

Research Report

Food and academies: a qualitative study

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April 2012

Commissioned and funded by the Department for Education

Key findings

This report looks at the attitudes and practices of secondary academies in relation to food and drink provision.

- In 13 academies, six sponsor-led and one free school nominated by the Department for Education, and six converter academies randomly selected across England, head teachers or business managers were interviewed face-to-face; head teachers and catering managers completed questionnaires; and a nutritionist from the Trust completed inventories of food and drink on sale and observed the dining environment and catering facilities and arrangements.
- All of the academies identified food as important and a part of education. The senior leadership team and caterers shared responsibilities about food provision, but the balance of decision-making and dialogue between them varied between academies.
- Decision making around food was influenced by a wide range of factors, including finances (the need to run a sustainable business), the priorities of their sponsors, listening to the needs, views and opinions of caterers, pupils and parents, provide the best for the children, the priorities of the government (i.e. attainment), and the needs of the teachers and staff. Balancing these priorities was described as a “challenge”.
- All but two of the academies subsidized the meal service.
- Senior staff were aware of welfare issues – pupils should not go hungry, in part because of the likely adverse impact on learning. But they knew little of the research that showed that healthier meals eaten in a pleasant dining environment was associated with better learning behaviours.
- The view by senior academy staff on pupils’ needs at lunchtime was “speed” – they wanted to get through lunch as quickly as possible, in part to have time to socialize at lunchtime. They did not link longer lunch times to possible benefits in terms of learning behaviours. Four of the academies had regular meetings with pupils to discuss food; in the remainder, most communication about food was one-way (e.g. information posted on the website, letters home to parents)
- Dining environments were seen to be adequate in all but two academies (where they were too small to accommodate the number of pupils being catered for), but some staff recognized that problems would arise in future if there were an increase in the number of pupils having school lunches.
- Most of the senior staff thought that their food and drink provision met the food-based and nutrient-based standards, but few were able to provide supporting evidence that this was the case. In general, academic staff said that they thought the standards were a good idea, many queried their effectiveness if they were not compulsory and no one was monitoring them either internally (e.g. the caterer) or externally (e.g. Ofsted).
- While some academies are making good efforts to maintain compliance with some of the food-based standards, others are doing no better (and in many instances worse) than secondary schools nationally. This was true especially in relation to starchy food cooked in oil, less healthy drinks, condiments, confectionery, savoury snacks, and cakes and biscuits, and especially at mid-morning break.
- In the absence of compulsory standards, academies are serving foods in the dining room that the standards were intended to restrict or eliminate.

Introduction and Aim

An academy is a school that is independent of control by Local Authorities (LAs) and is directly funded by central government (Department of Education). In May 2010 there were a total of 203 academies in England ^[1]. By 2010 the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats coalition government announced plans to expand the academy programme with the Academies Act 2010 ^[2]. In May 2010 the Education secretary Michael Gove wrote to all state schools in England inviting them to opt out of Local Authority Control and convert to academy status. By April 2012, the number of academies had increased to over 1500, the majority of whom were in the secondary sector, two thirds of which were Converter rather than Sponsored ^[3].

A key clause in the Academies Act ^[2] exempted academies from having to follow the compulsory school food standards introduced by the previous government in 2006. The justification from the Department for Education was that “academies will always do the best for their pupils.”

As a step toward understanding the approach being taken by academies to food and drink, the Department for Education asked the School Food Trust (SFT) to undertake a small qualitative study in 12 selected academies and one Free School. Through face-to-face interviews with head teachers and members of the senior leadership team, completion of brief questionnaires (one for the head teacher, principal or business manager, and one for the catering manager), and an on-site visit by SFT nutritionists for one day, the aim was to obtain an overview of the strategies and management objectives and practices relating to the provision of food and drink in academies. Furthermore, inventories of food and drink available at mid-morning break, at lunchtime, and from vending, together with the use of menus and other existing evidence, were used to explore the extent to which academies were compliant with the food-based and nutrient-based standards for school food.

Methods

School selection: Twelve academies and one free school^a were included in the study. The DfE requested that the Trust include six academies and one free school. These seven academies were nominated jointly by DfE, the Schools Network and the Independent Academies Association as providing exemplars of good practice.

A further six academies were selected by the SFT from a list of all academies in England, using appropriate random selection techniques. Academies randomly selected were excluded if they were involved in other work being undertaken by the Trust, or in a local authority in which another academy had been selected. All of the schools nominated by DfE completed the study. Five of the twelve schools randomly selected by the SFT agreed to participate. The seven that declined claimed either to be too busy, were not interested, had just brought a new caterer, or did not respond to repeated approaches (four schools). A reserve sample of three academies was then approached, of which one agreed to participate; the remaining two academies did not respond to repeated approaches.

^a For the purpose of presentation, all thirteen schools are referred to in this paper as “academies”. Free schools are technically a subset of academies.

Each school was offered £500 to help defer the costs of participation in the study,^b to be paid on successful completion of the study in the school.

Design and Analysis: Field work took place in March 2012. In each school, a 60 minute face-to-face interview was arranged with the head teacher or member of the senior leadership team responsible for school food. The interviews were carried out by senior members of the SFT staff, all of whom were highly familiar with school catering, and who had been trained in qualitative interviewing and assessment methods. One week before the interview, two questionnaires were sent to the school, one for the head teacher or senior staff member responsible for school food, and one for the catering manager in the school. The responses to the questionnaires were taken into account where they were relevant to the face-to-face interviews, to clarify responses to themes that emerged from the interviews, and to provide information on catering practices and school food policies, management, and monitoring and evaluation of school food services.

At the start of the interview, the participants were told that they could end the interview at any point without having to give a reason. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of any information discussed in the interview, and told that no individual school would be identified in any published reports. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked if they had any questions.

In practice, the face-to-face interviews lasted between 39 and 70 minutes. 11 of the 13 interviews were recorded successfully for subsequent qualitative analysis. The interviews were transcribed verbatim^c and a constant comparison method^[4] was used to analyse the data using NVivo 8 software^[5]. Emergent themes were tested against the data set and refined accordingly. Two interviews were not recorded, one because of an equipment failure, and one because the respondent withdrew previous permission to record just as the interview commenced. Extensive notes kept by the interviewer were used subsequently to explore any additional themes that might have emerged from these two interviews, but none was detected.

