



National College for
Teaching & Leadership

Meadowlands Primary School – a whole- school approach to healthy eating

Case study

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Meadowlands Primary School is a green oasis in a challenging inner-city setting. This primary school opened in September 2005 as the result of an amalgamation of two neighbouring schools. Serving one of the most deprived wards in the country, Meadowlands has made the most of extensive playing fields to create a physical environment designed to engage pupils and give them experiences and opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have.

In keeping with this, the curriculum has been developed to prioritise outdoor education, as well as an understanding of where food comes from and the relationship between good food and health. The school earned Healthy School status quite soon after opening but didn't stop there. Meadowlands started working closely with the Food for Life Partnership and became one of the organisation's first flagship schools. The success of its whole-school approach to healthy eating has led to Meadowlands being considered an exemplar of the School Food Plan, which was launched by the government in 2013.

This case study charts the journey the school has taken as it has worked to improve the food offered in school and to change awareness and attitudes about the benefits of healthy eating among staff, pupils and parents. The efforts around healthy eating complement the school's cross-curricular, topic-based approach to teaching and the other opportunities and support the school provides. The whole package has proved successful in removing barriers to learning and encouraging achievement. Despite having very low levels of attainment on entry, most pupils leave the school performing above national averages.

This case study is about how this school has developed a whole-school approach to healthy eating and embedded it into school life. It looks at how this approach stems from the school's ethos, supports its curriculum and other activities, and how it has contributed to the school's progress from being a 'good' school in its first Ofsted inspection in 2008 to being judged 'outstanding' at its most recent inspection in 2013.

The case study also examines the:

- role of the headteacher and key leadership behaviours
- other senior leadership roles that have helped to embed the changes
- important contribution made by external partners and specialists
- ongoing challenges in transforming attitudes to healthy eating
- impact the changes have had on pupils' behaviour and attainment

Background

Meadowlands Primary School is located at the heart of a large inner-city estate. The school is an average-sized, one-form entry school with 245 pupils aged 3–11 years on roll. The Foundation Unit and Children's Centre are based in a separate building while the rest of the school is reached by a walkway across the school's large playing fields. All the buildings have been recently refurbished and new facilities added including a new performance hall, information and communications technology suite, art studio, parents' room and a cookery room.

The community in the estates around the school is very diverse and almost 80% of the pupils come from minority-ethnic backgrounds, the main ethnic group being Pakistani children of the Muslim faith. Many families arrive in the UK seeking asylum or as refugees or economic migrants. Altogether, some 30 different languages are spoken within the school.

Key characteristics of the school are:

- About 30% of pupils are White British and slightly more than this are of Pakistani heritage. Other pupils come from a wide range of minority ethnic groups.
- Approximately 65% of pupils speak English as an additional language, which is more than double the national average.
- More than half of the pupils are supported by the pupil premium, which is well above average.
- Almost 10% of pupils are supported at School Action, which is an average proportion. Approximately 20% are supported at School Action Plus or with a statement of special educational needs, which is above average.

The attainment of pupils at the end of key stage 2 in summer 2013 was that:

- 83% of pupils achieved level 4 or above in reading, writing and mathematics
- 17% of pupils achieved level 5 or above in reading, writing and mathematics
- all pupils made the expected two levels progress in reading, writing and mathematics from Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2.

Learning outdoors is a positive feature of the school's culture. As part of its Forest Schools work, the school has developed a spinney, or small wood, in the school grounds between the main school building and the Foundation Unit. The spinney has a number of young trees of different species, a stumpery (a rockery made of logs, stumps, bark and other pieces of wood), a wild flower meadow area, a muddy mound, a rustic woodstore and a fire circle. The area is used with the younger children and when there isn't time for off-site activities.

Following an Ofsted inspection visit in March 2013, the school was judged to be 'outstanding' for each of the inspection criteria of the achievement of pupils, the quality of teaching, the behaviour and safety of pupils, and leadership and management.

The report noted the determination shared by the headteacher and senior leadership to drive the school forward to improve the lives of the pupils. It also recognised the strong use of the outdoors, which provides an interesting range of activities that motivate all, including those who find learning difficult. The report recognised the rapid and sustained progress that all pupils made from low levels of attainment on entry. By the time pupils leave Meadowlands, many are performing at or above national averages.

