

# my manifesto for school dinners

## school dinners

For the past couple of years I've been campaigning to ban the junk served in school canteens and get the kids to eat fresh, tasty, nutritious food instead. Without your support for the Feed Me Better campaign Tony Blair wouldn't have committed to new school meal standards and to spending £280 million for sorting out the problem.

In my new TV programme, Return to School Dinners, we show that parents are a key factor, and that without cooking skills, kitchen facilities and political support on the ground it's going to be very hard to make lasting improvements.

During the course of filming I spoke to the Prime Minister and he promised more and longer term funding for school food. I don't want to sound ungrateful, but the amounts are tiny when you divide it up by all the schools in the country—Nora, for example, only gets £2,000.

Local and national government need to come up with a ten-year strategy and some real money to re-educate people about proper eating habits.

This is what I think needs to happen now:

1. **IN SCHOOLS:** Make cooking and life skills classes compulsory for ALL kids so they learn about food and good eating habits while they're young.
2. **FOR TEACHERS:** Recruit and train new cookery teachers, otherwise the new right that kids have to cookery lessons just isn't going to happen.
3. **FOR HEADS:** Empower heads to make every school a junk food free zone.
4. **FOR PARENTS:** Educate parents and help them to understand the basics of family cooking and responsible nutrition.
5. **FOR DINNER LADIES:** Invest in dinner ladies with proper training and enough paid hours to cook their food with fresh ingredients.
6. Commit to a ten-year strategic plan and fund a long-term public campaign to get people back on to a proper diet and empower/persuade (and possibly scare if needed) the public to make better choices. With obesity costing the NHS more than smoking, it seems logical that a similar campaign should be appropriate.

Let me talk a little more about each point above.

## schools

Make cooking and learning life skills compulsory for ALL kids so they can survive when they leave school. The basic stuff.

It's great that kids are going to be taught how to cook at school, but it needs to be made a compulsory part of education, not just a voluntary entitlement. This will require a complete rewrite of the school syllabus to make it appropriate to today's needs, so our kids will learn to understand food, and to cook and shop on a budget—essential life skills.

There's a whole generation of parents out there who were never taught the ease of cooking. This is why the government needs to step in and bolster the school environment, as it's the only place where the kids are going to learn.

Why doesn't the new entitlement cover primary schools too? Kids need to be learning about food right from day one, so they get basic recognition and aren't afraid of what food looks, smells and tastes like and where it comes from.

Currently, you can pass a food technology course without having to cook. This is totally bonkers! We need to make sure this new syllabus doesn't get lost in the curriculum and that every teenager leaves school able to cook at least ten healthy dishes as a basis for feeding themselves.

A simple menu of nutritious dishes will give kids the range of basic skills they need to prepare and cook with fresh ingredients, instead of getting their meal from a packet with all of the extra cost, unnecessary processing additives and packaging that goes with it.

## teachers

Qualified cookery teachers are urgently required.

There's a national shortage of properly qualified cookery teachers. How are schools going to deliver this new entitlement? If the government is going to put cooking back on the curriculum, it needs to:

- Sort out a recruitment programme for new cookery teachers now.
- Set up specialist training colleges to train up more cookery teachers.
- Ensure that all teacher-training courses include the basics of food and cookery.

## heads

Make every school a junk food free zone.

Schools will no longer be able to sell or serve junk food to our kids at school—fantastic news. But the government needs to go one step further and make sure they can't bring it in from outside either. I held a junk food amnesty in Greenwich, asking all kids to hand in the food they brought into school, and the result was pretty worrying.

If school heads and governors aren't empowered to ban kids from bringing in rubbish food in their lunchboxes or school bags, how on earth are they going to be able to get them to switch over to eating proper food instead? The Healthy Schools policy, which all schools are expected to adopt, needs to include a total ban of junk food on school premises.

Heads need to take responsibility and find out how much of this stuff their pupils are bringing in on a daily basis. They need to get support from governors and parents to introduce a school policy that makes their school a junk food free zone.

## parents

Educate parents on the importance of a healthy balanced meal for their kids.

I think many parents are unaware of how much junk their kids are actually eating and drinking. Many don't quite understand that if chocolate bars, fizzy drinks and bags of crisps are part of their kids' daily diet, then they aren't getting the right kind of nutrition for proper growth and could be facing a load of serious health problems from early adulthood onwards.

As well as the frightening rise in obesity there's a growing number of kids, no matter what shape or size that simply aren't getting fed enough nutrients like iron calcium and vitamins. It's having a huge effect on their brainpower, behaviour and ability to concentrate and learn at school.

Take iron: half of the country's teenage girls don't get enough, which affects IQ and probably means they're not doing as well at school as they could be.

Currently, the government is spending £75 million to get us to stop smoking. We need the same kind of massive campaign to educate families—maybe even scare them a little—on how important a good diet is to their kids' growth, health and future. If we don't get it right now, pretty soon we're going to be a nation of overweight underachievers.

## dinner ladies

Skills training for the nation's school cooks.

Many dinner ladies still don't seem to get money filtered down to them to pay for any extra hours they need to

cook proper meals with fresh ingredients from scratch. They're also not getting any proper training yet. In the summer, the Prime Minister asked me what was still needed to train up our dinner ladies and get them motivated again. Here's what I asked for:

- Set up a network of training kitchens by next autumn and get all head cooks trained up as quickly as possible.
- Teach the girls how to cook. Refresh their skills and revive their confidence in the kitchen. Teach them about the new standards so they're equipped to deliver them.
- Make sure the course becomes a recognised qualification and that at least one person in every kitchen has been on it. Use it as a foundation course for further career training, like an NVQ.
- Set up a network of mentors to follow up and help the girls put the new standards into practice.
- Ensure there's a national training centre to train the trainers.
- Train other people, like heads, governors, teachers and catering managers too.
- Find £2 million to fund all this.

## government

Commit to a ten-year plan

It's not clear from this week's announcement how much new funding the government has actually committed to but what we need is a strategic, ten-year funding plan. This plan should get all the ministers—health education, farming, sport—working together to get the nation's health back in shape and to get people cooking for themselves and eating properly again. This plan should get priority funding from the £1 billion obesity budget.

Local government also needs to get involved. By the time the government money gets divided down to a school level, it's a tiny amount. How many councillors know what's happening about school food in their area? What are they doing to make it a health and education priority for the children in their care?

More money is still needed to:

- Get basic cooking equipment into schools so they can start teaching kids how to cook.
- Run a recruitment and training drive for more cookery teachers.
- Fund more hours for dinner ladies so they get paid for doing their jobs and feeding our kids better.
- Fund a massive and sustained national campaign to re-educate people about proper eating.

7 September 2006