During each academy visit, a School Food Trust nutritionist attended to observe the mid-morning break and lunchtime services. During the visit, the nutritionist used planned menus and other evidence provided by the school, along with observation of the food provided on the day of the visit, to assess whether the food provided met the final food-based standards for school lunch, the nutrient-based standards for school lunch and the food-based standards for food other than lunch. Nutritionists also made notes on the type of service, number of dining areas, number of vending machines, the quality and presentation of the food on offer and general notes on how the service was run.

Materials: A semi-structured interview guide which consisted of 21 questions was developed and tested by the research team (Appendix A). This provided a structure to guide the face-to-face interviews, and also allowed scope for questions to evolve should new topics

^b This same approach was used in the recently published study on food in secondary schools in England.

^c For purposes of qualitative analysis, all quotes in this report are verbatim and reflect natural speech.

be introduced by the participants. The questions covered a number of topics such as the students' need and priorities, the Academies' needs and priorities, free school meals, decisions about operating balances, the schools catering services and their view about food. Three of the questions from the interview guide were intended to explore themes based directly on responses to the questionnaire that the Head Teacher was asked to complete prior to the visit, using the format, "In your response to Question xx, you said that..." These questions were related to the dining space, decisions about operating balances, and monitoring.

The Head Teacher questionnaire consisted of a total of 30 questions. Some of the questions were open-ended, where participants had to describe reasons for those decisions or add comments, but the majority of the questions were closed. The questions were about food provision in the school, Free School Meals, catering facilities and lunchtime arrangements, stay-on-site policies, etc. The caterer questionnaire, similarly, asked specific questions about catering practices, levels of school lunch take up, etc.^d The interview guide and the questionnaires were approved by DfE before being used in the field.

Results

Interviews

In the interviews, academies were asked a very open-ended question, "What are your views about food in school?", together with a wide range of supporting questions about the management of food services and influences on decision-making in relation to food provision. In the analysis of the interviews, the main themes that emerged were: (a) the importance of food in academies; (b) factors influencing decision making around food provision; (c) how free school meals were promoted to pupils and parents; and (d) views about school food standards, monitoring and the food environment. Related subthemes are discussed within each section. Comments from the interviews and answers from the head teacher and caterer questionnaires were integrated as appropriate. Information from the nutritionists' observations helped to inform the objective assessments of food provision, dining spaces and evidence of monitoring and meeting the school food standards.

(a) The importance of food in academies

All the academies identified food as important. One said, *"We have a huge responsibility, that we are forging eating habits for the rest of their lives; they are having at least one sort of meal with us a day, if not two in the way that our school day works..."* Another said, *"It's the most important aspect the school can control because there is no doubt there's a massive link between how your food you eat and both your attitude to learning and the way you are feeling in general."* Other views mentioned included the importance to Sponsors/Governors to provide good food, and how it is seen as part of education, part of the school day, and influencing behaviour (albeit as part of a shifting landscape): *"We do recognise that children need fuel to actually make them study well and be, you know, attentive and the rest of it, so I think we see that as a responsibility of ours to*

^d Copies of the questionnaires are available from the SFT on request:
info@childrensfoodtrust.org.uk

offer something, but we've also got to ...acknowledge the tastes of...the community changes and then children in those communities change...".

The challenge mentioned by three schools was how to balance a commercial service against the welfare of the children. These views were affected by things such as the type of service (in-house or catering contract) and the involvement of the sponsor (where one existed). One with a contracted-out service stated, *"Well obviously there is a commercial aspect to it...and I would be lying if I said there wasn't...at the end of the day they are there to make money, and because they're not linked to the school, you know, it is their own stand-alone business,"* but went on to say, *"but I do think that they are very conscious of the welfare of children, and obviously under Every Child Matters, you know, we would never let a child go without any form of meal..."* Another said food was very important but at the same time was *"a challenge, financially"*.

Getting pupils to eat healthily was another issue. *"It is the majority [of pupils], and healthy eating is a massive issue or the lack of healthy eating at home, so it's a real culture change that we're trying to do, and so although we offer all of these things I'd be lying if I said to you that they eat healthy because they don't, all of them. They'll have their lunch here, those who don't buy the lunch, who bring in their own, it can be a box full of sweets, crisps, massive bars of chocolate, great big cans of coke, bottles of coke, fizzy fluorescent looking drinks and that's what they go and ... spend their money on."*

Food is not the academies' only priority. They are not just there to provide food, but to provide good education and a safe environment. *"What we have to be careful is of course they aren't just here to have food, they're actually here to do some learning."*

- **Food in the education agenda of the school**

All the academies stated in the head teacher questionnaire that practical cookery was part of the curriculum, and available to all the pupils in Years 7 and 8. From Year 10, ten academies offered practical cookery, and by Year 13 the number had fallen to six. Within the interviews, academies stated that they had included food as part of the education agenda by including food technology lessons, but how these linked to the school food service was not always further elaborated. One academy that did elaborate said *"So we have two or three health days a years throughout the year which means that those, all the curriculum is suspended and every student and every member of staff does something related to health. So we've had a variety of things, so last summer we all went on a health walk, because in the area that we're in, health is a major issue for the local community... on another day we had different types of workshops running throughout the day and this is where we had experts coming in and they could go round and learn how the heart works or learn how, you know, the effects alcohol has on your body and things like that, but run by experts and our staff as well, so there was a mix. Another one of the projects they had to do throughout the day was that they had to market a healthier option to XX and as part of the day they had to do the marketing, they had to draw the menus so they worked with our food technology teacher, they designed the menu, they then had to make the menu, they then had to create the restaurant, they then had to have the people come and eat in their restaurant."* A couple of academies said that they were considering introducing food technology lessons or they had just started. One academy stated *"That's only just starting to come through, [the previous school] didn't have cookery or food technology as a curriculum subject, it does now, so that was introduced in September. So I would have to say its early days yet. I know the*

lady ...the teacher who was brought in to launch food technology as a curriculum subject does pay attention to and is interested in what's going off in the catering dining facilities and is starting to link that back to her teaching. But again I would have to say its early days yet, it's only something we've just started to do."

Seven academies said that they included cookery as an extracurricular activity, but apart from one academy who reported that 176 pupils participated each year, in the remaining academies the numbers ranged from 10 to 60, or they were unsure.