The school has developed its own curriculum, which emphasises cross-curricular work with a topic as a focus for each half term. This approach is set out in the school's curriculum framework which goes through from nursery school to year 6. All the additional activities support efforts to raise standards, especially in literacy and numeracy. As headteacher Tony Roberts emphasized:

It is very much about providing opportunities for children which they would not normally get. It is not just doing things for the sake of doing them, but doing things which then have an impact on literacy and numeracy. Everything we do in school has got to impact positively on standards.

Ethos and identity

A focus on food and health has been an important aspect of Meadowlands' ethos since the beginning. Opening a new school was a fantastic opportunity and a chance to create an identity and ethos from scratch, said headteacher Tony.

Our catchment is an area of high social disadvantage – it is in the top 20 most deprived wards in the country. There's high unemployment, youth unemployment too, there are gangs, violence and the majority of our children come from challenging backgrounds. So, in defining what the new school was going to be like, at the heart of our vision was that the school would provide experiences and support that these children wouldn't ordinarily get. It was an amazing opportunity.

Despite these challenges the school had one important advantage – plenty of outside space – which shaped the vision for the new school, he said:

Even though the setting is very urban, we have a huge site, with a big field and several different outside areas that we have developed. So when we were creating an identity for the school we recognised very early on that outside education was going to be very important for us.

Making use of and developing the school site led Meadowlands first to working towards becoming a Forest School and later to a close relationship with the Food for Life Partnership, Garden Organic and an adjacent community garden. These organisations have provided the school with training, support and expertise – and have played a very important role in its successes.

Eight years on, the school makes maximum use of the site. The school garden won both the city award and a regional award for Best School Grounds in 2013, along with a Royal Horticultural Society Gold Medal. As well as outdoor learning, the school employs a gardener (one day a week), grows its own organic vegetables, runs cookery classes three afternoons a week, and has a gardening club, among other after-school activities.

Since food became a whole-school focus, the number of pupils having school lunches has doubled – and now more than half of all pupils take them. Organic ingredients are supplied by agreement with the council catering team and make up an increasing proportion of the food served.

As well as an ongoing effort to improve the quality of the food, the school has recently introduced a new round of changes to transform the experience of school lunches. Year 6 pupils now join the midday supervisors in providing a 'family service' for the Reception and years 1 and 2 children. Gone are the long tables and the 'flight trays' – plates and round tables are used instead. Water is now the only drink permitted at school.

Whether they take school lunches or not, all children eat together in the hall. Those having school lunches make their meal choice at registration and are given a coloured wristband to show when they should collect their food. This approach has dramatically reduced waste and means popular meals do not run out – previously a fairly regular experience for many pupils, according to feedback that came through the school council. Other feedback through this channel has led to whole-school efforts to reduce the noise in the room during lunchtimes to make lunchtimes a more pleasant and family experience.

Other initiatives have attempted to change the attitudes and awareness of parents – with one recent effort aimed at engaging parents and improving the quality of the food in lunchboxes. The school has also organised community lunches to promote healthy eating and regularly runs Family Learning classes for parents on healthy eating.

The role of external partnerships

The key external partner for the school as it developed its work on healthy eating has been the Food for Life Partnership, an organisation now funded by the Big Lottery, with the Soil Association, Garden Organic, Focus on Food, the Health Education Trust and the Royal Society for Public Health among its partners.

Carol Bradley is the local programme manager for the region's Food for Life Partnership (FFLP). The support the organisation provides is commissioned by the county's public health team. The partnership works to transform school food, supporting catering teams, training teachers in gardening, helping schools to provide cooking classes and to involve their communities in healthy eating activities.

"This school is one of our earliest flagships, and over the past six years it has gradually progressed through our award scheme from Bronze, through Silver, and it is now close to achieving our Gold award," said Carol.

The awards are built around four areas of development:

- food leadership
- food quality and provenance
- food education
- food culture and community involvement

The FFLP award criteria define Gold award schools as:

... hubs of good food culture in their community, actively involving parents and community groups in cooking and growing activity. [Their food is ...] healthy, ethical, uses lots of local ingredients and is animal and climate friendly. [They...] use a minimum of 15% organic and 5% free-range ingredients. More than 60% of pupils are choosing to eat school meals. Every pupil learns to cook and has the opportunity to grow food, and groups of pupils are actively involved in the life of a local farm.

