

School Dinners – Parents Questionnaire Analysis

15/05/07

We had 52 forms returns from parents out of a total number of 78 families which represents 66% of the whole school.

From the questionnaires received: 46% of children had school lunches sometimes, 33% had them everyday and 21% of children did not have school lunches at all.

Assumptions: Statistically it has sometimes been difficult to be precise. You will note that some of the percentages below may not add up to 100% because not all parents answered all questions. However, the numbers are not statistically large enough to affect the overall picture that has emerged. 21% of children did not have school lunches and therefore did not answer some of the initial questions. I have not included every comment made, but have tried to ensure that those quoted represent all the different concerns parents expressed.

When asked about the quality of the school meal

- 44% of parents thought it was reasonable
- 27% of parents thought it was good
- 17% thought it was not very good
- 10% thought it was poor
- 2% thought it was excellent

Most parents thought the food was reasonable, a further 29% thought it was above average and 27% thought it was below average. At either end of the scale, five times as many parents ranked it as poor rather than excellent.

When asked what their child/children thought of school lunches:

- 39% of children said they were okay
- 37% ranked them as quite nice
- 12% thought they were really nice
- 10% thought they were not very nice
- 2% thought they were horrible

Most children thought lunches were okay. 49% ranked them as above average and 12% ranked them as below average. At either end of the scale, six times as many children thought they were really nice as opposed to horrible. The children's views suggest that quality is not such an important consideration in enjoying their food.

When asked about the menu choice

- 44% thought it was reasonable
- 22% thought it was good
- 17% thought it was not very good
- 7% thought it was poor
- 7% thought it was excellent

The majority of parents thought the menu choice was reasonable. 29% thought it was above average and 24% thought it was below average. The same percentage of parents ranked it either as poor or excellent.

When asked about the value of school lunches:

- 41% thought it was reasonable
- 24% thought it was not very good value
- 15% thought they were good value
- 7% thought they were poor value
- 2% thought they were excellent value

Most parents thought the cost of school lunches was reasonable. 31% thought value for money was below average, while 17% thought it was above average.

This statistic suggests that lunches are fairly price sensitive and attempting to charge more could result in an increase in the perception that school dinners do not represent good value and a potential loss of children having school lunches.

My child has school lunch because

Most parents said their children had school lunch because it was easy and convenient for them (44%) and that their child actively chose to have school lunch (41%). A further 32% felt it was important for their child to have a hot meal each day, and 27% said their children had school lunches because their friends did. Only 10% of parents thought that school dinners were healthier than packed lunches.

Parents were invited to give any other reasons important to them, but most related to personal choices and circumstances and were not enough to be significant statistically for this survey.

These statistics may suggest why the numbers of children having lunch remains high. The convenience factor may outweigh some of the other concerns parents have about school lunches. The children's views also play a large part as many children appear to be involved in the decision making process. As other statistics show, a significant number of children enjoy school lunches.

What do you think is the most important Part of school lunches?

	COMMENTS
Being part of the school community and eating together/social skills	18
<i>Learning manners - Being with friends - Encouraged to try new Things - "He eats a lot more fish now thanks to school dinners"</i>	
Nutritional/healthy/balanced diet	17
Quality of meal	09
<i>Fresh ingredients - At least 1 green vegetable - fresher fruit and vegetable - Low salt and low fat content - Enjoyable/appealing food - Food to boost energy levels</i>	
Freshly cooked food	08
<i>Cooked at school - Proper cooked dinner</i>	
A hot meal during the day	05
Able to pre-order	02

Parents felt that the most important part of school lunch was the social benefits that the experience of being part of a school community offered to the children, followed closely by having a healthy, nutritious, balanced diet.

Two other important aspects identified were the quality of the meal (the ingredients that went into it), and way it was prepared (cooked from fresh as opposed to pre-packed).

Would you change anything about school lunches?

