measures for enforcement,^[11] so have not had such a high impact. In the words of the Soil Association, a lot more is needed to reverse the damage caused by 'twenty years of savage under-investment.'^[12]

Another recent change has been the fragmentation of services - in 2002 80% of Local education authorities (LEAs) provided an authority-wide service, compared with nearly all in 1995. The amount of authorities with in-house providers fell from 70% to 55% in these years. 23% of LEAs now have a fully privatised service.^[13]

In the last few years, attention has been refocused on health issues, in particular obesity. Public interest in the nutritional quality of meals served to children was sparked off in February 2005 by the television programme of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, bringing the issue into the May 2005 general election.^[14] With this came a new set of government initiatives, including a pledge of 50p per day per primary child (60p per secondary child) for ingredients; a new School Food Trust; new minimum nutritional standards; and powers for OFSTED to inspect school meals.^[15]

Recent public concern has called for new initiatives and regulation, but has not sufficiently challenged the very structure of provision, which has seen school meals open to commercialisation and often taken over by multinational companies.

2. What's wrong with school meals?

2.1 Health

- * 2.1.1. Obesity**
- * 2.1.2 Mental and behavioural health**
- * 2.1.3 Chemicals**

2.2 Labour Casualisation

2.3 The costs of the 'cheap' food chain

Under the privatised school meals system, the stress placed on competition has meant a drive to keep down costs, squeezing out spending on ingredients and on labour, with Best Value interpreted narrowly on the basis of cost. As the following concerns by health experts and unions show, keeping down costs on ingredients has resulted in a reduction of the quality of school food. The concerns raised are not co-incidental, they are the impacts of a vital public service being run for private profit.

2.1 Health

Firms to which school dinners are outsourced have profit not health at heart, so tend to source cheap and poor quality ingredients and favour packaged and processed foods to save on labour costs. The result is that much of the food is high in fat, sugar and salt, and low in fresh fruit and vegetables.

Despite this drive to push down costs on ingredients, the price of school meals is actually increasing. The average spent on ingredients per day is 35p[1] (compared to a daily £1.35 by the prison service which includes an estimated 60p for lunch).[2] According to research carried out for UNISON, the average price of school meals in primary schools rose to from £1.03 to £1.31 between 1995 and 2001, whereas if it had risen in line with inflation it would only have reached £1.19.[3] This is because whilst costs are saved through labour and ingredients, further costs mount up through the production, processing, packaging and distribution of food, and administration through procurement and the management of large contracts.[4] For example, according to UNISON, schools in Wiltshire complained that they were paying £2,600 above the cost of meals to cover Sodexho's management costs and investment and to ensure the viability of the contract.[5]

A number of studies have illustrated the poor nutritional quality of school meals. According to the Soil Association, school meals contain food that 'every community dietician and the Department of Health urge the rest of us to avoid.'[6] Primary schools provide 'a low grade diet of dematerialised fish, mechanically recovered meat and poor quality produce containing pesticide residues' and are dominated by 'cheap processed and 'fast' food items packed with fat, salt, or refined sugar... and precariously low in essential nutrients.' [7] Additional research by the Soil Association showed that average meals failed to meet recommended nutritional guidelines, with analysis of meals served over a week showing children receiving 40% more salt than recommended, 28% more fat, 20% more sugar, and only 80% of the iron needed.[8] Further research commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills and the Food Standards Authority also found that meals were failing to meet recommendations.[9]

Poor quality means many parents opt their children out of school-provided food – which in turn compromises the quality for those staying with provided meals. Often packed lunches are no better, failing to 'deliver sufficient nutrition' and 'very often containing a disproportionate amount of snack foods high in fat, salt or sugar,' according to the Soil Association.[10]

The new nutritional standards of 2001 required certain food groups to be made available, rather than regulating the nutritional standard of all food served or a complete meal eaten.[11] The regulations came after a consultation process in which large, private sector catering firms argued that they would not be able to implement quantitative nutrient-based standards,[12] despite such quantitative standards being urged by the Soil Association and the Caroline Walker Trust, a charity set up to advise on nutrition for 'vulnerable groups' including children.[13] A wide platform of experts has urged the government to adopt the quantified nutritional standards of the Trust's recommendations, rather than the narrower food group approach preferred by the catering companies. [14]

2.1.1. Obesity

The dietary imbalances described above are the key factors which the World Health Organisation (WHO) links to the growing problem of overweight and obesity, together with an increasingly sedentary lifestyle. [15]

Obesity is a growing problem in the UK, linked to severe health problems including high blood pressure, heart diseases, stroke, diabetes, osteoarthritis, and various cancers.[16] In 1998 17% of men and 21% of women were obese[17] and two thirds of adults were overweight.[18] Levels have grown by 50% in England between 1980 and 1998, the fastest growth in Europe, so that it has switched from having one of the lowest to one of the highest levels in Europe.[19] Childhood obesity has become a new and growing problem: excess body weight affects a sixth of children, making it the most common childhood disorder,[20] and in 2003, 28% of children in Britain were overweight and 14% obese.[21] The need to address childhood obesity is also urgent because eating patterns and values are formed during childhood which have a serious impact on adult lifestyle,[22] and childhood obesity has a strong likelihood of persisting into adulthood, according to the WHO. [23]

Health experts urge that school should be a central venue for tackling obesity. The WHO has highlighted the importance of school as an environment in which children develop eating habits, suggesting that 'studies have shown an effect of school based intervention on obesity prevention,'[24] and that 'there is a need to stress the importance of clear and unambiguous messages to children and youths.'[25] Clearly the quality of school meals plays a huge part in this. According to the International Obesity Task Force (IOTF), school catering is 'likely to play an important role in influencing potential weight gain' and is part of the 'pastoral responsibility' of schools,[26] in which regulatory bodies should play a larger role:

***'Meals in most European schools are poorly regulated and of low nutritional value. Mistaken assumptions are made that young school children are capable of making informed choices despite the contrary evidence. There are few schools with formal mechanisms for ensuring a dialogue between teachers, parents, governors and children ... School catering staff are often poorly educated with no contractual obligations to ensure healthy nutritional meal provision...the overall lack of regulatory processes in most European countries aids the escalating childhood obesity epidemic.'*[27]**

The IOTF report shifts the focus of blame from the individual to society at large, and describes what it refers to as the 'toxic environment' created by the penetration of a commercialised culture into children's lives and food production, in particular the marketing of unhealthy food in schools. [28]

According to the Soil Association, 'the provision of healthy, high quality school meals is central to any effective national paediatric health care strategy [on obesity].'[29]

Obesity is more prevalent amongst children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and low-income families, and in particular amongst children from deprived areas.[30] Research has shown that access to shops, particularly those selling fresh fruit and vegetables, is often limited in deprived neighbourhoods, far more than access to shops selling poor quality food.[31] So poor health in such communities is not just down to individual food choices, but is a matter of 'social environment', a response to what is available, and what is marketed.[32] In such cases it is even more crucial that the onus be on public bodies including schools to ensure access to good quality food.

