



Image: Ray Spence

Engaging with food growing gives education leaders the opportunity to create positive change for life of their school, its pupils and its place in the community. Schools of every size around the country are telling us that bringing food into the heart of their strategy is making all the difference.

Working closely with the local authority and community stakeholders, food growing helps schools to become educationally, financially and socially stronger, with a student body enriched with school-grown nutrients.

Vastly increased take-up of school meals, positive effects on physical and mental health, overall higher educational attainment, greener environment and a boost to local economy through employment and food-based enterprise are just some of the results of food growing in schools.



Start in school, change for good

- Whether a school is large or small, rural or urban, when they place food at the heart of school life, and work to win pupil, parent, staff and management buy-in, they succeed.¹ The **'whole school' approach** to food growing is shown to create demonstrable impact in just about every area.²
- Nowhere is the potential for positive habit setting around food stronger than in the dining hall.³ Young people involved in food growing pick up healthy habits and choices that decrease health and social care issues (and the accompanied cost for local authorities) in the longer term, even impacting on **family food choices**.⁴

Health and wellbeing

- The current obesity rates for UK schools are 11% in reception, rising to 22.5% in school year 6. Head teachers and management have a responsibility to address this issue as part of their commitment to the health and wellbeing of their school. This requires real cultural change around attitudes to food throughout the school, and must include involving parents and teachers in productive and honest dialogue that is sensitive to financial and cultural issues.
- Positive effects go beyond just pupils and impact on families that engage with or are exposed to food growing, whether through local projects or **school-led initiatives**, also report an increase in their intake of foods proven to prevent obesity.⁵

Eating smarter

- The link between better food and increased attainment is now firmly established. Data from 2012's **School Meals Pilot** showed that primary school pupils at Key stage 1 and 2 progressed by an average of two months further when eating free school meals.⁶ This has also been highlighted through the Jamie Oliver 'Feed Me Better' campaign where attainment also grew.⁷
- Twice as many primary schools received an **Ofsted** rating of Outstanding following their participation in the **Soil Association Food For Life (FFL)** programme, which prioritises food growing in schools.⁸
- **Children's Food Trust research**⁹ from 2009 showed that primary school children were over three times more likely to concentrate and be alert in the classroom once changes were made to the food and dining room, including the inclusion of food grown at school.
- Since the launch of School Food Plan¹⁰ there has been a wealth of **resources and case studies** to support the delivery of the national curriculum and the roll out of Universal Infant Free School Meals. The What Works Well website¹¹ offers a collection of the best examples and ideas for delivering great food and food education in schools.
- As a result of recommendations made in the School Food Plan, from September 2015 **Ofsted Inspectors** are looking for evidence of a culture of healthy eating.¹² This is a very clear reason for schools to ensure they address the quality of the school food experience as part of their **Ofsted assessment**. Engaging with food growing demonstrates a commitment to equip pupils with 'informed choices about healthy eating' as well as supporting a whole school approach to making lunchtimes a positive feature of the school day.¹³



Organic changes

- Recent research show that **organic crops** and crop-based foods – including fruit, vegetables and cereals – are up to 60% higher in a number of key antioxidants than their non-organic counterparts.¹⁴
- Choosing organic and teaching pupils organic horticultural skills (without the use of pesticides or chemicals) spreads these nutritional benefits further. This in turn passes on benefits to the local environment, as food growing also **reduces landfill** via increased composting and encouraging pro-environmental behaviours.¹⁵

School-grown food in school meals

- Parents spend £1m a year on packed lunches, less than 1% of which are nutritionally balanced to the same standards as are now required of school lunches. As the School Food Plan demonstrates, the key to a viable school meals service is not reducing food costs but increasing overall sales – **take-up** – so that overhead budgets go further. Working with catering contractors to introduce food grown at school into meals has seen take-up rocket (and deficits plunge) because young people are excited to eat food they have grown.
- Schools that engaged with the Food for Life programme (growing initiatives and improvements to school meals) showed a 13 percentage point increase in primary take-up of school meals, and 20 percentage point increase in secondary, following their participation in FFL.

Food for social change

- Growing food helps communities vulnerable to food poverty become more self-sufficient. Families with children involved in growing food in school say they eat more vegetables at home as a result.¹⁶
- This enthusiasm spills out into wider neighbourhoods - Phoenix School Farm and Learning Zone began life as a small school garden in 2007 and is now used equally by local residents, increasing their engagement with the school and access to organically grown food.
- Our research shows that gardens managed by schools are valued and protected by local communities even if they are off-site, with a very low rate of vandalism and theft.¹⁷ **Garden Organic's** Master Gardener project trains people in the skills needed to grow locally and reduced overall spends on food in participating households by 29%.¹⁸



Food skills, job skills

- Food growing helps bolster the employability of school leavers through enterprise and horticultural knowledge building. Horticulture is an expanding part of the careers market, with over 300,000 people employed in the sector that contributes £9 billion to the UK economy.¹⁹ Pupils can gain appropriate skills in this area by engaging in a school garden or vegetable patch. This might involve taking responsibility, planning ahead, crop management, delegating tasks and even honing entrepreneurial skills by selling food at school markets.
- The Soil Association's **London Farm Academy** engages ten schools over three years to fully integrate farming, growing and food careers into the curriculum. It has already delivered over 100 school farm markets, enabling young people to visit organic farms and set up their own markets, becoming involved in everything from research, planning, marketing and sales.
- Growing projects are a way of attracting external funding to schools - Phoenix School in **White City** successfully bid for £70,000 of Big Lottery funding for their flagship school farm, which now employs two full-time members of staff and selling produce to the public three times a week.²⁰

Action points for Heads:

- **Consult** and partner with local community growing groups, Master gardeners, Food Growing Schools and the Food For Life programme to build a local networks
- **Sow the right seeds** initiate the conversation for a 'whole school' approach to food, by working with bursars, school governors, staff, parents and of course pupils
- **Sound out** your catering contractors approach to incorporating school-grown food into menus
- **Identify** areas on school property that could be used as growing space, even temporarily. If there is no green space, consider portable beds.



Image: Schools Marketplace, 2014

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