

Case Study – Provision of Free School Meals for all reception children for five weeks

Aim of the project

To provide a free hot school meal for every child in reception, for a five-week period.

Background

Our school is situated in a small market town in a rural location. We have 280 children on roll, 47 of whom (or 16.7%) are currently eligible for free school meals. Of these, 12 are reception children. On an average day 55 hot meals are taken up by only 19% of the children on roll, and only 2% pay for meals.

Aims

To offer all reception children free school meals for a five-week period. We hoped this would benefit their health and wellbeing as well as improving behaviour and social skills. We also hoped it would increase the uptake of hot meals in the future by addressing some misconceptions (regarding nutritional content of packed lunches vs. hot school meals, cost, diet preferences) at an early stage of their school life.

At the time of writing we are three weeks into the project, with two weeks to go.

Experiences and findings

As the project is so short-term, it is difficult to measure the impact of the project on the children. However by observation and discussion with various groups we have identified some anecdotal findings:

Children

- All the children have been happy to eat the hot school meals
- They are all trying new foods even if they are not sure they will like them
- The children are using new vocabulary to describe different foods and their likes and dislikes
- The children's social skills and use of cutlery are improving with practice
- Children are drinking water with their lunch rather than fruit drinks or milkshakes

- Some meals are more popular than others. We think this may be because the types of meals served are different to those served at home.

Parents

- Initial feedback was positive; parents were pleased to give their children this opportunity for various reasons: convenience, cost savings, and health benefits.
- During the project only one family, whose child was not eating enough due to food preferences, opted out.
- Parents commented that their children were now trying more new foods at home
- Some families were able to provide hot meals for older siblings due to the cost savings made. Normally they could not afford to purchase hot meals for more than one child.

Teaching Staff

- Teachers are leading more discussion about food in curriculum time
- Children are using new words to describe texture and food
- Children are trying new foods and learning that while food may look different, it can still taste the same: eg “round” carrots taste the same as carrots cut into sticks.

Midday Supervisors

- Children are experiencing eating a hot meal in a social setting
- Hot meals are more balanced than many packed lunches, with much more varied food groups
- Portion control is better as many packed lunches contain too much food for young children
- Puddings are popular, possibly due to a decline in traditional puddings being served at home
- Peer pressure influences children’s choices about what they will eat
- Some meals are more popular than others: eg. pasta is more popular when the sauce is mixed in rather than being served separately, possibly due to the difference in texture.

Lasting Impact

Although, after such a short period of time, it is difficult to prove the benefits of the project, we can see from anecdotal evidence that, on the whole, the project has been a success.

We hope that the project has made a difference to the diet choices that parents and children make in the future, which should benefit their health and wellbeing in the long term.

After the project ends it will be possible to measure the impact on school meal take-up in our school, not only for the children who took part, but also their siblings.

We look forward to September 2014 when all of our FS/KS1 children will have the opportunity to have a hot school meal daily, provided by the government. We hope that many of our families will see this as a positive opportunity to help improve the quality of their lives for the future.

The Project

As it was not possible to fund the project from the school budget, a successful bid was made to Tesco Charity Trust and we were awarded £2160. This meant we could provide meals for all 44 reception children for 5 weeks.

We presented the project to parents carefully, by explaining the proven benefits of hot school meals to the children. We decided to order meals for all 44 children, rather than giving an option, although parents could opt out if they wished.

Implications for School Facilities

We have a separate dining hall for all of our reception children so it is easy to serve hot meals with minimum disruption to routine.

Cost

We had to buy a small amount of equipment, such as a trolley to transport meals from the main hall.

Staffing

Although it takes longer to set the hall up to serve hot food, this is offset by less cleaning up at the end of lunchtime as there is less rubbish and food on the floor.

During lunchtime children have sometimes needed help to cut up their food and more social interaction from adults, eg encouragement to try food. It takes longer for some children to eat hot lunches as in some cases they are not used to using cutlery, however this is improving.

Transport of meals

We have the full support of our caterer and they have split the hot meals into separate hot boxes to ease serving and transporting food around school.

As we use a gold FFLP-standard caterer, the meals produced are of a high quality and transport well, therefore the meals are of a good standard when served.

Free School Meals

The project has allowed children who are not eligible for free school meals to try meals that their parents may not otherwise be able to afford. We believe there are families attending our school who are not eligible to claim benefits but who are nevertheless suffering poverty. In our school we encourage all children to sit with their friends during lunchtimes, regardless of what they eat for lunch, so that there is no stigma attached to being given free school meals.