- **Research**

A few academies were aware of research relating to improvements in lunchtime food, but no further views were elaborated. One academy, when asked about the role of food in children's learning, stated that *"I don't think any studies have been done particularly here as to whether things have improved since the new regulations came in. I think if you talk personally to staff that everybody would agree that a decent meal inside a child will make them a better, you know, make them more able to do what they need to do. But I can't really comment any further than that on that"*.

(b) Factors influencing decision making around food provision

There were six key themes that emerged from the interviews that provide evidence of the complexity of the decision-making process relation to school food provision.

- **Who makes the decisions, and how they are made**

Responses from the interviewees suggested that the person in the school responsible for making decisions regarding school food varied from school to school, ranging from the Governors, senior leadership teams, Principal or Vice Principal, to the catering manager or the catering company. One academy, when they were asked about who makes the day to day decisions, replied *"By and large the catering manager... so as far as is practical and possible, the whole catering operation is delegated to the department which is managed by ..."*. When questioned further they added *"Absolutely he/she comes to a meeting with myself and another member of the finance team who looks after the cost centre monitoring because our systems allow us to see what's happening on the spending side, on the cashless catering side and it allow us to see what's happening on the purchasing side in terms of the invoices that are coming in."* In another academy when asked about who made the decision of being an in-house catered school, the response was *"The decision was made when the school was going grant maintained, I think it was the governors of the time."* The interviewee clarified that they joined the academy at the back of that decision and when asked further on who makes the decision about the kitchen, dining and vending facilities they have at their school, the answer was *"Who decides? We work together, don't we [catering manager and school administrator] Erm, yeah."*

Each academy was asked in the head teacher questionnaire who had the responsibility to ensure that the food and drink provided in the academy was monitored. Nine of the 13 stated that one or more people were responsible for monitoring, including the head teacher (mentioned five times), the business manager (six times), the catering manager or head cook (eight times), or an independent consultant (three times). The remaining four provided no response.

Interviewees were asked who made the decision to use particular catering services. One academy stated three people made the decision: *“The principal, myself [vice principal] and the Business Manager.”* They went further to justify their decision in choosing a particular caterer as they were aware that the catering company *“were following the nutritional code... And we also knew that, you know we set quite strict agreements in place that we would have them from day one but that we would monitor in the first six months.”* They then added *“And if we weren’t happy – and there were a few things that we weren’t happy about at the start – and so we had a close working relationship with them where we’d go back and we decided. Then there came a critical point where we were thinking well, do we stay with them or do we go somewhere else, and we decided because they’d responded to the things we weren’t happy about they had responded that we decided to stay with them... but it is monitored and the Business Manager, she has a close sort of practical day to day working relationship with them.”*

These findings suggest that the arrangements for delegating responsibility around school food and its delivery varied from academy to academy. In some, there were close links with the caterers. In others, responsibility for choosing the caterer or contract rested with the senior leadership team, but responsibility for delivery (and decisions about provision) was delegated to the catering provider.

- **School priorities**

The sponsors or Governors set the priorities. All academies stated that the safety of the children, especially the younger ones, was one of their top priorities, and that is why they use the stay-on-site policy. *“We only operate the on-site policy for the younger kids, so Years 7 to 11 [not Year 12 and 13], and that’s to do with behaviour management and pupil welfare. We are in the middle of nowhere really, and we don’t want kids disappearing off into the fields, so we keep them in the school, they are on site.”* Other priorities they identified for lunchtime were to run the academy efficiently, keep costs down, help the students meet their needs, and get them ready for lessons.

Another academy said, *“Clearly the first principal is, is there enough time to get everyone through to eat lunch... We’ve also looked at the school day, how we can manage the school day best, so we took 10 minutes off for older pupils, ... so school used to start at 8.45, it now starts at 8.55, but see that extra minutes, they actually come in, actually if they are coming into class at 8.45 they actually come in now at 8.35 so they actually have 20 minutes to themselves, they have 20 minutes in the class in the morning where they sit down, have their toast and have that chillax as they call it, you know time where they can sit and chill into the day and work themselves up into, to school life again.”* Thus, in order to allow time for everyone to eat lunch and not be seeking to fulfil other needs at lunchtime, the academy took 10 minutes of their schedule in the morning for them to socialise and eat breakfast so they could go to the classroom relaxed, and then eat lunch quickly, having satisfied some of their need to socialize earlier in the school day.

- **Stay-on-site policies**

In the head teacher questionnaire, academies were asked if they operate stay-on-site policies. With the exception of one, all the academies reported that they do operate such a policy. When asked how strictly the policy is enforced, two of the academies reported that for Years 7-9 it was enforced strictly and that students who breach the policy are spoken with individually. In the remaining 11 academies, it was said that for Years 7-9 it was enforced

very strictly, and that repeated breach results in punishment such as detention or a letter sent home. For Years 10-11, the responses were quite similar with the exception that three academies do not enforce the policy for Year 10 and above.

Within the interviews, academies were further asked about their stay-on-site policies. One academy stated *“we don’t allow pupils out in the school day, so they have to eat in school. We have lots of visitors come in and have lunch with the kids but again obviously you can’t just have an open door so that anybody could wander off.”* When academies were asked to elaborate further on the reasoning for keeping to these policies, the responses varied. One academy stated that it was for the safety of the students; another one stated *“Looking at the previous school’s experience, the school that was here before, the kids just all used to go down to the chip shop and to XX and they are eating things that are just not healthy and we said straight away, if we are going to be a health academy, you could just imagine pictures on the local newspaper of people with mouths full of pasties, so it was just never going to be an option.”*

- **Consultation with parents**

In the head teacher questionnaire, academies were asked if they communicate with the parents about food in their academies, and all stated that they do. The ways they communicate differed from academy to academy. Five academies provide information on their profile or website, seven send letters and newsletters home to the parents, two sent the menu home, six communicate with the parents during the parents’ evening and one through email.