2.1.2 Mental and behavioural health

The links between nutrition and mental and behavioural health is controversial but increasingly backed up by scientific study, which suggests that an excess of fatty, heavily processed foods and insufficient nutrients can affect the behaviour, academic achievement and happiness of children. In a time of concern about 'antisocial behaviour' and the growth of health problems such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorders (ASD), it is crucial to take these links seriously.

Fatty acids and vitamins

Essential fats are involved in the functioning of the brain. Omega-3 oils, for example, are said to 'improve behaviour...in children with ADHD and related disorders.'[33] Fatty acids are present in fish, nuts, seeds and green vegetables, but crucially are stripped from food by industrial processing, in particular the process of hydrogenating fats to increase shelf life. As a result, the presence of Omega-3 is diminishing. The strong links between these qualities of food and behavioural problems is a powerful case for increasing the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables in children's diet.[34]

Research has suggested that behaviour, mood and achievement are affected by whether the brain receives enough of the nutrients it needs to function, and suggests that dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD are related to diet and can be improved with nutritional supplements. In an experiment in Durham amongst underachieving children given fish oils, 40% experienced rapid improvements and 50% of those with ADHD symptoms made enough progress to be no longer counted as having attention disorders. [35]

Similarly, a 2002 study found that 'antisocial behaviour in prisons, including violence, is reduced by vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids...there are similar implications for those eating poor diets in the community. 'The study suggested that 'dietary standards should be re-assessed to take account of behavioural effects.'[36] Other studies have suggested that academic performance and behaviour could be improved with increased consumption of vitamins. One study included changes in behaviour at an American high school after the introduction of healthy food into the school cafeteria. [37]

Additives

In 1999 research was carried out by the David Hyde Asthma and Allergy Research Centre, at St Mary's Hospital, Isle of Wight, on the effect of additives including sodium benzoate and the food colours carmoisine, ponceau 4R, sunset yellow and tartrazine on behaviour. The research concluded that positive changes in behaviour could be achieved by removing the additives from food.[38] The Food Standards Agency judged the methodology of the research inadequate,[39] and agreed to commission a new study.[40]

A school in Worcestershire which banned all additives from meals reported a significant improvement in pupil's behaviour.[41]

Iron and zinc

Iron and zinc deficiencies are both common. 39% of boys aged 7-10, 50% of boys aged 11-18, 59% of girls aged 7-10 and 100% of girls aged 11-18 fail to reach Department of Health recommendations of iron. According to the Soil Association, the relationship between iron level and brain function has been established, and zinc deficiency has been linked to hyperactivity.[42]

2.1.3 Chemicals

The Soil Association recommends increasing the sourcing of local and organic food in schools, suggesting that children are especially vulnerable to the health risks posed by high levels of chemicals used in industrial agriculture. High doses of agricultural chemicals in food have been linked to cancer, especially for children.[43] One study has linked a number of chemicals used both for animal weight gain and for pest control in food production, to obesity.[44]

2.2 Labour casualisation

UNISON, the public services union, found that 'a two-tier workforce had or was emerging as a matter of routine in many workplaces' where services are contracted out of local authorities to private companies - a finding it regarded as 'disturbing.'[45] The system of Best Value has meant that 'contractors build into their winning bids lower pay and conditions and poorer pensions for the new workforce.'[46] The following examples illustrate this in force in the school catering sector, which, together with cleaning and care jobs, are the worst affected by the two tier workforce according to UNISON's report:

Lancashire County Council - contracts were awarded to three catering companies, Harrison Catering Ltd, Mellor Catering Services, and Palm City Catering Group. The companies were paying transferred staff £4.80 per hour while pay for new staff dropped to £4.20.[47] Transferred staff were paid unsocial hours payments under the national joint council for local government services (NJC) agreement (salary enhancements above 37 hours a week), while new staff were denied any unsocial hours payments.[48] The companies were also reported to be increasing the number of casual and temporary contracts for new starters.[49]

Nottinghamshire County Council - transferred staff in school meals services contracted to Scolarest were being paid £4.80 for a 38 week contract where new staff were hired on £4.60 for a 34 week contract.[50]

Stevenage Borough Council - catering contract awarded to Crown Venue Catering in 2001. 'The transferred workforce has changed from a hard working, reasonably happy, conscientious, helpful workforce into a stressed out, unhappy, miserable, overworked understaffed workforce who are continually looking for new employment.'[51]

UNISON also describes Scolarest paying at or near the minimum wage to staff in contracted-out catering services,[52] and staff contracts often being 'part-time, temporary and casual contracts on the lowest points of the local government scale.' A particular problem is the term-time-only basis of contracts, which spreads low salaries across the entire year, on top of which 'school support staff have great difficulty getting any holiday work and are denied job-seekers allowance because they have an annualised salary.'[53]

This has implications not just for staff working conditions, but for the quality of school meals. What it amounts to is a 'de-skilling' of the job, with resources undermined so the service offered by staff is not as high as it could be. Together with changes in the facilities available in kitchens, it creates a system whereby the job is not supposed to be cooking, but being a 'food service operative', re-assembling and reheating pre-cooked food days before in factories and shipped long distances.[54]

2.3 The costs of the 'cheap' food chain

The availability of cheap food relies on the squeezing of livelihoods at other points in the food chain, in particular farmers and producers, and has an implied impact on rural economies and communities. See Corporate Watch's 'Food and Agriculture Project' and reports on supermarkets.

The main companies with an involvement in school meals

3.1. The Compass Group

*** 3.1.1. Scolarest**

*** 3.1.2. Castle Independent**

3.2 Initial Catering Services

3.3. Sodexho

3.4 Other companies

3.5 Wholesalers

3.1 The Compass Group Plc

The Compass Group was described as 'the catering firm at the centre of the recent row over the quality of school meals.' [1] It owns Scolarest, to which 37 LEAs have contracted services,[2] Castle Independent,[3] to which 12 LEAs have contracted services,[4] and Goodfellows Catering Management Services,[5] which runs services on behalf of one LEA.[6] These make it the largest school meals company. Compass also provides catering for the NHS through Medirest, which has contracts with 130 NHS Trusts;[7] catering services for the Ministry of Defense, police, prisons and offshore clients as well as businesses through Eurest;[8] and contract services to the public sector through Compass Contract Services. Compass owns companies catering in other sectors including leisure, conference centres and transport.[9]

In May 2005 The Guardian reported that the company had stated its profits fell 8% in the first half of 2005. The company admitted that sales of school meals had fallen 2% in the first half due to 'the political heat over school meals,' though it maintained that 'there was "no way" it was going to retreat from a global business that provided £1.5bn of sales.' [10]

3.1.1. Scolarest

According to its website, 'Scolarest is the market leader in fully managed catering services for state secondary schools,' with contracts with single site schools, LEA group schools, and through PFIs.[11] Scolarest provides food for 2,500 schools.