One of the first activities recommended by FFLP was the formation of a School Nutrition Action Group (SNAG) to shape the priorities and build consensus as Carol explains:

We made sure that the headteacher was in that group, as was the school cook and a representative of the local authority catering team. The group also included children from right across the school, members of staff, a parent and a parent governor. We tried to make sure someone from every part of the school was in the group. We started off with some fairly painful discussions, listening to the children mainly: what do you like, what don't you like?

The children suggested a lot of things: they didn't like the fact that those having packed lunches and school meals couldn't sit and eat together; they didn't like the long queues and the fact they often didn't get their first choice or the food they had ordered. Most of the quick wins came from those group discussions.

This kind of process took lot of courage, particularly from the school cook, because she had to hear some quite hard things. It was a very scary moment; she felt threatened about her food. But she took it on the chin, and decided to work with the feedback. Once she could see that children's suggestions made them happier, she went from being a person who was quite anxious and resistant to joining in with teaching cooking skills and gardening. She said she felt like her job had been transformed.

FFLP worked closely with the school over the first year, but once the work was underway the organisation took a more 'hands-off' role, such as supporting the school by bringing in experts to help with specific things – training teachers to teach age-appropriate cooking skills, developing and improving the school garden, and drafting a school policy around food. Meadowlands became one of FFLP's first flagship schools.

One key to the success at Meadowlands has been the level of commitment shown by the headteacher. He is very innovative and willing to try new ideas. He takes a long-term view and has kept on developing the school's work around food and healthy eating. Unless you have that drive and support from the top, it is hard to maintain this kind of work or to develop it further.

One important step the school has taken is writing this work into the school development plan and into the job descriptions of key staff. This formalising process helps embed the work within structures in the school; otherwise you are just operating on goodwill.

For his part, Tony Roberts recognises the crucial role that the FFLP has played:

The partnership with FFLP has been fantastic; they have supported us across so many different aspects and activities – this relationship really has been key for us.

The school's other key external partner has been the local authority's catering team. Without their support, improving the food would have been impossible, said Tony

When we started, the food we served was not very good – the food was shipped in already cooked and everything was beige. In changing the whole approach to food and going for the FFLP awards, the council catering team has been fantastic; they saw the value of what we were doing and have supported us all the way through.

We've improved the standard of the food and its nutritional value. Around 30% is organic and 70% is locally-sourced – Alison our cook can tell you where every piece of food comes from. The catering team has supported us even though some of the food is more expensive – the theory being that if this approach works here, then catering can take it out to other schools.

The council catering team develops menus for all the city's schools, working out and balancing the nutritional and calorific value of each meal option using a central computer system. The menus are sent out to the schools and the school kitchen team can suggest changes if needed. The schools then order the ingredients direct from agreed suppliers. The catering team gives all schools the same service – the only difference is that Meadowlands can order organic meat and yoghurt and free-range eggs.

Cathryn Harvey is an area food technician for the city catering team. She states:

The catering staff are absolutely brilliant – the supervisor leads the cookery lessons very well. If the ingredients are not quite the standard they should be, the team are very proactive and make sure things are as they should be. They have some very specific dietary requirements to meet and they work very closely with us to do that.

The school does an amazing job and children have a really good understanding of where food comes from. We're behind him them 100%. The catering at Meadowlands does cost us a little more but we are prepared to do that. We want more schools to be like this one.

Leadership roles in embedding healthy eating in school life

Headteacher Tony Roberts agrees that commitment from the top is essential:

I think the headteacher's role is a key one, particularly at the start where you go from having a vision to starting to make it real. It's about changing a lot of attitudes, about getting all the staff involved, arranging appropriate training, sorting out roles and responsibilities. But in the long term, the leadership has to be distributed, so the drive to do this cascades down through the whole school – it wouldn't work if it was just me.

The headteacher has appointed three members of staff to key leadership roles that are closely related with this agenda:

- The schools gardener, an ex-teacher with 25 years teaching experience who re-trained as a gardener, who provides support and advice on developing and using the school grounds and on curriculum and gardening support.
- The school's personal, social and health education (PSHE) co-ordinator, who organises and leads many of the healthy eating and health-related initiatives, arranges staff training, and runs the school council.
- A recently appointed curriculum development co-ordinator, who is co-ordinating the school's outside education work (Forest Schools*, gardening, vegetable growing) and ensuring the work ties in to the revised national curriculum. This teacher is on a teaching and learning responsibility allowance and is also a trained Forest Schools teacher.