Within the interviews this topic was further elaborated. One academy said how the parents consult with them with regard to food: *“Parents are consulted as much as they want to be consulted, you know parents get very active with a new seven year intake, if parents ever want any questions answering, they phone me, they phone our finance department, we have a system of team leaders here and our team leaders are very active, any specific food questions that the team leaders pick up on they will come and speak to me, bring the parents, phone the parent back.”* Another academy said when discussing whether parents had any input into the food provision *“The Governors did yes, parents not so much, but the parents engaged since we opened. The get engaged through PTAs and what have you, and I asked their views, and really good views and they ask for some changes now and again. If we look back, we said we used to give them an apple or a piece of fruit in the afternoon, now we give them cheese rolls and crackers and stuff, this came from the parents, they asked could we have instead of just fruit.”*

- **Academy perceptions of pupil priorities, and pupil consultation**

All the schools identified the students’ priorities at lunchtime as the need to eat something really quickly so they can spend time with their friends and play sports. One academy said, *“Speed.”* But they later continued *“I think they would love, I’m sure if we had the sort of space that we would need to do it, they’d love to be able to come in, get what they want, sit down and chat with their friends ... The lads will still want to go out and play football on the fields and stuff like that, but, and some of the girls will too, but you know I think a lot of students would just like to be able to have that natter time...”* Another academy also identified ‘speed’ as an important aspect of student’s priorities and have also identified that majority of the students do not actually eat their lunch during lunchtime but during break.

When discussing the amount of time for lunch and the additional outlet that the school had opened up, the head teacher said: *"It does [help], but it helps with the speed, and it gives them an opportunity to have something in their hands. I mean we have a lot of lunchtime activities going as well, which is why at break time we serve a lot of food which lot of kids will get their food at break time, which is going to be their lunch, because they're doing a lunch club. This time of the year all the year elevens are being dragged into revision sessions left, right and centre and things like that."* Another head teacher added that along with speed students *"need to go and spend a lot of energy in the tennis court"*.

In terms of student input into the catering service, four academies reported that school nutrition action groups (SNAGs) or school council had an active input in to school food and the dining room service and that they met once a term. Those academies identified the importance of letting the students have their say. *"They [students] were invited to the school council and that's one ... they wanted to discuss with us. We are working very hard on student voice this year, that's one of our priorities."* SNAGs are often the forum where students are able to make their voices heard^[6]. Another academy that answered "no" to the question in the questionnaire about having an active school nutrition action group, stated in the interview that they had carried out a student survey in order to get people's voices heard. *"It's focused on food, so it's focused on lunch and break and then the catering surveys. The student survey was specifically ... on catering, and that highlighted the need for increase in the diversity of food that was on offer, which resulted in introducing the distributed serving point style and introduced the pasta bay, so the XX which is a branded product that we buy in which has a dedicated serving trolley and the chicken run the same XX which is a branded bought-in product as well as... and then a slight relaying out to the dining hall, so there's food that's cooked in house as well. Broadening the range, like that was something that was realised that... (a) there was demand for that's what children wanted and (b) would be a good way to go as the numbers increased and a good way of actually getting the large numbers through the dining hall as well."*

- **Financial**

Virtually all of the catering services run at a deficit, although one or two hoped to break even for 2011-2012. One academy reported that they currently have a *"£12,000 deficit"* and another one saying *"The last full year that we produced accounts for was the year before, six months before we became an academy, we made a £43,000 loss, which is the cost of a teacher's salary"*. The academy, not the caterer or LA, subsidises the service. Another school when asked simply stated that *"we expect to break even"*. They added *"there's no real strong motive, there's no driving force within the organisation that says that catering has to make a profit and I think the logic behind that is that we don't particularly want to be generating surpluses in catering because by implication then you are probably pitching your prices higher than they need to be and perhaps discouraging take up."* One academy that had stated earlier that they viewed food from a commercial point of view and had brought a catering service when asked about whether they are making profit, surplus they said *"I've put break even, but I should have imagine they will make... I can't imagine them not making a profit, but because I don't ...because we are not involved in the management of the company, you know, it's very difficult for me to say to be honest with you."* These views were corroborated by the questionnaire responses from head teachers. All except two expected to be operating at a deficit in 2011-12, a repeat of their experiences from the previous year (all

had the same caterer in both 2010-11 and 2011-12). All were using the same catering provider as in the previous year.

(c) Free School Meals

Overall, the take up of school lunches varied between the schools, from 22% to 100% (school meals were compulsory in one school). The take up of school meals by children registered for a free school meal was between 60% and 100%.

In relation to free school meals, all but one of the academies stated that they were doing everything they could to encourage students and parents about the free school meals. One academy even provided for the whole Sixth Form with free meals to promote their awareness that some pupils are entitled to free school meals (whether that was for a day, a week or a year was not specified). Eight academies specified the methods used to promote FSM, mainly sending letters to parents, newsletters, and use of cashless systems. Another academy did not allow students to bring in packed lunches and all the students had to have school meals (whether free or paid-for). Nine said that they actively encouraged pupils to take up their FSM entitlement, and six were able to specify what those actions were. Four academies said that pupils can split their FSM allowance between lunch and mid-morning break.

One head teacher said: *"We're doing a lot of proactive work and we emailed everybody, we use an email service across, we emailed and those who aren't on the email get a paper version of it, in December to remind them how easy it was to register for free school meals. Because it's a very simple and, it's probably one of the simplest forms of benefit that I've seen. There are also some booklets and a paragraph in there to reminding the parents that if they're already on free school meals they've got to make sure that they're registered on time, if they think they might be entitled to it, contact this person, if they need somebody, there's someone here in school who can help them get access to the free school meal forms and such like, and fill them in. So we are working quite hard because that has brought in a shed load of money."* When asked whether all this hard work is effective, the interviewee responded *"Can't tell you. Can't tell you."*

(d) School Food Standards and monitoring

Overall, the academies agreed that the standards were there for the wellbeing of the pupils, but different views on their importance were evident. One stated their view of the importance of the standards but at the same time expressed a concern about the monitoring: *"I think my views on the standards are, I believe they're essential, but they are not monitored nationally. They should be made law, as they are for primary school. I mean there are advisory things, there are certain legal requirements in there, but who adheres to it? ..."* Another academy said *"Yes I think they should [be monitored]. Well I think they should, speaking as a parent and a business manager, because as I've said before, you know, for some children that might be their main meal of the day, and if I'm a parent I want to know that my child is getting a good balanced diet,"* but later continued, *"and I can't imagine why*

any academy, other than possibly financially, why they would change [from not following the standards]”.