LEAs with services contracted to Scolarest (information from UNISON, 2002; contracts may have changed since then)

Barnsley (3 schools) Bolton (1 school), Bristol City, Carmarthenshire (1 secondary), Cheshire (3 secondary) Coventry, Cumbria, Devon (4 secondary), Dorset, Durham, E Renfrewshire (PFI schools only), Essex, Falkirk (5 schools), Greenwich, Hampshire, Highland (Lochaber area), Hounslow, Lewisham, Medway, N Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire (3 schools), Poole, Richmond upon Thames, Rochdale (4 schools), Rotherham, Sandwell, Southampton (1 PFI school), Southwark, Staffordshire (1 school), Surrey, Swindon, Torfaen, Warrington, Warwickshire, West Sussex, Wigan[12]

Scolarest's brands: Scolarest refers to its 'food court concept' in which the values ensured are 'variety, choice and above all, speed of service.' Scolarest claims to aim 'to create the quality and feel of the high street' - does this mean high street fast food outlets? Scolarest says 'the foods on offer closely match the broad and varied eating habits of our demanding teenage customers.' Some of the choices are described at www.scolarest.co.uk/Scolarest/SecondarySchools/Brands/brands.htm. Many of these seem to consist of poor quality fast food. Scolarest says that 'as market leader in state secondary school food service, it is vital that we are the architects of change, shaping the future trend of school meals.' [13] However such a role in 'shaping the future' is worrying for a company with a commercial interest to maintain, best served by low-cost, low quality food.

Complaints/investigations relating to Scolarest In May 2004 UNISON reported that: Scolarest had quit its contract in Wandsworth after five terms, after complaints over meal sizes and quality by headteachers, and £8000 in performance related fines. Uptake fell in Islington when Scolarest took over the contract for 65 schools. Before improvements were made, dieticians from Islington Primary Care Trust said that menus were unacceptable and did not meet government guidelines. Scolarest was considering whether to renew some of its 'difficult' contracts.[14]

Islington school meals staff planned a strike in February 2004, supported by heads and other school staff, over threats to cut pay. [15]

In January 2005, UNISON reported that Scolarest and Sodexo continued supplying three food products banned in Scotland to English schools. [16]

In May 2002, pupils teachers and parents threatened a boycott after canteens were taken over by Scolarest in two Bristol secondary schools, alleging that meal sizes had decreased and prices risen. 'Dinner ladies said that they have been told to cut portions and use lower quality ingredients.' [17]

Scolarest in Camden A contract was awarded to Scolarest to cater for the London Borough of Camden's LEA in 2002. In 2005, a local newspaper The Camden New Journal uncovered Town Hall correspondence which revealed serious health and safety violations as well as the poor quality of the food:

- ***Rancid lard which staff had been ordered to destroy a month earlier used in cookies described as 'disgusting' in St Alban's Primary in Holborn.***
- ***Burnt biscuits sent to Emmanuel Primary in West Hampstead covered with a 'deceitful layer of good ones placed on top' during an inspection.***
- ***New End Primary in Hampstead - eggs a month past their use-by date were found and meals were prepared a day early, against council rules.***
- ***Staff shortages forced teachers to serve lunch at Hampstead School, where almonds two years out of date, and sauces and drinks five months out of date, were in stock.***
- ***Teachers at Hawley Infants in Camden Town were forced to buy extra sandwiches for hungry pupils after Scolarest ignored repeated warnings that not enough food was being served.***
- ***Crisps two months past their use-by date were given to pupils on a day trip at Richard Cobden Primary in Camden Town.***
- ***'Appalling' cleanliness at Jack Taylor School in South Hampstead.***
- ***Children at Gospel Oak School eating 'nothing more than some mashed potato and rice pudding' after Scolarest attempted to improve standards.***
 - ***Information from The Camden New Journal, 29.04.2005 [18] Kitchens at Emmanuel CE Primary in West Hampstead were so filthy that the head teacher had to clean the kitchen herself.***
 - ***Catering staff smoking in the kitchen of Rosary RC Primary in Haverstock Hill.***
- ***Information from Hampstead and Highgate, 29.04.2005 [19]***

According to local school dinners campaigner Natasha Seery, 'staff are underpaid, ingredients are low quality and Scolarest really don't care. Imagine if these spot checks were carried out once a week. God knows what the would find.' [20]

A small number of schools in Camden have opted out of the contract with Scolarest (see section below on 'Resistance and alternatives'). However, despite significant and ongoing complaints from parents, and a Town Hall report finding that food failed to meet basic nutritional standards,[21] the LEA seemed surprisingly amenable to continuing its good relationship with Scolarest and apparently only fined the company once. [22]

3.1.2 Castle Independent

LEAs with services contracted to Castle Independent (information from UNISON, 2002; contracts may have changed since then): Brent (Primary), Brighton and Hove, Cumbria, Ealing, Kensington and Chelsea, Kingston Royal (free meals only), Slough, Southwark, Wansdworth, West Berkshire, Westminster City, Windsor and Maidenhead [23]

3.2 Initial Catering Services

LEAs with services contracted to Initial Catering Services (information from UNISON, 2002; contracts may have changed since then)

Bedfordshire, Bracknell Forest, Croydon, Devon, Dorset, E Sussex, Essex, Hampshire, Kent, Leicestershire, Merton, N Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Poole, Reading, Rotherham (3 schools), Warwickshire, Wokingham[24]

Initial, with contracts serving 17 local authorities, is the company with the second most contracts after Scolarest. It is owned by Rentokil, which runs other privatised services. It has also had problems in recent years: pre-tax profits fell by 25% in 2004 with little prospect of improving.[25] Despite this, in December 2004 UNISON reported that Initial was paying its joint chairman and chief executive £750,000 per year. [26]

3.3 Sodexho

For more information on Sodexho and its numerous activities across privatised services in the UK, see Corporate Watch company profile of Sodexho www.corporatewatch.org.uk/?lid=347

LEAs with services contracted to Sodexho (information from UNISON, 2002; contracts may have changed since then): Bristol City, Bromley, Cardiff (1 secondary), Coventry, Cumbria, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire (2 schools), Plymouth city (1 secondary), Rotherham, Swindon, Warrington, West Sussex [27]