Other important roles are:

- the school cook
- two teaching assistants trained to lead cooking classes for three afternoon per week
- three teachers who are trained (to level 3) as Forest School teachers
- the school's learning mentor who works with individual pupils as needed
- the school's counsellor who offers therapeutic support to individual children and families

The school views its outdoor education, gardening, cooking and healthy eating work as a complement to the other support and opportunities offered. Meadowlands funds many of the specialist roles and activities through the pupil premium (a total of some £97,000 in 2013–14) due to the high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals. The pupil premium funds the school gardener (one day a week), a counsellor for 1.5 days a week, who supports eight to nine children each week, a music teacher for 1.5 days per week, supporting singing and music across the school, and a learning mentor to provide support for individual children who may be experiencing barriers to learning. It also funds the school's breakfast club every day, extra support for Forest Schools teaching and any food and equipment for cooking sessions. Tony says:

This is all about assembling a whole package – we have a raft of people and resources which support our approach to the curriculum, which is cross-cutting and topic-based. We use the pupil premium to fund elements we couldn't otherwise afford and provide a range of experiences for the children that otherwise we wouldn't be able to provide. The whole package helps narrow the gaps for children from less advantaged backgrounds and helps to remove possible barriers to learning.

Overcoming resistance from pupils and parents

Despite its achievements, the school is still striving to improve the health of pupils and families. A whole-school Healthy Eating week was held in October 2013, which included cooking sessions and a community meal for parents, as well as one free school meal for every child.

The activities were led and co-ordinated by Mary Martin, the Foundation Unit co-ordinator who is also the school's PSHE coordinator:

One of the aims of the week was to improve the quality of the food in lunchboxes. Some 50% of the children have them and many are eating not particularly healthy food. We held sessions with all the pupils from nursery to class 6, looking at what makes a healthy lunchbox. We held healthy eating cookery sessions for parents, run by an outside tutor, which was a great success and we plan to repeat this. We also held a session for parents on healthy lunchboxes, but it was not well attended – there's a lot still to do when it comes to parents.

Another major initiative has been implementing the decision that water would be the only drink permitted at Meadowlands. Ahead of this decision, the school had been advising pupils and parents that water was best and to avoid sending in fizzy drinks, juice or smoothies, all of which have high sugar content. Anne says

Getting the whole school drinking only water has been much more challenging than we thought it would be. There has been some resistance from the pupils, and a lot from parents – one family decided to take their child out of school as a result. Ironically, it turns out that the new school has implemented the same policy. Things have settled down now – we gave all the children a school water bottle they can use – and our next targets are to get more of our children eating school lunches and to improve the amount of exercise they get.

A valuable tool in winning pupils around has been the school council, which Mary runs. The council is effective because pupils see changes come about as a result of their comments.

One of things we looked at was around the volume of noise in the school hall, which can have an impact on the experience and prevent children from eating properly. We are working on some of their suggestions for reducing the noise. We have come a long way, because many of the pupils don't have experience of sitting down together to eat.

The feedback mechanism works both ways, said Anne:

One of the things we did was to invite the school cook to come to the council, which was brilliant. They got to know who she was and she was able to tell them that it makes her sad if she cooks something and they don't like it and it gets thrown away. She told them that she cooks bigger dinners because she doesn't want them to go home hungry. Hearing this was important for the children, part of changing their attitudes. Off their own bat, they made her a card to say thank you for the lunches.

Mary is keenly aware of the responsibility she and the school have to bring health messages – from food and nutrition, to exercise and oral health – to children who might not hear them anywhere else. Her advice for other schools is to get a baseline – and start young:

Find out what pupils really know about food – where it comes from and how to prepare it – and start working on healthy eating right from when the children first come to the school. Young children are more open to trying new things and haven't learnt that vegetables are horrible.