The head teacher/bursar and caterer were asked in their respective questionnaires who monitored compliance with the standards for their school. Most reported that either the academy itself or the caterer monitored the standards, but the list included independent consultants, local authority representatives, healthy schools coordinators, the business manager and Ofsted. One school stated that the standards were not monitored at all.

The nutritionists recorded all of the food and drink provided at lunchtime and mid-morning break. DfE nominated academies met on average 10 of the 14 food-based standards at lunchtime, ranging from as few as six standards in two of these academies to 14 in another two. The average number of food-based standards met in the randomly selected schools was nine out of a possible 14, ranging from four to 14. The standards met most often were for water (13 academies), salt and condiments (12 academies) and group 3 meat products (pies, met in 11 academies). Met least often were the standards for starchy food cooked in oil and deep-fried foods (six academies) and extra bread and confectionery (seven academies).

Figure 1 shows compliance with the standards for which we have directly comparable data between the DfE nominated academies, the academies selected randomly by SFT, and the secondary school food results for 80 schools nationally. For starchy food cooked in oil, healthier drinks, confectionery, savoury snacks, and condiments, the schools in the secondary school food study were more likely to be compliant with the standards than the randomly selected academies in the qualitative study. For deep-fried foods, salt, extra bread, and free water,^e the randomly selected academies in the qualitative study were more likely to be compliant than the schools in the secondary school food study. Academies nominated by DfE were the most likely to be compliant of the three groups of schools, except for salt.

None of the differences between school groups reached statistical significance, in part because of the small number of schools in the qualitative study (see also note to legend for Figure 1). The findings suggest, therefore, that academies are no better at meeting food-based standards at lunchtime than other schools.

^e The standards require that drinking water is freely available throughout lunchtime. Some schools in the secondary school food study provided bottled water for sale but not free water.

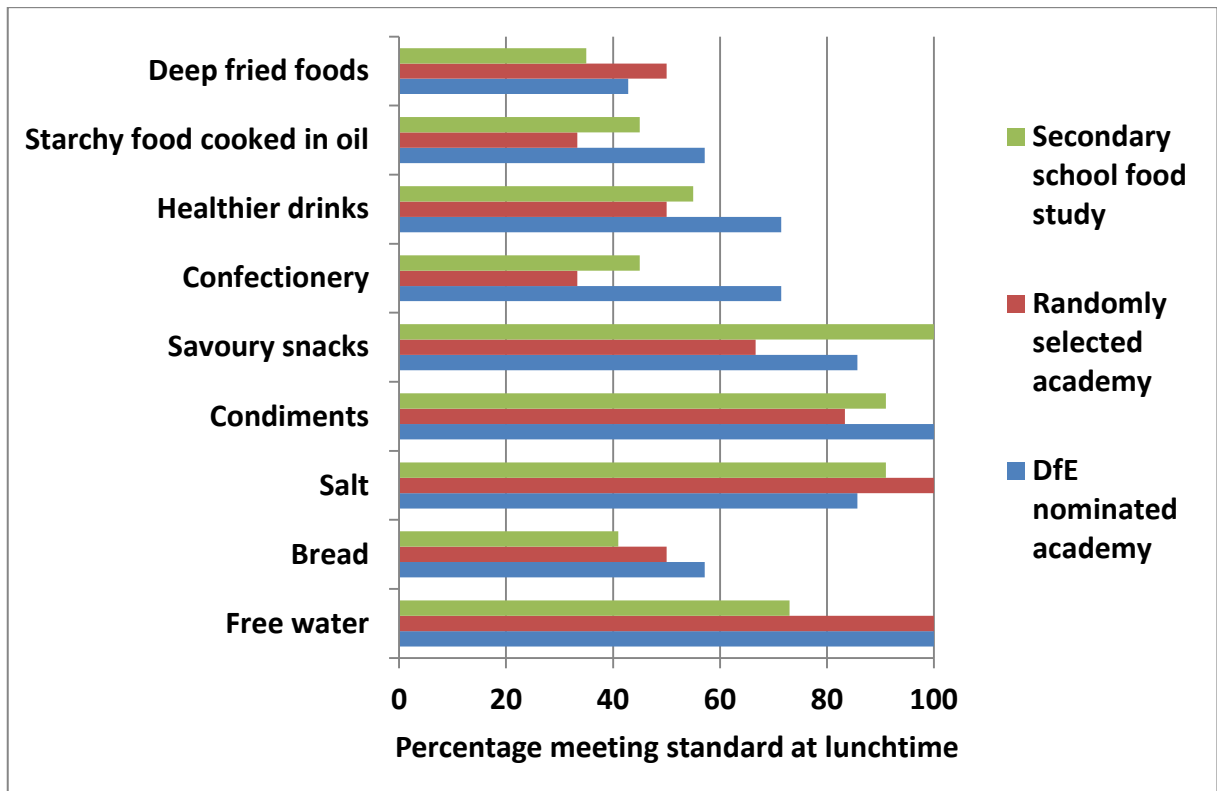


Figure 1. Percentage of schools meeting selected standards for food and drink provision at lunchtime, by type of school or academy. (For water, bread, confectionery, healthier drinks, not significantly different between school groups (chi-squared test); for other foods, chi-squared not valid because of small values for E.)

Figure 2 (see below) shows that for all the standards except salt and water, the schools in the secondary school food study were more likely to be compliant with the standards at mid-morning break than the randomly selected academies in the qualitative study. For cakes and biscuits, confectionery, and savoury snacks, schools in the secondary school food study were more likely to be compliant with the standards than the academies nominated by DfE. In spite of the small number of observations, for cakes and biscuits and confectionery, compliance in academies was statistically significantly worse than in the average for secondary schools for England in 2010-2011, and for savoury snacks the statistic was of borderline significance. Only for water at morning break were academies more likely to be compliant than other secondary schools.

