



A Central Ingredient

The Role of Food Education in
Supporting Pupil Outcomes

Research by Public First

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Executive Summary

Food learning is vital to preparing children for life. How and what children eat has a well-evidenced impact on their health, concentration, energy and ability to learn. Good food education can help children develop practical skills, confidence, knowledge about nutrition, and a positive relationship with food that can last well beyond their time at school. Schools play an important role in shaping children's relationship with food, from what is served in the canteen to what is taught in lessons.

However, the wider impact of food learning on pupil outcomes is less well understood. The existing literature offers encouraging insights. Studies suggest that food education can improve pupils' food literacy, cooking confidence, enjoyment, knowledge of nutrition and attitudes towards healthier eating. Practical food activities can also support creativity, cooperation, independence and confidence. However, research to date has not yet fully captured the breadth of influence of good food education on attendance, engagement and behaviour, attainment, wellbeing and a sense of belonging. In this report we seek to address this evidence deficit.

This report is the final in a series of three research papers into food education and its impact. The Food Education Mapping Project 2025 explored the state of food education in schools and what successful delivery looks like (when food learning is delivered in a way that pupils can 'Learn it, See it, Live it'). Hungry for Change: What Parents and Pupils Want from Food Education 2026 investigated parents and pupils' attitudes to food learning in their schools and beyond. This report looks at the impact of food learning in its fullest sense: what children learn through the curriculum, what they see through enrichment activities, assemblies and school culture, and what they experience and practise through their everyday food environment, including school canteens. In other words, whether schools that help pupils to 'Learn it, See it, Live it' see extended benefits.

We interviewed senior leaders, department heads and food teachers in schools with recognised strong food education. The aim was to understand how schools that have prioritised and invested in food education view its impact on pupils.

The findings suggest that in these schools, food education is seen as having both a broad and positive impact on pupil outcomes. Senior leaders and teachers consistently described food learning as practical, purposeful, inclusive and highly valued by many pupils. Schools that give children opportunities to learn about food, experience positive food cultures and apply their skills in real settings believe this supports attendance, engagement and behaviour, wellbeing, and to some degree attainment.

Attendance

Food lessons were often described as something pupils genuinely look forward to. For some children with attendance difficulties, food was cited as the lesson they would come into school for, or as a useful part of return-to-school plans. Our findings suggest food education can offer a positive point of connection with school for pupils who may otherwise be disengaged.

Behaviour

Schools gave examples of practical food lessons being used constructively as part of behaviour management and engagement strategies. Food lessons require pupils to follow instructions, work safely, use equipment responsibly and manage time carefully. Teachers felt that the practical and safety-critical nature of the subject helps pupils develop discipline, focus and responsibility.

Attainment

Teachers described food lessons as giving pupils a clear and immediate experience of success. In the course of a single lesson, pupils can make something tangible, see the result of their effort, and feel proud of what they have achieved. This can build confidence that pupils can carry into other areas of learning. Food education also develops resilience when things go wrong, and draws on transferable knowledge and skills, including numeracy, science, planning, problem-solving and communication.

Wellbeing

Food education was seen as helping pupils understand how to nourish their bodies, develop independence, and experience a sense of achievement. It can also support feelings of belonging at school with pupils working together and engaging in school life through sharing food and food experiences. For many pupils, food education offers a route to feeling successful and valued at school.

A CENTRAL INGREDIENT

Overall, the findings suggest that food education can make a meaningful contribution to wider pupil outcomes. This research offers strong and consistent perspectives from schools that prioritise food education, that when children are given rich opportunities to learn about food, practise food skills and experience a positive food culture, the benefits can extend across school life.

A whole school approach to food education that allows children to ‘Learn it, See it, Live it’ should therefore be understood as an integral, practical and valuable way to ensure all children thrive at school.

This creates a clear opportunity. Government commitments on free school meals, breakfast provision and updated school food standards show renewed attention to the role of food in children’s health and wellbeing. But without a stronger place for food education in the curriculum and a robust accountability system, these reforms risk missing their full potential.

Proposed food education curriculum changes at Key Stage 4, uncertainty around post-16 routes, and the absence of a coherent A level pathway could further marginalise a subject that connects health, science, culture, sustainability and practical life skills. Food education should be strengthened, not narrowed, so that all pupils can access the knowledge and skills they need to thrive.

There is a clear and urgent case to rebalance. Ensuring all children can ‘Learn it, See it, Live it’ would help turn positive school food reforms into lasting skills, confidence and healthier habits whilst also improving key pupil outcomes such as attendance, engagement and behaviour, attainment, wellbeing and a sense of belonging.

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We know that engagement in a high-quality food curriculum that goes beyond the bounds of a classroom has a positive impact on children being safe, happy, and healthy.

Best Food Forward calls on the government to:

01 Establish food education as a foundation subject for all

Position food education explicitly as a foundation subject for all pupils across Key Stages 1 to 4, ensuring protected curriculum time and parity with other life-skills subjects such as Physical Education, Computing and Citizenship. Crucially, this designation should be reflected within accountability frameworks. In addition, food education qualifications must sit within the recognised ‘breadth’ category of study at Key Stage 4, rather than being relegated to optional ‘choice’, ensuring it is not squeezed out by performance measures for those who wish to specialise.

02 Appoint school food leads

Require MATs to appoint a specialist food education lead responsible and accountable for embedding a whole school approach to food learning, encompassing provisioning and ensuring food education allows children to ‘Learn it, See it, Live it’. For local authority run schools, the local authority should appoint a food lead responsible for the maintained schools in their area.

03 Rebuild clear and credible progression pathways at level 3, including a Food A level

Act urgently to restore and secure progression routes in food education post-16, including the development of a robust A level pathway in food, alongside high-quality technical options. Government must ensure clear progression from Key Stage 4 into advanced study and careers in food, as part of the wider level 3 review, with parity between academic and technical routes and recognition of the food sector’s economic and societal value.

Good food education is central to enabling children to thrive. It goes beyond cooking skills and nutrition knowledge, supporting pupils’ attendance, engagement and behaviour, wellbeing and sense of belonging, while also opening up credible future pathways. At a moment of significant reform, strengthening access to food education is both necessary and achievable.



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To maintain anonymity and safeguard the identities of our case schools, we have included representative stock imagery.

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