

School Meals: A Health Policy That Would Work

Can you give us a breakdown of the £1.35 we pay for our child's meal? Why is it that all the milk used in the canteen is powdered milk? Who is responsible for compiling the menu served in our school? What is your policy on sustaining the local food economy?

These were some of the searching questions that the parents at Betws Gwerful Goch school asked their local authority in Denbighshire. The school is located in a farming community, where lamb and beef are the staple products, making it all the more perverse that the school menu sported lots of reconstituted chicken from afar but no locally produced meat. Having lost trust in the nutritional quality of the school meal, the parents decided to give their children packed lunches instead.

This local story has a wider resonance. In fact the humble school meal is fast becoming a litmus test for the integrity of the public realm in Britain. Far from being a trivial or comical matter - symbolised by smutty jokes about spotted dick and lumpy custard - the school meal finds itself at the forefront of cutting edge debates about health, well-being and sustainable development in this country.

School meals could help to secure three important benefits. Firstly, more nutritious school food could help to reduce diet-related health problems like obesity, heart disease and diabetes. Secondly, more locally produced school meals would create new local markets for local farmers and producers. And thirdly, a more localised food chain could produce environmental benefits through lower food miles.

Can such ideas really work in practice? The answer is short and simple: they already work. In Italy, France, Denmark, Sweden, Austria and Germany public procurement policy is playing a pro-active role in specifying organic food for school children. Many Italian cities have comprehensive organic school meal systems in place. In Ferrara, for example, 80% of all food served to the city's nursery schools is organic, while Udine was one of the first Italian cities to supply organic meals to all its schools.

In Italy and elsewhere in the EU the public catering service has played the leading role in promoting nutritious local food in local schools, hospitals and care homes. Public procurement managers in the UK, however, say they cannot promote local food because their hands are tied by EU directives which forbid such practices, and they cite the fact that public contracting procedures must not discriminate in favour of local suppliers.

Although this is technically true, it is nevertheless possible to design contracts that use product qualities – fresh seasonal produce, regionally certified products, organic ingredients and so forth – which allow these cities and regions to practice 'buy local' policies in all but name.

The fact that these things are already happening gives the lie to the view that EU regulations are the villain of the piece in preventing school meals from using locally produced nutritious food. Far more of a problem is the conservative *interpretation* of these regulations by public procurement managers in Britain.

The public procurement profession claims that cost is the other big barrier to the use of higher quality food in school meals, and there is much more substance to this charge. One of the most closely guarded bits of information in local government is the amount of money that is actually allocated to food ingredients. Most parents would be shocked to discover that 35 pence is roughly the amount allocated per child for a 2 course primary school meal in Britain today.

Although 35p is nowhere near enough to provide a really nutritious school meal, most members of the Local Authorities Caterers Association (LACA) seem to perform a minor miracle daily in making these limited resources go a long way.

The simple fact of the matter is that the school meals service needs more resources and more recognition for the strategic role it performs. LACA members have still not recovered from the disastrous Tory regime of *Compulsory Competitive Tendering*, which spawned a culture of cost-cutting that had adverse effects on staff numbers, kitchen facilities, pay and morale.

More supportive regulations and more resources would go a long way to restoring the original purpose of the school meal as a social policy innovation designed to have health, educational and welfare benefits. But better regulations and more resources are only part of the solution.

If locally produced nutritious food was demanded in school meals tomorrow, it could not be delivered. Why? Simply because farmers and producers are not tooled up to supply it. Nor are the distribution networks there to deliver it. In a recent report, *Re-localising the Food Chain: The Role of Creative Public Procurement*, we argued that locally produced fresh food for schools constitutes a challenge for everyone in the food chain, from farm to fork, especially for suppliers, purchasers, distributors.

But the biggest challenge is for government. School meals cannot be divorced from the social environment of food choice and the latter is overwhelmingly stacked in favour of junk food. It is high time the UK government caught up with its more innovative counterparts in the EU and rendered locally produced healthy food a more attractive option - through creative public procurement, through better labelling schemes and through tougher regulations on foods of low nutritional value, like limits on junk food TV advertising to children for example. A stronger government stance in favour of nutritious food will induce accusations of the 'nanny state' from the junk food industry. But this is a price worth paying if the public realm is to play a more effective role in promoting health and well-being. The school meals service could be at the cutting edge of this process, as it is today in other EU countries.

At a time when diet-related diseases threaten to bankrupt the NHS - currently more an illness service than a health service - it beggars belief that we're not prepared to put a little more money into the school meals service to save ourselves a lot more money later. It's time to recognise that school meals are an investment and not just a cost.

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