Nutritional guidelines Sodexho's website suggests that food served must be of a certain nutritional value, but this involves 'food groups' rather than minimum nutrient levels, and its statements display a certain ambiguity. For example, it suggests that as 'a top up' to other foods, 'sugary foods and drinks can be useful energy boosters,' and the 'wide variety' of fruits and vegetables offered includes 'all fresh, frozen, canned and dried varieties' - without distinguishing between these or suggesting a minimum amount of fresh vegetables. According to the Soil Association, canned foods contain more fat and sugar than fresh equivalents.[28] Likewise, 'bread, other cereals and potatoes are an important source of starchy carbohydrate' - nothing is specified about whether these should aim to be wholemeal.[29]

Complaints about Sodexho

Wiltshire In June 2005, Sodexho's contract with Wiltshire was reviewed and renewed, but with 14 recommendations for improvement and many complaints, including from headteachers, about poor food quality and rising costs. One head said that the school was paying too much as it was not compensated by Sodexho for a 24% rise in electricity bills and because the cost was calculated by the number of children on the roll in 2001, which had since fallen. Even so Sodexho claimed that it was failing to make a profit. Responding to complaints, a Sodexho spokesperson said that 'Sodexho does a lot of work behind the scenes to boost the nutritional content of school meals.' [30] Schools complained that they were paying £2,600 above meal costs to cover management and investment costs and ensure the viability of the contract. It sounds as though everyone is losing out financially from the contract - schools, the council, those taking school meals and even Sodexho itself. [31]

In June 2004, a Channel 4 documentary claimed to uncover poor levels of hygiene and food safety at a factory preparing school meals owned by Tillery Valley Foods, a Sodexho subsidiary. Allegations included the mishandling of food; coughing and sneezing while preparing food; eating from the production line; and dipping ungloved fingers into vats of cooked food. [32]

UNISON reported in 2003 the refusal of a child's parents to allow their son to return to St John's School in Warminster in disgust at the quantity and quality of packed lunches supplied by Sodexho. His mother described the food as 'totally inadequate. My son only gets a finger roll, a 10-pence bag of crisps, biscuit and a drink. During his last seven days at school, he had grated cheese in his roll five times. It is not a balanced diet and I'm fed up with him coming home hungry and in a bad mood.' Sodexho started supplying meals after the school's kitchen was closed in 2001. [33]

Sodexho and unions

Sodexho is notorious for its anti-union practices. Students anti-Sodexho campaign groups in the US reported on a 'union avoidance' manual used by managers, showing that non-unionised staff could be paid less, illustrating loopholes in labour law and advising how to discourage workers from unionising.[34] In 2004 a division of Sodexho was ordered to recognise a union after a series of labour law violations during a union campaign, including illegal dismissals and soliciting resignations from the union.[35] In the Glasgow Royal Infirmary in 2002, Sodexho responded with what UNISON branch secretary Carolyn Leckie called a 'climate of fear' to an exposition of unsanitary conditions,[36] and flew in scab workers during a strike in August - despite which the strike was successful.[37] Sodexho has also faced claims of racial discrimination.[38]

Sodexho's Influence

Sodexho is one of the large multinational companies to benefit from the privatisation of services around the world in the last three decades. As well as school meals, Sodexho has branched into other local authority services put up for competitive compulsory tendering in the 1980s, such as cleaning and hospital catering, and by taking part in Private Finance Initiative (PFI) consortia (see section on PFI below). The expansion of PFI and Public Private Partnership (PPP) schemes is advocated by accountancy firms such as PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC), whose clients include companies standing to benefit greatly from PFI and PPP opportunities - among them Sodexho. The UNISON report 'A web of private interest' examines the interlocking interests. The report lists PFI and PPP projects in which PWC and other accountancy firms acted as financial advisors and auditors, a number of which include Sodexho as a consortium member. [39]

3.4 Other companies

A number of other companies contract services from a smaller number of LEAs: (information from UNISON, 2002; contracts may have changed since then):

Harrison Catering - Rochdale, Southwark, Surrey, Warrington (3 schools) Ealing [40]

Serviceteam - Greenwich, Portsmouth City, Sheffield

Caterhouse - Barnet, Southwark

ABM - Bromley, Harrow (secondary)

Starr Catering - Coventry (10 schools), Oxfordshire (5 schools)

Pabulum - Hampshire, Isle of Wight

Raymark - Bristol City

Aramark - Bath & NE Somerset (1 school)

Rutland Services- Rutland

Principal; Goodfellows; Nelson Hind - Bromley

Hallmark - Darlington (1 secondary, 3 primary)

Martins of Oswestry - E Riding of Yorkshire

Shire Services - Flintshire (1 former GM School)

Hyder Business Services - Lincolnshire

Redcliffe caterers - Monmouthshire (secondary)

Brambles Foods - NE Lincolnshire

Cloverdale; Kingswood; Milepack; Thorntons - Northamptonshire

eat.com - Nottinghamshire [41]

3.5 Wholesalers

Most major school meal caterers source their food from the same big wholesale firms such as Brake Brothers, Green Gourmet and Bernard Matthews. The Soil Association refer to 'major wholesalers that commonly supply school meal ingredients,' with similar menus across service providers pointing to a system of centralised sourcing from large manufacturers. [42] Its report analysed the quality of samples of products received from these wholesalers:

FOOD TYPE/ANALYSIS OF PRODUCTS

Turkey/ all processed, normally shaped and coated, and 'a substantial proportion... may be poor quality mechanically recovered meat'

Chicken /'almost always' in a 'highly processed format' raising 'concern about their meat and additive content

Lamb/most 'arrives in a minced format with no indications of its origins or provenance'

Pork/much may 'be no better than emulsified flare fat combined with some jowl'

Vegetarian/reliance on dairy products

Vegetables/most 'arrive frozen'; salads are 'ready prepared and far from fully fresh;' root vegetables often 'in bags dosed with preservatives

A number of Bernard Matthew products have been dropped by Scottish LEAs, as they do not meet new standards introduced in Scotland relating to fat and salt content of food products served in schools. A number of turkey products had up to twice the maximum recommended fat content. The same products remain legal in England. [43]

4 Privatisation and school meals

4.1 Compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) and best value (BV)

4.2 The role of PFI

4.3 The privatisation of education

4.1 Compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) and best value (BV)

'Contracting out is the villain of the piece... it has resulted in a de-skilled workforce, a shortage of staff and schools that are built without the facilities to cook proper meals.'