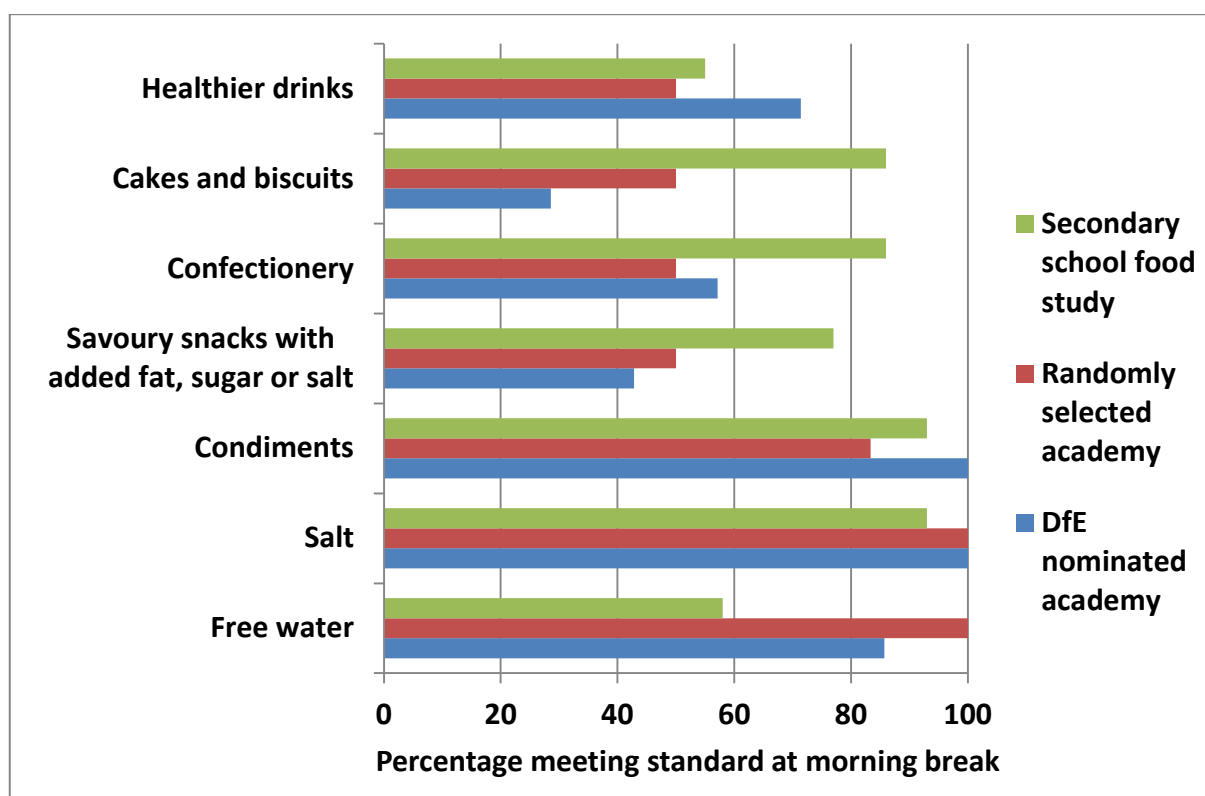


Figure 2. Percentage of schools meeting selected standards for food and drink provision at mid-morning break, by type of school or academy. Statistically significant differences were shown between the three school types (chi-squared test) for cakes and biscuits ($p < 0.001$), confectionery ($p < 0.019$), water ($p = 0.048$), and borderline for savoury snacks ($p = 0.059$).

Nine academies claimed to have met most or all of the food-based standards at lunchtime, and six to have met them for food other than lunch. Of these, four academies were able to provide evidence of having met the lunchtime standards (or evidence of working toward the standards), and two were able to provide evidence of compliance with the non-lunch food-based standards.

Similarly, eight academies claimed to have met all of the nutrient-based standards at lunchtime. Only one academy was able to provide evidence of meeting the nutrient-based standards for school lunch. Although four other schools reported being able to provide evidence that they met the nutrient-based standards, none was able to do so. Of the remaining eight schools, three admitted to having no evidence of compliance and one reported currently actively working towards compliance, but did not provide evidence.

When a head teacher was questioned about the planning side of the menu, they said “Yes, he [a consultant that advises them] *has got different ideas* [regarding menus], yes. *But basically we try and stick with the guidelines of how many portions of meat, fish, oily fish, vegetables, build round that. And I’ve tried to put in like a traditional meal, a spicy meal, a hot type sandwich type meal, each week, to give it variation.*” In several schools, knowing whether or not provision was meeting the standards was put down to “*common sense*”.

Facilities, and support for healthy eating

Of the 13 schools in the study, nine had an in house catering provider, three had a school-contracted private caterer and one had an LA contracted private caterer. The quality of the food was generally good and schools valued local sourcing and freshly prepared most food on site. All the schools had a cashless system, either biometric or card-based, and there did not appear to be any stigma attached to pupils in receipt of a free school meal, as they could not be differentiated from other pupils.

All of the academies had full-production kitchens. About two thirds had either vending machine(s) or tuck shops, eight had breakfast clubs, and four afternoon clubs. Seven of the academies had one dining room only, whilst the remaining six had between one and three additional dining rooms, kiosks or satellite serving points, and two schools had a trolley service which operated at mid-morning break. Six of the schools had between one and four vending machines, most of which served compliant drinks only. Confectionery and savoury snacks were available a vending machine in the sixth form dining area of one school, although other pupils in the school had access throughout the day. Nine schools reported serving food at breakfast time and ten schools reported providing a mid-morning break service. One school provided food after lunch, at afternoon break time. No schools reported serving food at after school clubs.

Eleven academies had a dining space that the nutritionist considered to be fit for purpose (in terms of size, number of serving points, length of queues and space for young people to eat), but two of the dining rooms were clearly too small to accommodate the number of pupils eating at lunchtime. The layout and the space for the dining hall were mentioned as problems generally, however, especially for schools that were converted and not newly built. When asked about the difficulties they have with their dining room space, one academy said *“the dining hall space was actually created as a gym originally, it wasn’t designed as a dining hall, so when the school was [a different school to what it is currently] that was originally built as a gym. At a later date, the gym facility was moved out to a new building, new at the time, quite old now, and a kitchen put on the back of the gym to allow it to become a dining facility. But it means that the numbers, particularly because we are an all through school, so we’ve got little people and big people and the numbers involved generally, there’s no way everybody could go, even within a particular phase, even within the secondary phase that everybody could fit in all together...”*. Another commented in relation to increasing numbers, *“The thing is, obviously since we’ve had the building our numbers have grown... The problem is that lunchtime sometimes we can get bottlenecks, you know when everybody comes at the same time. So it’s just managing the flow of the queues, which dinner ladies to be fair, do as best they can.”*

Five head teachers stated specifically in the questionnaire that they had issues relating either to space or the age of the equipment available. Most had tried to accommodate these issues by introducing staggered sittings, three had introduced new food outlets, and two had increased the length of the lunch break. Three had plans to extend the dining space in the future. In one academy at mid-morning break, pupils mainly either stood up or sat on the floor because no tables and only a few chairs were made available. This was done in order to accommodate the number of pupils who wanted to be served in the 20 minute break.

