

# Let's do Lunch

They've spent more than twelve months researching and putting it together – now it's your turn to get involved with the School Food Plan, say **Henry Dimbleby** and **John Vincent**...



**J**ust over a year ago, we agreed to take on the challenge of working out how we can ensure children eat well in school. We knew it was going to be a big task. But we also knew it was an important one. Over the past year, we have been to – and eaten lunch in – more than 50 schools all over England, and heard from many, many more. We have spoken to pupils, teachers, parents and cooks, many of whom are doing amazing work to improve the quality of school food. We have also analysed in depth the economics of school food and studied the research that has been done here and abroad.

Although school food is far better than the dark days of the Turkey Twizzler, there is still more to do. Too many children are unhealthy and unhappy due to a poor diet. Last year alone, the NHS spent £10 billion on diet-related diabetes and a further £6 billion on other illnesses caused by bad diet.

Together, this is 16% of its budget – equivalent to the cost of 60 new hospitals every year. And there is now clear evidence that well-nourished children learn better.

The big problem with school food today is that, at 43%, take-up is far too low. This creates two problems. First, because labour and other costs are fixed, it means that many school kitchens are like a half empty restaurant: they are losing £140 million per year at the moment – money that comes out of already stretched school and council budgets. Second, children who don't eat a school meal are consuming unhealthy packed lunches instead. With very few exceptions, even a 'mediocre' school meal is better than the alternatives. Research shows that only 1% of packed lunches meet the overall nutritional standards that currently apply to school food.

So, increasing take-up is the means *and* the end.

There are many schools that are achieving high take-up, and feeding their children great food that they love to eat. The one thing that all these schools have in common is the culture and ethos created by the leadership of the head teacher. These head teachers in turn rely on a great number two (it might be the business manager), and a school cook who shares their vision. They adopt a 'whole school' approach: treating the dining room as an integral part of the school, lunch as part of the school day,



the cooks as important staff members, and food as a vital element in school life – weaving growing and cooking across the curriculum. They also understand and focus on the things that are important to children – great tasting, wholesome food, the social aspects (like short queues, eating with friends, allowing time also to play or do clubs, cashless payment systems), an attractive dining room, and sufficiently low prices. And teachers in these schools often encourage children to grow their own herbs and vegetables and fruit (that are in turn used in their own lunches). These schools create a virtuous cycle where quality is improved, prices are reduced, and take-up is increased to spread and reduce fixed costs.

Ninety per cent of head teachers say they think that food is critical to them being successful in their school. But forty per cent say they would welcome help to achieve success. The government has agreed to spend £11.8m to support head teachers make this happen. We will be asking charities and local organisations to pitch for money to increase the take-up of good food in our schools. We know it can be done, and we know there are organisations like Food for Life Partnership, School Food Matters, and the Children's Food Trust who are keen to support you.

Also, the government has agreed that from 2014, cooking will be taught in all schools up to key stage 3. The new curriculum will emphasise the importance of cooking nutritious, savoury dishes, understanding where food comes from, and taking pleasure in the creative arts of the kitchen.

The government has also agreed to supplement breakfast clubs with an extra £3.15million. You know yourselves how difficult it is to teach children who are hungry. And how miserable it can be for the young people themselves.

We will also be making sure that all of the great things that are happening – all of the brilliant ideas – are shared as widely as possible. We have visited many schools where fantastic things are happening, whilst a mile down the road are others with no idea about all the successes their neighbour is enjoying, and how they are being achieved.

It would be wonderful if you could read the Plan ([schoolfoodplan.com](http://schoolfoodplan.com)). This is not a stack of paper that will sit gathering dust on the government's shelves; it is an action plan that has already been agreed by government and all of the people who work in this area. But the challenge must be overcome school by school. We are determined to support you in your school to nurture a generation of children who are healthier, more successful and happier.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**HENRY DIMBLEBY AND JOHN VINCENT** ARE CO-FOUNDERS OF HEALTHY FAST-FOOD RESTAURANT, LEON, AND CO-AUTHORS OF THE SCHOOL FOOD PLAN: [SCHOOLFOODPLAN.COM](http://SCHOOLFOODPLAN.COM)