- Margie Jaffe, UNISON national officer [1]

It is the system of CCT introduced in the 1980s that has undermined school food provision. By opening up to market competition, meals switched from being a public provision to a private service, and services began to pursue the cheapest prices - or the highest profits. BV has the potential to be a far better system - but also the potential to be exactly the same as CCT, and where it has the potential to stay the same, this force will win out - because of the principle of competition.

Because of the system of competition, even where a service is still provided by the Local Authority, it nevertheless operates as a private company, as it is judged to need to stay competitive with the service a private company could offer. The result is that standards stay the same across the sectors. The Soil Association notes how little catering differs across different companies and local authority services, because 'school catering has been made the commercial arm of every school or local authority rather than a basic facet of the education service.'^[2] Even services run by local authorities are 'run as commercial enterprises that must meet budget and commercial targets,' often by minimising labour costs by relying on cheap heavily processed food allowing them to employ unskilled staff on poor contracts.^[3]

Nevertheless, despite the fact that local authorities are pushed to operate as private companies would, there is still a minimum guaranteed of service accountability - concerning local government pay scales for staff at least.

On paper, BV is less restrictive than CCT, allowing life cycle costs, rather than immediate price, and social and environmental criteria, to be taken into consideration. But in practice it 'generally upholds a culture where measurable, quantifiable costs remain king.'^[4] Section 16 of the 1988 Local Government Act limits consideration of non-commercial criteria.^[5] The limitations of the BV system are clear in what happened in Camarthenshire, an LEA with higher quality but higher cost school meals, due to on-site preparation using a high proportion of fresh, local ingredients. The county also had a high uptake of school meals. In 2001, the Audit Commission Best Value review criticised the service for its higher costs, demanding it cut down on fresh food preparations and cut staff's 'national conditions' of pay, or engage the private sector.^[6]

4.2 The role of PFI

Under the Private Finance Initiative, a consortium of private companies is given a contract to design, build and operate a public work such as a school. The consortium raises the funds to do this from bank loans and through shareholders. The school is then rented back to the LEA. Currently there are 130 PFI and PPP contracts for primary and secondary schools in the UK.^[7] As UNISON points out, it is important to remember that PFI does not represent any new finance because all the money is eventually paid back, plus interest on the bank loans and more for shareholder profits. PFI contracts can last up to 35 years, so even if the initial costs of a project are paid back within a few years, the consortium will continue to be paid for the duration of the contract, and thus continue making profits from taxpayers' money. Although PFI schemes are usually far more expensive than traditional methods of financing public works, UNISON suggests that one reason why they are favoured by the government is that it does not appear as borrowing on the nation's balance sheet.^[8]

Many people believe that PFI is playing a key role in the erosion of democracy in education. According to UNISON 'PFI in the education sector is not just about providing school buildings: it is also about privatising public services.'^[9] Teachers, parents and governors often feel they were not consulted adequately or kept informed about the PFI process: LEAs can withhold information about affordability or value for money on PFI schemes because it is deemed to be 'commercially confidential' – even though it could have vital implications for children's education. UNISON reports that 'the Audit Commission has identified a strong correlation between how satisfied schools users were with their new school and their level of involvement during the design phase.'^[10] The length of PFI contracts also makes it difficult for people to influence local politics through democracy – whoever you vote for, the same PFI consortium controls your child's school for the next twenty years.

Some PFI schools have found that the lengths of PFI contracts, by tying schools into long term agreements with private contractors, can hinder schools' efforts in improving the quality of meals to keep up with government guidelines.^[11] The contracts are described by UNISON as 'protracted and very inflexible.' According to UNISON national officer Margie Jaffe 'once you are tied into a PFI contract you lose all flexibility and control over what goes on.'^[12] So even if teachers, pupils and parents are unhappy with a situation it can be legally very difficult to get out of it.

A campaign group in the London Borough of Merton said they had been told by the LEA that six new PFI schools in the borough might be exempt from the new guidelines because of their contracts. Under these contracts, schools are locked into a 25-year PFI contract with New Schools, which has subcontracted all its services in a 25-year contract to Atkins Asset Management, which has in turn given a 25-year catering contract for these six schools to Scolarest. So despite complaints by parents, teachers and governors about the quality of the food, and new government regulations, the terms of the PFI contract keep Scolarest secure in its contract. In addition, the PFI schools in Merton have been built without proper kitchens, limiting the possibility for freshly cooked food.^[13]

Islington borough's education contractor, CEA, allegedly said that the borough's schools could not opt out of their contract with Scolarest as they would have to pay the equivalent of a year's profit as compensation. According to Bert Schouwenburg of the GMB, 'if we didn't have either of these unwanted companies seeking to make money out of Islington council-tax payers we would be able to concentrate on giving the kids a square meal every day.'^[14]

4.3 The privatisation of education

The changes of the 1980s allowed the quality of school meals to deteriorate as it became a privatised service, open to companies as a profit-making venture, and more recently for a small number of multinationals to gain increasing number of contracts. The legislative reforms of that decade - amidst a general culture of under-investment - encouraged these companies, removed the nutritional standards that might work as a barrier to their capability to push down costs, and obliged all local authority controlled services to operate in the same manner by competing with them.

There are a number of other ways, beyond the issue of school meals, in which the private sector is encroaching on education. Inspections services are contracted out from OFSTED. A management consultancy firm, Hay Management Consultants, was awarded a contract to develop performance-related pay for teachers, a measure opposed by teachers unions.^[15] Education Action Zones, part of an initiative to raise education standards in disadvantaged areas, are required to cooperate with businesses, which are often multinationals. Schools are expected to forge close relationships with the businesses, and they are expected to help manage schools through Action Forums, which are separate from LEAs.^[16] These have now been transformed into Excellence in Cities Action Zones (EiCAZs) or Excellence Clusters.^[17] Under the Academies system, businesses are invited to sponsor schools in deprived areas, which are 'set up as companies,' ^[18] and private sponsors gain a significant amount of control over the curriculum. In May 2005 a House of Commons Select Committee advised the government to slow down the project, as evidence revealed that schools were failing to improve standards.^[19] LEAs have been encouraged to hand over their management services to companies. The first LEA to do so was Islington, where Cambridge Education Associates took over the full functions of the LEA in 2000 - and was subsequently penalised for failing to meet its targets. ^[20]

This has amounted to a growth of the ideology of outsourcing of services so that 'the private sector has been given a role in the delivery and management of the state education system.'^[21]

5 Commercialising school environments

5.1 Sponsorship in schools

5.2 Vending machines in schools

Another area of concern relating to the increasing penetration of the private sector into state education is the commercialisation of school environments through sponsorship deals, business-provided teaching materials, and marketing and vending machines in schools. These very much work against efforts to improve children's health by allowing companies whose profit is made by selling unhealthy food a privileged position in their attempts to appeal to children.