Most schools had between one and six support staff in the dining room, whose main roles were to manage queues and behaviour and to clear tables. Three mentioned a role relating to educating pupils about healthy eating or promotion of school meals. Two catering managers, four members of catering staff and two supervisory staff had received training

related to healthy cooking or healthy eating in the previous twelve months. Ten academies said their senior teaching staff supervised in the dining room, and eight said that their staff ate in dining room alongside pupils.

Eight academies put up menus in the dining room, and four or five promoted menus by sending copies home to parents or putting them up on the academy website. Five catering managers said that they had been involved with groups in the school (e.g. school councils) to discuss food provision. Two catering managers used taster sessions for parents or pupils, or theme days to promote school meals. Two had tried to boost fruit and vegetable consumption through giving them away free or promoting them as healthy options. Eight said that they had taken action in the previous 12 months to find out what pupils, parents or governors thought of the service, and five had made changes as a result (although the changes were not specified).

Eight academies said that they had a whole-school food policy, but in only three was it written down and used as “guidance”. Three also said that they had a packed lunch policy, including one mandatory policy that did not allow packed lunches. Seven academies had been awarded Healthy Schools between 2008- and 2010.

Discussion

The purpose of the current report was to understand the approach being taken by academies to food and drink. The report integrates data from three sources: interviews with senior school staff; questionnaire responses provided by head teachers and catering managers; and direct observations of school food provision and catering and dining facilities.

All of the academies identified food as important and a part of education. The senior leadership team was always directly involved and reported to governors. At the same time, it was clear that decision making around food was influenced by a wide range of factors, including finances (the need to run a sustainable business), the priorities of their sponsors, listening to the needs, views and opinions of pupils and parents, provide the best for the children, the priorities of the government (i.e. attainment), and the needs of the teachers and staff. Financial factors came up regularly in the interviews. (In the free school that took part in the study, the financial component was not an issue for them. The academic staff were in charge of arranging the lunchtime (not the provision of food) and the catering service was in charge of the provision of food, but they did not have to worry about making a profit or breaking even.)

The word “challenge” was used to describe this issue of balancing competing priorities. In one or two instances, the responsibility for catering was wholly devolved to the catering manager or catering provider, and the primary concern of the academy’s senior leadership team was financial. All but two of the academies were subsidizing the catering service. In only a few academies were catering staff part of the senior management team and able to have a direct influence on decisions about food and drink provision. Senior staff were aware of welfare issues around food and were concerned that pupils should not go hungry, in part because it was likely to have an adverse impact on their ability to learn. But they were far less aware of the research evidence about the impact of standards on improved eating in schools, or that linked healthy eating in a pleasant dining environment to better learning behaviours in the classroom.^[7, 8] This suggests that more needs to be done in academies to raise awareness of both the research and the benefits of healthier eating. This implies that

academy staff may need more support to understand the reasons why children in school need to have healthier diets and the rationale for maintaining provision in line with the standards. Without this understanding, it will be more difficult to justify the need for healthier eating, defend the standards to parents, pupils and other staff, and to prevent competing priorities taking precedence.

When asked to elucidate their perception of pupils' needs at lunchtime, most of the academies alluded to "speed" and the need to get pupils into and out of the dining room as quickly as possible at lunchtime. Although some academies recognized that their dining spaces were not ideal, and suggested that staggered lunches or different sittings for different year groups, no one suggested that a longer lunch break would help to meet students' social objectives as well as promote better nutrition, and yield benefits in terms of classroom behaviour and learning outcomes. One academy mentioned that as the school grew, there would be problems accommodating more pupils in the dining room. Only four academies had school nutrition action groups which met termly; these have been shown to be effective in encouraging pupils into the dining room^[9]. Beyond this, catering staff were only occasionally invited to meet with students or others in the school. Most communication about food and drink was one-way (letters home, menus on website, etc.). One academy had carried out a survey about food and drink, but this was not a regular event, nor part of a systematic approach to improvement of food and drink in the academy.

Most of the senior staff thought that their food and drink provision met the food-based and nutrient-based standards, but few were able to provide supporting evidence that this was the case. Although there was a delegated person responsible for food in every academy, the findings suggest that monitoring was not a priority except in one or two academies, and then not necessarily in relation to the standards. Although in general academic staff said that they thought the standards were a good idea, many queried their effectiveness if they were not compulsory and no one was monitoring them either internally (e.g. the caterer) or externally (e.g. Ofsted). One or two relied on the external catering company to monitor compliance with the standards, but neither requested nor queried the evidence that the standards were being met.

Conclusions

Evidence from the recently published study on food and drink provision and consumption in secondary schools in England shows that substantial improvements have taken place since the introduction of the standards for school food^[10]. The evidence from the present study suggests that while some academies are making good efforts to maintain compliance with some of the food-based standards, others are doing no better (and in many instances worse) than secondary schools nationally. This was true especially in relation to starchy food cooked in oil, less healthy drinks, condiments, confectionery, savoury snacks, and cakes and biscuits, and especially at mid-morning break. These foods are typically higher in fat, saturated fatty acids, sugar and salt. Their reduction is key to healthy eating strategies around overweight and obesity^[11]. They are also the types of foods which pupils are most likely to put pressure on caterers to return to the dining room, in part because of marketing on the high street and in mass media. In the absence of compulsory standards, caterers and senior leadership teams may be less able to resist this pressure when other priorities (particularly financial priorities) are competing. This is not dissimilar to the situation that

existed when school food had been deregulated previously, which led to a sustained deterioration in the quality of school food provision and catering and a decline in the number of pupils eating school meals.