Eating experience

25

Sometimes don't get what you ordered (10 comments on this)

Get despondent about school lunches - Kitchen runs out of what they want - Doesn't match what child actually gets - Child gets left what no-one else wants - Doesn't seem fair to older children - Sometimes forced to eat or left without

Hate the trays/want real plates (6 comments on this)

Little ones rushed and not encouraged to eat (4 comments)

Not so rushed - Eats too slowly for 2nd helpings and is often starving at 3.15pm

Fewer children per table

Plates often have dried food on – not cleaned properly

Frightened of being told off if not able to eat everything

Friendly serving staff needed especially for reception year

Portion sizes too small

Menu Choice

21

More pasta and Italian dishes - Combination of foods - More vegetables - Choice/variety of vegetables - No bread as fills up and eats less of meal - More fruit such as melon/kiwi/pineapple/mango - Jacket potatoes sometimes plain with side salad - Not impressed by current menu - Vegetables watery - More flexibility with choice (mix and match) - Squash as choice - Ketchup to be allowed - New things to try - more interesting fruit desserts - More pudding choices- Menu ideas sound okay but end products are disappointing

Quality

19

No/Less processed food (9 comments)

No additives – MSG/GM/Hydrogenated oils

Fresh food (5 comments)

Locally sourced food - Locally cooked food - ideally organic

Healthy (2 comments)

Don't leave food standing too long

Have Fresh food cooked on site

Food seems overcooked and grey

Costs

03

Price – school lunch is an expensive alternative to packed lunches

Less expensive – St Johns first course of pasta is only £1

It might be a good idea to separate the dessert cost from the main course

Logistics/other

06

The supplier/cook (3 comments)

Parents should know they can pre-order. I found out by chance.

It would be nice if you could take meals outside to be with friends and enjoy the Sunshine
School lunch children find it unfair when children with packed lunches are allowed outside to eat in warm weather

Statistically the three important areas that came up were comments around the eating experience, menu choice and quality of food. These comments seem to tie in closely with parent's views on the most important aspect of school lunch, which were the social aspects, a nutritious balanced meal and the quality of food.

Is there anything else about your child's experience of school lunch that you would like to tell us?

Availability/choice

When something is not available they get no choice sometimes just pudding
Not all options are always available

My child often does not have a choice as the younger ones go first and choose the nicer food

Children get a choice of vegetables rather than both as the menu seems to suggest

Sometimes only eat bread/potatoes/plain pasta

My child had no choice one day and couldn't eat it as it was 'horrible'. She went without and was starving. £1.85 is way too expensive for a pudding. Would be better to know in advance who would like school dinners so they can be catered for

Food/cooking

Sometimes meat is unrecognisable as meat – too processed (3 comments)

My child says the roast potatoes are plastic and everything else comes out of a tin.

One day apple jelly was made and 95% of children did not like it

Perhaps bread offered to children who have eaten meal and are still hungry

Please tell the head teacher and teachers to eat with the children and you will have your answer.

Roasts are a favourite

Child loves Mrs McWilliams 'homemade' approach

It's important for me to be able to talk to someone about my children's food intolerances. Mrs Ellison is excellent and works around some very restrictive rules.

Since change in kitchen staff my child doesn't enjoy dinners as much

Portions are tiny

Mashed potato used to have lumps and put my children off

Shepard's pie was like soup

Social aspects

Shouldn't be made to eat the dinners if they don't want to

Poor behaviour - throwing food

How it is served – currently slopped on the plate

Enjoys social experience, but less the waiting to eat

I prefer my children to have school lunch but they can't sit with friends if friends have packed lunch

Class 4 is last in so don't always get a full choice and can't get seats together with friends

Sticker on bottom of tray idea fun

New method of calling up by table very good as stops scrummage

Often dictated by peer group – if one has school lunch all have school lunch

The availability of food has come up twice as a fairly major issue (17 comments between 2 questions); especially children not getting what they ordered and the quantity of food they are given. It may be possible to deal with the first two concerns fairly promptly.

