

NO HEALTH VALUE ONSENSUS

SURPRISINGLY, HEALTH PROFESSIONALS ARE DIVIDED OVER THE PERCEIVED HEALTH VALUE OF THE NUTRIENT-BASED STANDARDS, AS SIOBHAN O'NEILL REPORTS



THE WELL-FED CHILD IS "GOING TO CONCENTRATE AND WORK HARDER"

Rachel Brown is the nutritionist at Green Gourmet, a company working closely with schools providing nutritious products to caterers, but also nutrition advice and support to schools caterers.

She is also a member of the Nutritionist and Dieticians in Food Service Forum, and it was in that capacity that she voiced her concerns about the new standards in secondary schools.

"The group is thoroughly behind the move to healthier school meals," Brown said. "But there has been little consultation with manufacturers. We want to work with the School Food Trust to get it working, but had they worked with nutritionists in the

industry, things might have been a bit easier."

Her job involves the kind of statistical analysis that school caterers will be required to perform as part of the assessment process determining whether schools are meeting the new standards, and Brown has concerns about the way the assessments will work.

She said that everyone is working from the McCance and Widdowson handbook on food composition, which is six years old and includes no details of NME (non-milk extrinsic) sugars - a key point in the new standards - and few current salt values for manufactured goods.

Instead she says those calculating the values are currently working from total sugars values and even for people trained in this kind of analysis it makes it really hard to see where the sugars in a meal are coming from.

Brown is also concerned that secondary school standards deal too much in averages across a wide age group. The nutritional needs of an 11-year-old boy will differ greatly from those of an 18-year-old girl and yet averages of gender and age range have been used to calculate the standards, pushing iron requirements for example, up to very high levels.

Brown agrees healthy eating in schools does need to be addressed, but "we feel the way it needs to be done is get the food standards working, the kids eating proper food and then look at improving values.

"The standards can make an apple crumble seem less appealing than a sponge because they want the children to eat raw apples, but let's just get them eating apples."

PAPER EXERCISE

Brown says the monitoring process meant to demonstrate that students are eating properly balanced, nutrient based meals, is just "a paper exercise - anyone can be compliant with the right menus, but on sales it could be very different."

There are a number of practical issues that also concern Brown. She says: "People are lacking awareness of the differences between cooked and uncooked values."

She also says that caterers currently have three different salt targets to consider when planning menus and "it would be nice to have one."

And she says inputting the menus for analysis is overly complicated. "It's expensive. It's a long and involved process. It can take a week to analyse one week's menu. The money would be better spent on kitchens or ingredients."

Finally she concedes: "We do want it to work but perhaps more pragmatically. A well-fed child is going to concentrate and work harder. Control of fat and salt will have a big impact [on health] and it's educating the children that you can have a filling meal that isn't full of fat, so it's highly beneficial but it can't be done in isolation."

Tam Fry, who works with the National Obesity Forum and is chairman of the Child Growth Foundation, also has concerns about the changes, but feels "caterers need to battle through the rocky period to come out the other side".

"If they put on their two course choices, two things will happen," says Fry. "First is the kids will go for the things they always go for and they'll be throwing away lots of healthy food, second it will undo a lot of the work that's been done in primary schools."

"School caterers do not have any option but to go with the standards and there will be uproar, but they will get there in the end," he says, citing the example of primary schools where meal uptake is now increasing after a bumpy start.

Fry thinks schools need to get on board and drive the changes through. "Life is not perfect, but the school has to take the decision with staff and students."

"We have these new standards and we have to abide by them but they are for the benefit of the children. We've got to change the mindset of the past 20 years. By reducing the levels of fat, sugar and salt found in easily prepared junk food, and increasing physical activity, will have an impact on child obesity."

"The School Food Trust has done great work in saying 'up the standards' but you have to be practical about what you can achieve with the funding available. You can produce great nutritional food with the money they have now," Fry says.

But he is pragmatic about the journey caterers are starting out on. "It is going to be a long battle but unless you start your march you're going to be on the back foot. There will be some scars and a lot of wasted food but it will be worth it in the end."

Dr Helen Crawley, is Science Director at the Caroline Walker Trust, globally

recognised as designing the gold standard in nutritional guidelines – particularly for the more vulnerable groups in society. She explained just why the standards are so important and necessary.

"The nutrient based standards were devised to improve the nutritional intakes of school children. They were calculated to correct inadequacies and overages in particular nutrients."

"The standards specify the amounts of nutrients that should be provided on average over a period of a week or more. They are the framework around which caterers work – and having a numerical basis is actually more flexible than having prescriptive food based standards."

INEFFECTIVE STANDARDS

"The review panel chose to bring in nutrient based standards because of evidence that food based standards were ineffective."

"There was an agreement that it was necessary if there was to be real improvement in nutrient intakes. The basic premise that we improve the food served by making recipes and the ingredients of better quality was accepted."

"Historically young people were being served food that was cheap. Of course there is a lot to reverse, but there is no point fiddling around the edges with vague food-based messages that fundamentally don't get caterers to really look at the sort of food they serve."

Crawley is adamant caterers should not find it hard to meet the standards if they take on board the messages of recent years.

"To make menus meet the guidelines, means that the staples of contract catering – no cheese cheese sauce mixes, packet mixes, meat products with hardly any meat in – and the use of the cheap commodities high in fat, salt and sugar that make more

profit, had to change.

"The nutrient based standards should get people to look at what they do: can you use more fruit, vegetables and pulses in dishes, can you use leaner meat, can you reduce sugar and salt where they are not needed?"

Crawley also sees it as a journey of gradual improvement for schools and caterers. "There needs to be development and the food needs to be eaten. There is no point offering foods no one wants because they meet some tick box standards. This is about making good food accessible and appropriate."

Hoping it will not be as hard as caterers believe, because of the timing, Crawley says: "The children coming into secondary schools next year will have had better food."

"There should be lots of help, guidance and advice available to schools, and examples of good practice even when there are local difficulties: a lot can be done with soup, salads, sandwiches and jacket potatoes – served in different parts of the school. I would say lots more sharing good practice and support is probably needed."

She also underlines the need for schools to get behind the changes. "Issues such as keeping young people in school, packed lunch guidance, how and when children are enabled to eat in schools have to be dealt with. If we think it matters that we enable vulnerable children to eat better, then we need to ensure schools understand that too and work together with the families they serve, to see how they can make it work."

Crawley thinks caterers shouldn't be left to feel this is a journey they alone are undertaking and that a lot of joint working is required. "We need lots of practical help and advice for schools from local authorities and others to ensure that caterers can find a way to make better quality food work, despite the constraints they have."



CATERERS HAVE ALREADY BEEN PROMOTING HEALTHY EATING SCHEMES WITH SUCCESS



LINKING MENUS TO FOOD PRODUCTION IS TEACHING PUPILS ABOUT GOOD NUTRITION