

Cambo First School

Cambo First School is a tiny primary school near Morpeth in Northumberland which educates village children between the ages of 4 and 9. The school has only two classes, of mixed ages, with a total of 39 pupils. It may be small, but it is a very good school: at its last Ofsted inspection it was deemed 'outstanding'.

The food is also excellent. Dawn, the school cook, cooks everything on site from fresh every day. She uses organic pork reared in the school grounds and vegetables from the school's large allotment. And, perhaps most impressive of all, the service breaks even. How is that possible?

First, says head teacher Paula Cummings, "I make it clear to the parents that if the number of children taking school lunches drops I will be forced to close the service. They are very supportive."

But even with take-up at 100% – which it currently is – Dawn is still only serving 39 children, and charging them a relatively low £2.00 per meal. Many schools struggle to break even when serving 100 children at this price. To understand how Dawn does it, we took a good look at her accounts – and in particular, her cost per meal.

Her labour costs, at £1.36 per meal, are higher than the £1.00 or so common at bigger schools – but amazingly low considering how small the service is. Dawn is a fast worker – she produces nine meals an hour, which is above the number achieved by the average (much larger) kitchen. She also runs a tight ship. "I have never known her to be off sick," says Paula. "If she is struggling on a particular day we will all help – even as head teacher I am quite happy to go and wash the dishes."

Dawn's food costs are even more impressive: despite the high-quality ingredients, the cost of food per meal is only 54p (which includes the feed for the pigs). A typical figure would be closer to 80p. "We rely on a lot of good will for our food costs," says Paula. "We buy the feed for the pigs, but a farmer who is a parent takes them to the abattoir, and the abattoir butchers them for free. The seeds for the allotment are donated by the community and we regularly get parents in to help with the work. We also have a begging bowl for ingredients. If parents – either farmers or parents who grow food – have a surplus they will give it to us."

Overheads are also very low, at 10p a meal. A typical school might have overheads of 20p per meal – covering utilities, kitchen repairs, costs, training and admin. Again, Paula keeps costs down by pulling in favours (and budgeting a little less for repairs than might be prudent).

What Paula, Dawn and the team at Cambo have achieved is extraordinary. They manage to break even serving just 39 meals a day – well below our benchmark of 100. But they do rely on enormous amounts of good will and favours from locals. It would be hard to replicate their methods outside a very tight-knit farming community. "We all support each other," says Paula. "If you don't, you will struggle."