5.1 Sponsorship in schools

Teaching unions and health experts have expressed serious concerns about the increasing penetration into schools of corporate sponsorship by companies, which in return for providing resources for schools are given excellent opportunities to market their products and establish brand loyalty amongst children. George Monbiot refers to the view of education as a commodity, in particular as an advertising venue, with the European Round Table of Industrialists suggesting that 'the provision of education is a market opportunity and should be treated as such.'^[1]

Investigations into the growing incidence of child obesity have focused on the role that commercialisation of the education environment plays in encouraging unhealthy lifestyles amongst children. The International Obesity Task Force looks at food and drinks companies' heavy marketing directed at children to establish brand recognition, and lobbying of government.^[2] The National Audit Office 2001 report says that 'commercial involvement' through sponsorship schemes 'has the effect of directly promoting sales of particular products' and 'may encourage children and their families to buy more snack foods with a high fat, salt and sugar content,' acting 'directly in opposition to initiatives to discourage over-dependence on such energy-dense snack foods.'^[3] (See 'Walkers Crisps for schools', below)

Teaching materials

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) links the growth of marketing in schools to the 'schools funding crisis' and the pressure, resulting from government under-investment, on schools to accept sponsorship deals and teaching resources offered by companies.[4] The government also encourages a climate of cooperation between businesses and schools. The Department for Education and Skills' 'Education and business links' website (EBNet) encourages businesses to have more involvement in Education through which they can 'acquire better market knowledge... gain new and more loyal customers... and improve our nation's competitiveness in the international arena.' [5] The NUT is 'deeply alarmed' at a situation in which

'some of the world's largest corporations, who are responsible for undermining health, environment and sustainable development, are at the same time being actively encouraged to become partners with schools and to provide core educational materials and services.'

Many of these companies are specifically promoting unhealthy food products. For example, a 'key skills in context' website contains a section on nutrition provided by Nestle, manufacturer of highly processed and packaged fatty products.[6] George Monbiot refers to a teaching pack distributed by Cadbury's which claimed that 'chocolate is a wholesome food that tastes really good... [it] gives you energy and important nutrients that your body needs to work properly.' [7]

Cadbury's GetActive!

This scheme promotes Cadbury's chocolate in return for providing sports and leisure facilities to schools. It is a useful way for the company to show that it is working to tackle problems of obesity, and even manages to create a platform suggesting that it is an inactive, sedentary lifestyle that is the major cause of obesity, rather than excessive consumption of the very products the company is pushing children to buy in return for the equipment. Cadbury's defended the scheme, saying that schools were 'free to... participate... at their own choice,' and that while 'chocolate is made to be enjoyed and consumed sensibly as part of a balanced diet and healthy lifestyle,' 'children's activity levels have decreased dramatically over the last 30 years while calorific consumption has decreased' - a suggestion that this, not nutrition, is the key cause in obesity.[8] The scheme gained support from government. The Consumers' Association described it as 'an irresponsible ploy to encourage unhealthy eating among kids.' [9] The Food Commission calculated that to get a set of volleyball net posts through the scheme, a school would need to spend £2000 on chocolate with 1.25 million calories, and that 'a conservative estimate shows that a ten-year-old child consuming enough chocolate to earn a basketball through the Cadbury's scheme would need to play basketball for 90 hours to burn off the calories.' [10]

Walkers Crisps for Schools

From 1999 to 2003 Walkers' crisps ran a sponsorship campaign offering books to schools in return for tokens collected from crisp packets, with the aim of making a real contribution to literacy in the community, whilst supporting the Walkers' brand values and regard in the public eye.[11] The scheme was extremely popular and actively encouraged children and their families to eat as many crisps as possible - crisps being a very unhealthy snack high in fat and salt and low in nutritional value. It constituted an incentive scheme for a certain pattern of consumption, and made teachers and parents into 'de facto marketing reps' for Pepsico, the company owning Walkers.[12] It assisted in creating a situation in which a quarter of all packets of crisps sold were sold to children. [13]

A study by Joanna Walker conducting interviews with librarians and teachers in nine schools in Sheffield suggested that schools were pushed to participate in the scheme by a shortage of funding for books and 'a government in recent years whose idea of improving funding looks towards alternative sources and partnerships involving the private sector.' [14] David Blunkett, then Education and Employment Secretary, called the scheme 'an excellent example of how business can get involved on a national level.' [15] According to the study, teachers, parents and pupils were disappointed with the amount and quality of books received compared to the amount spent on crisps and the amount of effort put in sending off the tokens.[16] Interviewees were concerned that the scheme was encouraging brand loyalty [17] and pressurising children and parents into buying the product.[18]

4.2 Vending machines in schools

Through vending machines, companies are allowed into schools to sell products such as soft drinks high in sugar and sweets and chocolate high in fat. Britain looks to be following the example of the US, where through 'pouring rights' contracts schools receive money from the company for the amount of products sold to children.[19] A third of schools allow lunchtime access to vending machines and tuck shops selling sweets and chocolate.[20] In June 2005, the British Medical Association called on the government to ban unhealthy vending machines in schools.[21] A Guardian/ICM poll in October 2003 showed that the majority of parents supported a ban of vending machines selling crisps, chocolate and fizzy drinks in schools, with an even bigger majority amongst parents from lower income families.[22]

Despite these calls, vending machines remain.[23] In PFI schools, the terms of the PFI contract can hamper efforts to remove unhealthy vending machines, as with school meal contracts. According to The Guardian, the Department for Education and Skills admitted that where PFI contractors have included profits from vending machines in their contracts, any losses incurred by removing them could be passed back to the school. [24]

6. Resistance and alternatives

Interest around school meals has been growing over the last few years, and has mushroomed in the first half of 2005. With this interest have come many positive initiatives from, amongst others, schools working by themselves, parents and pupils, campaigning groups, and the government. These responses have so far been characterised by a piecemeal nature focusing on individual initiatives and schools.[1] This is because schools are being given more autonomy, which gives them the option of running a self-managed service by opting out of LEA contracts. This is what many schools have done, and often constitutes a very positive change in the meals provision in those schools. But it is at this level that significant change has occurred, not at the level of the cost-driven decisions of how LEA contracts are awarded, or with a questioning of the privatised system.

