

A Healthy Profit Aspens and Upton-by-Chester High School

Introduction

Encouraging children to eat healthily means providing balanced meal options, as well as educating them about food and nutrition. But to have a meaningful impact on young people's health, their attitudes must also be influenced.

The environment at school has a key role to play in this. How can schools promote and reinforce healthy choices through genuine and sustainable initiatives?

Origins of the project

Aspens is a national catering consultancy company working in schools, academies and universities. Established in 2008, Aspens' founders aimed to build an organisation that had a different offering to larger and more impersonal catering contractors. High-quality, personalised service with strong values are at the core of its brand.

In 2013, its fifth year of business, Aspens had 50 contracts, doubling to 100 in 2014. The company strives to offer a cost-effective service, and agreements are drawn up with the schools.

Aspens' view is that children should be engaged with food, interested in nutrition and empowered to manage their own diets. The company is working against a backdrop in which one in three British children is currently overweight; schools play a critical role in promoting healthy eating.

Partnership working

Each Aspens service is integrated within the school, and strong collaborative links with staff are made. At each site a manager monitors the running of the service and has the freedom to develop new personalised projects that meet the needs of each school.

At Upton-By-Chester High School in Cheshire, service manager Vicky Davies' work with the food technology department began through collaboration with a motivated member of staff.

Approach and delivery

Beyond providing a nutritionally balanced meal, Aspens recognises the importance of its role in influencing the food choices young people make. The company provides a variety of healthy options to empower young people and have undertaken a number of tailored projects that promote the importance of food and the benefits of eating well.

In the kitchen Aspens promotes healthy cooking techniques such as oven-baking instead of frying, and omitting additional salt or sugar. Special offers are used to attract pupils' attention to the healthiest options in the canteen and to encourage them to try new dishes.

At Upton-by-Chester, a 'Smoothie Bike' allows pupils to blend healthy fruit and vegetable drinks by pedalling. A 'Ready Steady Cook' session, meanwhile, encourages students to experiment with ingredients, particularly vegetables that they might not otherwise try.

Aspens runs cookery classes for pupils as part of after-school clubs. Many schools have also run 'Uni Survival' sessions to teach basic cookery skills for older pupils preparing to leave school. These classes encourage pupils to take ownership of their nutrition and understand cooking as a skill for life rather than simply another subject in the curriculum.

Families are also taught about the benefits of healthy cooking, creating ownership over the process of making food. At North Birmingham Academy, Aspens run community cookery workshops. Held for parents, these sessions offered the opportunity to cook easy-to-prepare healthy dishes alongside Aspens chefs.

Success and outcomes

Even where health is not an explicit focus of their work, through encouraging pupils to take an interest in their diet, to make choices and to take part in the processes of preparing and advertising foods, Aspens' work with schools helps young people develop positive attitudes towards nutrition and seeing meals as something to be enjoyed.

The organisation is beginning to research the links between academic attainment and food choices.

Future plans and obstacles

A further facility with emerging potential to support health lies in the use of a contactless payment system implemented in many of Aspens' schools. This 'Cashless Catering' involves pupils using a pre-loaded card to purchase lunch.

Aspens has started to utilise the system both to incentivise certain meal choices through operating a loyalty card / bonus points system, and has been able to use the records from card purchases to track how money is being spent, which products are most popular, and whether children are making healthy choices.

Conclusion

Aspens not only provides nutritious meals but works to change attitudes to health. The company demonstrates how it is possible to make eating a positive experience, change attitudes to eating and encourage pupils to take ownership of their eating by providing a locally co-produced service that integrates eating, service, preparation, curriculum and extra-curricular activities.

Researcher Catherine Belton