Impact and learning

Headteacher Tony Roberts believes the work around food and health, including the outdoor education, contributes to the progress that pupils make:

Our key stage 2 results are excellent and the progress pupils make from when they start in Foundation to year 6 is strong and our children leave with attainment at or above the national average every year, which is very positive considering where many of the children start.

In terms of the general approach, the whole package we have, Forest Schools, gardening, outside education, healthy eating, the experience children have in school – we have found these activities very clearly improve pupils' confidence, their speaking and listening are massively improved, we are seeing children coming up through the school who have something to write about.

We have also observed an improvement in children's behaviour, in the afternoons, in terms of increased concentration and quality of their work. I think the improvement in school food is one of the factors that has made a big difference.

There is anecdotal evidence that children's eating habits at home are changing – with some now growing vegetables at home:

When it comes to the eating habits of families, I like to think some have changed, but we have also met quite a lot of resistance from parents. At our community lunches, I always notice that parents are reluctant to go for the fruit and veg.

Tony's advice to schools is to look for ways to tie healthy eating and related activities into the school's identity and ethos, to build leadership capacity in school staff, and to build powerful external partnerships. He identifies the long connection with FFLP as being crucial to much of what the school has achieved.

For her part, Carol Bradley of FFLP has this advice for schools:

Be willing to take a risk on investing time and energy into changing the food culture in school. Come and see how some other schools are doing it and the difference it's made to them. Don't limit the possibilities for change, be open to unexpected outcomes – many schools are using this as a vehicle for change and find they can achieve many related benefits in a fairly painless way.

Appendix 1: The school Food and Nutrition Policy

Meadowlands has a School Food and Nutrition Policy, the aims of which are to:

- enable pupils to make healthy food choices through the provision of information and development of appropriate skills and attitudes
- provide healthy food choices throughout the school day

Key features of this policy are:

- pupils learning about budgeting and meal planning, and developing basic cooking and food hygiene skills
- high quality and nutritious food being served by the school to the pupils at various times of the day such as at lunchtime, the mid-morning break, and at breakfast time
- encouraging pupils and parents to eat healthily, for example when pupils take packed lunches into school
- having in place a School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme, which includes pupils having an opportunity to grow and cook their own produce
- providing positive rewards for pupils who eat healthily
- making drinking water readily available to the pupils
- teaching pupils about the environment and the effect we have on it, including choosing food items that have less packaging and recycling food waste

Appendix 2: The Forest Schools curriculum

This is part of the Forest Education Initiative (FEI) which has been set up by the Forestry Commission to increase the understanding and appreciation of the environmental, social, and economic potential of trees, woodlands and forests and of the link between the tree and everyday wood products.

The Forest Schools approach is a particular form of outdoor education where children visit a familiar woodland area every week and learn through a range of practical tasks, games and playful activities. It originated in Scandinavia, where it is still used as an important part of nursery education. It has since been developed for use with older children, particularly older children with challenging behaviour.

It has been found that the benefits to children who take part in these tasks, games and activities have been:

- They learn to work and play together.
- They develop their communication and socialisation skills.
- The tasks are carefully chosen and broken down into small steps to enable the children to experience success. This boosts their self-esteem.
- They learn to transfer learning from school to the forest and back again.
- They learn to enjoy themselves.
- They learn to observe environmental change and thus learn about the forest environment.

Specific activities include:

- fitness treasure hunts
- collecting things
- making a home for an animal
- making shelters
- making mud pies
- making fires
- campfire cooking
- follow my leader
- hide and seek
- following wool trails

- looking for particular things (for example, a big leaf, some beech buds)
- looking after the forest, including activities such as clearing litter, whittling, sawing and cleaving wood
- picnics
- maintaining the site
- clearing nettles and brambles

There are three Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) recognised Forest School training qualifications:

- **OCNWMR Level 1 Award** in Introduction to Forest School Principles (QCF)
- **OCNWMR Level 2 Award** in Forest School Programme Support (QCF)
- **OCNWMR Level 3 Certificate** in Forest School Programme Leadership (QCF)

Three of Meadowlands' teachers are trained to level 3, which is designed to qualify the trainee to become a Forest School practitioner, able to set up and run a Forest School programme. Level 3 covers how to facilitate groups in a learner-centred way, and how to manage a Forest School site sustainably. It also covers the practical skills required of a Forest School practitioner. Generally this course is approximately 180 hours and worth 18 credits.

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