

Children should design their own school meals, says research

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Research from the University of Bath recommends a radical rethink of school food to give pupils a central role in designing meals and ownership of issues such as queuing, littering and marketing of menus.

The research was commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government to ensure attempts to raise nutritional standards in schools in Wales have an impact on what pupils choose to eat.

The report calls for schools to give pupils a real say in how this is achieved and to make food and nutrition a central part of the school curriculum.

During the project children enjoyed an unprecedented level of influence over what food was served and the canteen environment, including interviewing [vending machine](#) contractors and drinks suppliers to find the best deal, and finding creative solutions to the problems of queuing and litter, as well as working with canteen staff to organise ‘themed lunchtimes.’

The changes would see schools moving away from offering food as if the canteen were a high street business, towards canteens as social enterprises, and an integral part of school life.

The report recommends that schools restrict access to off-site eating, instead organising alternative, or mobile eating concessions elsewhere on the school site for pupils in years 11 to 13.

Paul Pivcevic, research team leader, said: “Changing the diet of school pupils is about more than just improving canteen provision. Every school needs a revolution to make nutrition and eating part of the very fabric of school.

“Schools need to support a sea change in pupil democracy and pupil-driven innovation to make [school food](#) fun and to ensure that eating at school impacts at home and on soaring obesity levels and health inequalities.

“The voices of children and young people will need to count in new and innovative, even challenging ways. Without their input and collaboration canteens will simply carry on as before, as an oversubscribed, under resourced re-fuelling stop in the middle of the day, a second best to most to eating at home, or eating on the high street.

“Involvement in school meals would enable pupils to learn about nutritional content and food budgeting, to think about ‘choice’ and why

choices are limited in the school context. Our work suggests this could have a positive influence on food choices outside school and what is cooked at home.”

The two-year research study, the Appetite for Life Action Research Project, was carried out by the University’s School of Management in nine schools in Wales, to investigate how nutritional standards for school meals set by the Welsh Assembly could be applied across the country.

Schools in England have also introduced stricter standards for school meals and the research team are confident that their findings could equally be applied in England.

The Welsh Education Minister Leighton Andrews has welcomed the report and endorsed its conclusion that canteens should be an extension of the classroom.

Mr Pivcevic said: “To create healthier schools we need real leadership from head teachers, not just to introduce new initiatives but to ask themselves how nutrition can be a more central part of a school’s educational mission”.

“Head teachers need to engage with parents at every opportunity, to explain the importance of a good diet and its links with educational performance as well as to local health statistics.”

Provided by University of Bath

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