Limitations

These findings are based on the views of the participating academies. They might not, therefore, reflect the views of all academies. Six were nominated by the Department for Education (all Sponsored), while the remainder (all Converter academies) were randomly selected across England, with the caveats outlined in the Methods section. It was clear that each Academy had a unique identity. Identifying all the themes and commonalities was a challenge, based on such a small sample (13 out of a possible 1500 currently operating). Moreover, it became clear that within the limited time available for each visit, not all the themes could be explored to the same depth in all the academies, and different academies wanted to emphasize different aspects of their service and challenges. Nevertheless, the approach taken provides a useful snapshot of food provision and practice in a cross-section of academies in England. Further research findings on academies are available on the School Food Trust website.

This report was prepared on behalf of the School Food Trust by Daphne Kaklamanou, Jo Pearce and Michael Nelson. We would like to thank all the academies who took part in the study. Thanks also to Claire Wall, Jo Walker, Linda Smith, Jo Nicholas and Jeremy Boardman for undertaking interviews, and to Jo Pearce, Alex Scott, Laura Briggs, and Clare Harper for their assistance with inventories and nutrition reporting, as well as to Kate Christ and Amanda Turner for their help in organising the interviews. May 2012.

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APPENDIX A

Interview schedule for use in face-to-face interview with head teacher/business manager/senior school food lead (line spaces deleted)

Name of academy:

URN:

Date of interview:

Name of respondent:

Job title of respondent:

Filter for later questions:

Does your school have a sixth form for which you are responsible for providing catering services?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Thank you very much for taking the time to see me today. I want to explore the role of food in your academy, and to follow up some of the responses to the questionnaires that you and your caterer kindly completed for us. I want to reiterate that all of the information that we collect is held in strict confidence, and that no individual school or comments from individual members of staff will be identifiable in any reporting of the results from this study. Also, you are free to stop the interview or withdraw the academy from the study at any point, without having to give a reason.

When we arranged the interview, we made it clear that we wanted to record it. This helps me to make sure that I don't miss anything from our conversation (although I will make occasional notes from time to time). Can I please confirm with you now that it is ok for me to record the interview. (CIRCLE ONE RESPONSE)

- Yes, ok to record
- No, not ok to record

I would like to start just by confirming a few details about your academy.

1. Roughly when did your school become an academy? (RECORD MONTH AND YEAR)

- *Month* _____
- *Year* _____

2. Which school years does your academy include? (*RECORD LOWEST AND HIGHEST YEARS*)

- Lowest school year: _____
- Highest school year: _____

3. How is your catering service provided? Is it... (*CODE ONE ONLY*)

- LA or LA contracted
- A private caterer contracted directly by the school
- An in-school catering service
- Other (*please specify*)

Thank you.

4. Does your academy have a sponsor? (IF YES, EXPLORE ROLE OF SPONSOR, PRIORITIES FOR SCHOOL INCLUDING FOOD PROVISION)

5. Your caterer said that [name of caterer] has provided your catering services since [date when first provided]. Who made the strategic decision about who would provide the catering services for your academy?

6. Who decides how the kitchen, dining and vending facilities (if any) are managed and maintained?

7. Who decided what types of catering services would be provided in the school? Who participated in that decision making? Were students, staff, parents or governors consulted? If so, how was the consultation carried out?

EXPLORE:

- Type and range of services
- Times and duration for lunch hour, break times, breakfast service, afternoon
- Types, ranges and timing of food on offer

8. You said that your school *does/does not* operate a “stay-on-site” or “closed gate” policy at lunchtime. Can we talk about the reasons for your decision?

- IF SCHOOL DOES OPERATE S-O-S POLICY, EXPLORE (A) HOW STRICTLY AND (B) WHY.

9. What are your views about food in school?

(PROBE: Burden to provide? Should it be a commercial service, or is it an essential part of education (e.g. demonstrating what is taught about healthy lifestyle)? Essential

to child health? Does it make a difference to behaviour, learning behaviour or attainment? Role of school meal versus packed lunch?)

10. What do *you* think are your students' needs and priorities at lunchtime?

(PROBE: Were they consulted about what their needs and priorities are?)

11. What are *your* priorities for your students at lunchtime?

12. What steps do you take to help students meet *their* needs at lunchtime?

13. What are *your* priorities for the school and school management at lunchtime?

(PROMPT: Keep lunchtime as short as possible? Make time for other activities for students? Give staff a break? Control poor behaviour?)

14. What steps, if any, do you take to encourage parents to register for free school meals and for students to take up their entitlement? (PROBE: If none, why not? If some, how effective are they? How do you decide which ones to pursue? What are the barriers to registration and take up? Make sure to cover both parents and students.)

15. What steps, if any, does the school take to enable students from low-income families who do NOT qualify for free school meals to take school meals?

(PROBE: Explore use of variable pricing. Are they aware of change in legislation?)

16. You said in response to Q14 in your questionnaire that you have issues relating to the dining space in your school. What steps, if any, have you taken about the issues you have experienced relating to the dining space in your school? (PROBE: Have these steps addressed the issues? Are there other steps you feel you need to take?)

17. You said in your response to Q4 that for 2011-12 the school catering services are expected to *Operate at a deficit/ Break even / Make a surplus / Other*.

(PROBE: How are decisions about operating balances made, and by whom? If there is a surplus, how will it be used? If there is a deficit, do you want to change to break-even or surplus? If not, how is the deficit covered?)

18. You said that / [name(s) of monitors from Q24] has management responsibility for monitoring the types of food and drink provided in the school / that you do not monitor the food and drink sold in the school.

EXPLORE: What is the main purpose for monitoring the types of food and drink provided in the school? OR Why do they not monitor?

19. Is there anything (e.g. from parents, students, or research) that influences what you do about provision of food and drink in your academy? (PROBE: Are you aware of research about school food, behaviour and attainment? Does this influence food and drink provision in your academy? Are there links, if any, between what is provided and lessons about food and food choice in PHSE and/or science classes?)

20. What are your views about school food standards? (PROBE: Good thing or a bad thing? Should academies be required to follow them? Do you understand why they were introduced? Are the standards an impediment to making a surplus? Are they too restrictive? Are there some points in the day when they are more important than at other times? Are school food standards important for children's health and/or attainment? Do parents care whether or not the school adheres to standards for school food?)
21. IF SIXTH FORM: Are there any issues about food in Sixth Form? (PROBE: Different needs and priorities? Pressures from students?)

Thank you very much for taking the time to see me today.