

WOODHAM ACADEMY, DURHAM

Lunches at Woodham Academy – a 760-strong secondary school in County Durham – used to be a sorry affair. The food (provided by a private caterer) wasn't cooked, so much as reconstituted. Everything was reheated from frozen, with barely a fresh vegetable in sight. "It wasn't about care for the students, it was about profit," remembers head teacher Christine Forsyth.

Although 36% of the children were eligible for free school meals, take-up never got above 40%. In other words, hardly any of those children who had to pay chose to eat a school lunch.

Christine decided to take the catering 'in house'. She hired Linda Vipond, a catering manager with 20 years of experience working in restaurants, as well as in catering colleges. Linda believes that school children should be given the same respect as any other customers. What they want matters.

The first thing Linda did was design healthy menus that the children would actually eat. She asked for their suggestions, and acted on them. Vegetarian versions of classics such as cottage pie and toad-in-the-hole were requested and have proved a big hit. Nearly everything is freshly made: even the pasta for the cannelloni. Every day the kitchen serves between six and eight vegetable dishes, such as roast parsnips, braised red cabbage, leeks in cheese sauce and stir-fried veg.

The school's two dining halls have been redecorated, at a cost of around £5,000 each, to make them brighter and more funky. The colourful walls are now decorated with 'street art' created by the students. Flat-screen TVs show music videos. "Some schools say you can only have the news on the TV," says Linda. "But they've been sitting in their classes all morning long and this is their time to chill."

Linda's menu always includes a 'meal deal' – a cooked main course and a pudding – for £1.95: a much better bargain than the average high street sandwich. Children can choose what they eat (for example, there are 'grab-and-go' items for those who want to head off quickly) and most pay with a top-up card to keep the system as cashless as possible.

Linda and her staff see it as their job not just to feed the children, but to educate them about food. They get students to help them in the kitchen, wearing chefs' whites to serve the food. They also provide cookery lessons for disadvantaged families, and run a healthy breakfast club.

Above all, they listen carefully to the students, taking a personal interest in their eating habits. If a pupil has a problem with food, the school works carefully to help. One boy would only eat cake. He was coaxed into trying a bit of bread first – and then, bit by bit, weaned onto sandwiches. Another boy wouldn't touch vegetables. Linda made him a deal: if he ate some vegetables every day for a week, she would make him his favourite dish. He asked for chicken nuggets, and she made them for him from scratch, with a crispy coating of brown breadcrumbs.

Turning round the food service at Woodham was expensive – at least at first. The school governors agreed to subsidise the service by up to £20,000 a year while it found its feet. But this subsidy decreased year on year, and is no longer required. Take-up is now 63% (and rising), and the service makes a profit.