The Health Education Trust's 'Best in Class' scheme, 'to recognise best practice' in catering, lists a number of schools that have opted out of LEA contracts, and developed kitchen facilities for in-house provision.[2] One such school is Lethbridge Primary School where parents set up a scheme called Let's Do Lunch ltd in partnership with local Sheepdrove Organic Farm to replace the previous system.[3] Subsequently take-up increased from an average of under 50 to a peak of 260 children. Apparently the amount spent on ingredients per child has doubled without the price of meals increasing.[4]

Food for Life

The Soil Association has set up a pilot project, 'Food For Life,' to introduce better menus in a number of primary schools involving a level of 'quantitative nutritional standards' rather than the government's food-groups based guidelines, a minimum of 50% local sourcing and 30% organic sourcing, as well as 75% 'prepared from unprocessed ingredients.' [5] In pilot schools described, the quality of food has been successfully improved through increasing local sourcing and use of fresh ingredients, and uptake of meals has increased.[6] Food For Life has been influential beyond this: the Soil Association has provided advice and information to 300 schools, some LEAs, and parents and teachers.[7] It also encourages the government to take on board the benefits the pilot scheme has brought and make its standards statutory regulations.

Jeanette Orrey

Jeanette Orrey, catering manager at St Peter's Primary School in Nottinghamshire, restored in-house catering at her school in 2000. She subsequently pioneered the sourcing of local and fresh ingredients, including signing up to Eostre Organics, a producers' and fair trade co-operative.[8] Significantly, cost of ingredients has risen to 60-70p, but the charges have stayed the same. Presumably because there is no private company to extract takings, the meals service is making a profit, which is reinvested in cooking facilities.[9] Jeanette became heavily involved in the Food For Life programme, and it was Jeanette's influence that inspired Jamie Oliver's 2005 television series. In 2005 Jeanette worked with the Soil Association and Ashlyn Farm, an organic farm in Essex, to set up a training kitchen for school cooks.[10]

Jamie's Schools

Another school meals personality, of course, is Jamie Oliver, whose TV series 'Jamie's School Dinners' in February and March 2005 pushed the issue into political focus. The amount of coverage it brought the issue receive was a huge achievement, pushing the government to respond, for example promising higher spending on ingredients, in the run up to the May 2005 general election. However, the programmes could perhaps have gone further in highlighting the problems with the privatised system and more general issues of growing corporate power in state education. Jamie is no enemy of corporate influence over food production and health: he has an annual advertising deal with Sainsbury's worth £1.2 million,[11] making him 'the face of Sainsbury's'. [12] A less corporate-friendly approach may have been more aware of the damaging role supermarkets have played in undermining our food culture and steering the shift towards poor quality, mass-produced food.

Case study from the London Borough of Camden

As seen above, Camden has a contract with Scolarest, whose school meals provision in the borough attracted a lot of complaints. In the context of growing dissatisfaction and increasing possibilities for schools to opt out of LEAs' contracts, a few schools in Camden have succeeded in opting out of the Scolarest contract. Firstly, South Camden Community School in Somers Town returned to in-house catering after head-teacher Rosemary Leeke judged the quality of food provided by Scolarest insubstantial.[13] Brookfield Primary School in Highgate also returned to in-house catering after complaints about Scolarest and the formation by parents of a School Nutrition Action Group, and Scolarest's refusal to include fresh vegetables in the menu. Quality has improved and uptake has risen to 70%, with pupils charged only 5p extra.[14] Parliament Hill School has also opted out of the contract.[15] However, the vast majority of the Borough's schools remain with Scolarest, amidst increasing numbers of complaints by parents that the food is not improving, and a Town Hall report finding that food failed to meet basic nutritional standards.[16]

Public sector procurement

According to a Cardiff University report, public sector procurement could be a powerful government tool to benefit consumers and producers through good quality local and organic ingredients. The 2002 Curry Policy Commission encourages local authorities to use their prerogatives to specify such sourcing. However, public sector catering, despite feeding the young, elderly and ill, often consists of poor quality, cost-driven food, according to the report, 'a totally unacceptable situation, morally and economically,' needing 'immediate attention by government.' [17]

Food Links groups have been set up to encourage local producers and food networks. These advocate public sector local sourcing, in particular for school meals.[18] The Yorkshire based Grassroots Food Network worked with Bradford Education Contract Services on a Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative, to improve quality and reduce costs and food miles by encouraging local tendering, a local supplier network, and increasing local and seasonal ingredients, at schools in Bradford. It successfully awarded a contract to supply fresh meat to a local butcher, replacing a New Zealand based frozen meat supplier.[19] A local sourcing trial in Oxfordshire resulted in improved quality, 20% lower costs, benefits to the local economy and a 70% reduction in food miles.[20] The implication of such projects is that the benefits of local procurement are only fully achieved through increasing buying from small and local producers, which cuts out the involvement of centralised multinational corporations.

But there are substantial barriers to this. At the EU level, the Treaty of Rome stipulates non-discrimination on grounds of nationality, which works against favouring local producers.[21] Existing infrastructure favours big businesses which transport standardised goods through a centralised system. Somerset Food Links' attempt to encourage local procurement met with EU and local government regulatory barriers as well as a catering culture predisposed to dealing with large suppliers.[22] Powys Food Links' failure to get past regulations resulted in its alliance with Cardiff University and the Soil Association to create the Powys Public Procurement Partnership (4P Project) to study public procurement at local and national level, and demonstrate its representation of best value in the NHS and LEAs.[23]

Despite EU regulations and disadvantageous infrastructure, in some European countries these barriers are being overcome. The Italian government, approaching school food as part of a joined up policy dealing with health, education, the environment and agriculture, rather than a profit-making venture, promoted use of organic produce in the public sector through a 1999 law as a result of which organic meals are now provided for 100,000 children. Services have in some cases been awarded to not-for-profit organisations run by parents, rather than companies.[24] In Sweden, some municipalities created independent distribution centres to remove a major advantage multinationals had over local businesses.[25] Such changes could also occur in the UK. In Wales, the Welsh Assembly has taken on a duty unique in the UK to base policies on sustainability, and through the Welsh Procurement Initiative is working against legal barriers to encourage radically new supplier structures including co-operatives and supplier associations. [26]

What has been achieved in these European examples?

- 'More fresh food, which raises the value of locality... and reduces reliance on multinationals who dominate processed foods
- 'More organic food, which in the UK would have obvious health and environmental benefits as well as increasing possibilities for local producers
- 'More creative requirements for domestic products, seasonal products, regionally specific products [and in the UK this could also mean ethnically appropriate products, something few large catering companies can manage]
- 'Procurement strategies with the participation of... parents and teachers, doctors and nutritionists
- 'More support from above'[27]

To ensure the growth of local procurement in this sector, state intervention is needed to challenge the dominance of multinational companies, to create a level playing field, and to encourage better ways to get food to schools. It should also regulate marketing opportunities in schools. This requires a shift of ideology so that healthy food is once more seen as a part of a state education system and 'state intervention in food choice'. Kevin Morgan and Adrian Morley, whose Cardiff University report suggests 'local food chain mobilisation' through Regional Development Agencies, suggest that

'In our model of sustainable development, the school meal becomes a prism through which we should design healthy eating for young people, create local markets for local producers, and secure lower food miles for us all.'[28]

Conclusion

'Decent meals give our children a better start in life... We want to see a national, comprehensive school meals service; adequately funded, publicly provided and with staff on fair pay and conditions that reflect their worth.'