There were substantial numbers of comments about quality of food and the social aspects of school lunch again, both negative and positive.

Key points

- Parents of children having school lunch rate them as being average in all instances.
- There are a fairly similar amount of parents who consider them above average or below average except when it comes to pricing when significantly more parents thought they offered below average value for money.
- The most important aspects of school lunches are the social elements, and the provision of a healthy, nutritious meal. These themes re-appear consistently throughout other questions and in the comments made by parents.
- While many parents consider lunches to be okay/reasonable, they put forward many suggestions as to how they would like to see them be improved.
- Currently there is a fairly significant issue around children getting the food they pre ordered, and getting a sufficient quantity of it. If this continues we could see a drop in numbers eating lunch, especially as warmer weather approaches.

Parents whose children do not have school lunch

We asked parents why their child/children did not have school lunch. We provided a list of possible reasons and asked for other reasons they had.

45 % of parents questioned said their children had tried school lunches but did not like them. 36% said they did not think the food was good enough quality. 27% said their child did not like the choice on the menu and a further 27% said lunches were too expensive. 18% said wanting to be with friends who had packed lunches influenced the choice.

Other comments included:

Lots of bad manners – shouting - We eat as a family our main meal in the evening - It is not our custom to have warm lunches - When my child had school lunches she has not been able to have her choice as its all gone – I can provide better quality/cost effectively with more than one child

The majority of reasons given for children not having school lunches related to the food provided rather than the social experience. Few parents cited cost as a major barrier.

We asked parents what would need to change for their child to have school lunch

Better quality Food

Nutritionally balanced - unprocessed food - no junk - Food to be fresh, freshly prepared and wholesome - Fresh ingredients, no powdered potato/tinned veg - Good quality meat - Needs to improve quality – over boiled meat and veg - unexciting choice of veg - not great puddings

My child

My child is a fussy eater, with a packed lunch I know he has had food that he likes and what he has eaten - My child only eats fish fingers, smiley faces etc

Other areas

Value for money - Queuing system takes a long time - If all friends had school lunch

Nearly all parents commented on the need to provide better quality food before they would consider their child having school lunch so this would be a major factor in increasing the numbers of children having school lunch.

There is evidence in these comments that some children are not having lunches any more for the reasons already highlighted in research around not getting the choice they order.

We asked if parents would like to tell us anything else about school lunches.

I would like to see organic food where possible, locally sourced and fresh
Would be happy to see less choice but better food – 1 dish plus veggie option
Veg often flavourless

They enjoy their variety of puddings

They enjoyed certain school lunches when we were able to pay daily with cash

Child likes pasta (plain) and pizza but easily put off

There were a range of different comments, but several comments suggested that parents would be happy to see less choice each day if it meant there was better quality food.

We asked parents for any other ideas or suggestions that would help us improve school lunches.

Social aspects

Lunch should be a social event.
Decent plates/cutlery/glasses used
Food put on table and served by older children (mixed age group on tables)
Decent manners expected – waiting until everyone has finished etc

Food

Healthy options like pumpkin risotto, chicken casserole.
Puddings like crème caramel – not plastic yoghourts
Dried fruit, seeds, wholemeal bread
Freshly made salads and fruit salads
Less stodgy puddings

Other aspects

Consult a nutritional therapist for food and snack ideas
It would be nice to offer the positions of cook to anybody that wanted to do it because they enjoyed cooking, rather than a company that is in it to make profit.
Parents should be encouraged to join in and if decent changes are made there should be an incentive to get children trying them

There was a range of suggestions put forward, but most related to the social aspects and the quality of food.

KEY POINTS

- The majority of children who don't have school lunches do not like the food provided or the choice on the menu and parents do not think it is good enough quality.
- Before parents will consider changing to school lunches, the quality of food and the social aspects will need to improve.
- All parents made suggestions as to where they would like to see changes made