

## Cooked

### Roy Blatchford

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Unusually, I start a column by referring to the previous one: '[The boiling frog](#)' in which I argued that our current school curriculum and structures are looking increasingly outdated as every day goes by.

Two colleagues then sent me these by way of evidence:

[New AI-Enabled Primary School Teaching Model Unveiled: International Roll Out Set for 2027](#)

[Joe Liemandt - Building Alpha... - Invest Like the Best with Patrick O'Shaughnessy - Apple Podcasts](#)

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And so seamlessly onto the food which is **Cooked** for children and young people every day in schools.

My first employment was in publishing where I learned the old adage that 'there is no such thing as a free lunch'. Yet when I moved to working in schools I discovered that lunch was free every day, if you did a dinner duty. As a regular visitor to schools I continue that practice of eating with children at breaktimes.

Thousands and thousands of school meals later, I can record that I have never experienced food poisoning from a school kitchen, unlike a few top restaurants I could cite. I can happily avow that I thrive on whatever the schools serve up.

School cooks and chefs across the nation are to be applauded for their meticulous attention to hygiene, tireless leadership of their kitchen teams, usually happy demeanours, *and* for wrestling with extremely tight budgets. Some highlights to date this academic year:

- Attractive picnic baskets provided by one primary kitchen for all children on a sports day
- Themed lunches in primary schools on World Book Day and International Days

- Presentation of a well-lit smorgasbord of appetising snacks in a secondary school's first break, with all students seated socially when eating
- Children and staff in a special school all seated for lunch at round tables and serving one another, delightfully social and promoting conversation
- A staff working lunch where the diversity of outstanding salad dishes revealed just what the chef is capable of – if working to a different budget heading....

It was last year in discussions at *second* breaktime with a group of Year 9s in Birmingham that I really got thinking about food served in schools. I was munching on tasty sausage rolls while a couple of them had used up their free meal allowance at *first* break. (The head cook promptly remedied the situation on that occasion.)

How can growing teenagers thrive in lessons if their stomachs are grumbling? How tempting is it for them to skip afternoon school to snack elsewhere? If as a school system we are rightly concerned about levels of absence in secondary schools, are we doing enough to put ***irresistible food in sufficient quantities and at affordable prices*** at the heart of pupils' engagement?

Conversations with children, teachers, headteachers, chefs and cooks, meals supervisors, food contractors and those who contract, lead me to make the following recommendations on how we supply and present food in schools.

1. The free meal allowance must be increased to allow teenagers to eat well enough to sustain them through the school day.
2. The overall budgets for lunches must be nudged higher so that *all* pupils can choose nutritious vegetables, fruits, meat, fish in the course of a week.
3. Breakfast clubs should serve brown bread toast and healthy spreads, nourishing cereals and fruit. White bread, choco-cereals and the like should be firmly off the menu.
4. The plastic-prison-tray-with-compartments still appearing in some primary schools should be replaced with open plates; and I'd retain cutlery.
5. All food should be *presented* as attractively as one sees in the best dining areas: 'hot food kept hot for those last in the queue' as students often comment.

I once visited a government school in Corsica. School closed each day between noon and 2pm. Children walked up the hill to the restaurant, dined in style, played, and then walked back to school. So the French live to eat whilst the Anglo-Saxons eat to live. Accepting that, the status quo in our schools is not good enough.

We need to smell the coffee and do differently in how we supply and serve food to children.

## *Coda*

To all those RISE advisers criss-crossing the country charged with school improvement: get yourself invited to school lunch, sit next to the children and talk to them about food. The answers to improved attainment might just have something to do with their diets. Then celebrate the kingdom's top kitchens!

**Roy Blatchford is series editor of [‘The A – Z Series’](#).**