- Dave Prentis, UNISON General Secretary[1]

The 'service' of school meals has been turned into a venue for private sector profit and competition, and distanced from the idea that it was a public service central to the provision of state education as advocated by the architects of the welfare state. Recent public focus on the deteriorating quality of school meals and particularly on the multinational companies providing them in a large number of schools has been a major breakthrough and has forced the issue on the political agenda. However, to really make a significant difference to children's health, and by implication to their education, the government has to look to more radical responses embracing greater regulation, encouraging local and organic sourcing practices at the expense of large, centralised companies, and ensuring a minimum of staff pay and conditions. Health and education will only be best served by policies that prioritise them above a narrow need to ensure competition and 'best value' in outsourced public services. If we want healthy food and healthy children, we need to build a system better placed to provide it.

8. Links and further resources

Get involved as a parent or teacher in your school's meal provision- or campaign against privatisation in schools.

On food quality in school meals

The Soil Association has many resources on the school meals issue and campaigns for higher nutritional standards, and for more sourcing of local and organic food. See its report 'Food for Life:

Do our children need healthy food?'

([www.soilassociation.org/web/sa/saweb.nsf/9f788a2d1160a9e580256a71002a3d2b/65a3b4988446e96280256db400380e4c/\\$FILE/Healthy%20local%20organic%20school%20meals.pdf](http://www.soilassociation.org/web/sa/saweb.nsf/9f788a2d1160a9e580256a71002a3d2b/65a3b4988446e96280256db400380e4c/$FILE/Healthy%20local%20organic%20school%20meals.pdf)). The Soil Association also have a 'School meals action pack'

(www.soilassociation.org/web/sa/saweb.nsf/9f788a2d1160a9e580256a71002a3d2b/b71c3714e692129980256db400380e4d!OpenDocument) and other resources for teachers

(www.soilassociation.org/web/sa/saweb.nsf/GetInvolved/ffl.html).

Local Food Links projects, steered by the Soil Association, work for more local sourcing in school catering sourcing practices. The Powys Public Procurement Partnership was set up between Powys Food Links, Cardiff University, and the Soil Association. See also the report, 'Relocalising the food chain: the role of creative public procurement' (www.organic.aber.ac.uk/library/RelocalisingProcurement.pdf)

The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) stresses the need for good quality, healthy and easily accessible free school meals as crucial for children in low income families to tackle disadvantage. See its School Meals Fact Sheet, www.cpag.org.uk/info/Povertyarticles/Poverty%20120/SchMealssupple.pdf. Recommendations include a 'universal free school meals service,' to get rid of the inequality and stigma in the system which results in 20% of those entitled to free meals not taking them up.
www.cpag.org.uk/campaigns/school_meals.htm

The Health Education Trust (HET) www.healthedtrust.com/index.htm is a charity working with young people to encourage healthy lifestyles. Amongst other things it looks into issues around vending machines, and has set up an Independent National Database of Information on Catering Excellence in Schools (INDICATES) to 'facilitate easy access and communication of relevant information.' www.healthedtrust.com/pages/natldb.htm

Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming is a network promoting more sustainable food and agriculture policies. Its Children's Food Bill campaign has supported a bill currently in parliament - you can support the bill and contact your MP about it at: www.sustainweb.org/child_index.asp The bill includes tighter nutritional standards for schools and action against vending machines.

School Nutrition Action Groups (SNAGs) are school based alliances involving staff, pupils, caterers and parents to improve the quality and range of food. In many instances SNAGs have succeeded in ensuring real change in the system of provision (see Resistance and Alternatives section above)

The Caroline Walker Trust produces quantitative nutritional standards and has advised on the quality of school meals.

Jamie Oliver has a 'Feed me better' campaign (www.feedmebetter.com/) as well as information about school dinners on his website.

On education and school meals as public service

UNISON, the public services union, and the National Union of Teachers are good places to look for resources on the impact of privatisation on school meals, and on other education and local authority services. UNISON have produced a report on 'School meals in the 21st century' (www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/12416.pdf), and reports on issues impacting on all local authority services including 'Best value and the two-tier workforce in local government' (www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/B318.pdf) and 'How the big five accountancy firms influence and profit from privatisation policy,' (www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/B362.pdf)

See the NUT's briefing on schools' role in promoting child health and combating commercialisation (www.teachers.org.uk/resources/pdf/combating_comm.pdf)

See also the **Campaign for State Education** www.casenet.org.uk/business.html

For further information on **PFI**: www.partnershipsuk.org.uk/projectsdatabase/projectsdatabase.html has information on all PFI/PPP contracts in England and Wales. See also UNISON's 'Positively public' briefing from June 2005 (www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/b1923.pdf) and its report 'What's wrong with PFI in schools?' from 2003 (www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/13672.pdf)

The National Consumer Council has produced 'Guidelines on sponsorship in schools' (www.norden.org/nice-mail/issues/six/guidelines.htm)

Another article on privatisation in education: Martin Wicks, 'Stop poisoning our children,' Socialist Unity February 2005 www.socialistunitynetwork.co.uk/voices/stoppoisoning.htm

On children's health and the growing obesity problem, see:

The International Obesity Task Force (www.ietf.org) is a good source of information on obesity and the need for policies tackling it to centre around schools. See their report with the European Association for the Study of obesity, 'Obesity in Europe, the case for action,' (www.ietf.org/media/euobesity.pdf)

The National Audit Office report on the growth of obesity in England, 'tackling obesity in England' (www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/00-01/0001220.pdf) has similar suggestions.

See also the **Department of Health** report 'Obesity among children under 11' on the increase of obesity amongst children in the UK.

The World Health Organisation urge that things need to be done about child obesity, in the 2002 World Health Report (www.who.int/whr/2002/chapter4/en/index4.html) and their report on 'Diet, Nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases' (www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/who_fao_expert_report.pdf)

For information on the links between diet and mental health,

see **The Guardian report** on diet and mental health: Felicity Lawrence, 'Why it's time we faced fats,' 05.05.2005 www.guardian.co.uk/life/feature/story/0,13026,1476219,00.html The Guardian also has a large number of other articles about school meals and associated issues.

References

For our complete list of references please see our online version of the School Meals Report at: <http://www.corporatewatch.org/?lid=2045>