



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.

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.

“ 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 foods 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

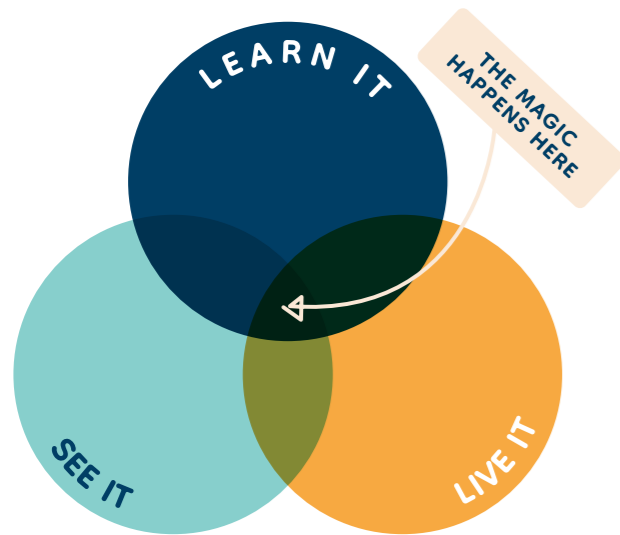
Act urgently to restore and secure progression routes in food education post-16, including the development of a robust A level pathway in food, alongside high-quality technical options. Government must ensure clear progression from Key Stage 4 into advanced study and careers in food, as part of the wider 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.

Definitions and Methodology

This report draws on the definition of food education established in the Food Education Mapping Project 2025 (FEMP). The project set out a three-part framework for understanding food education, summarised below:

- The **'Learn it'** component describes 'the knowledge and skills delivered through the formal curriculum, both within food-specific lessons and across other subjects', including PSHE, and Science.
- The **'See it'** component describes 'the wider range of opportunities for food learning that take place across the school day, including food provision in the main canteen, within celebrations and events, and through extra-curricular activities such as cooking and gardening clubs or competitions.'
- The **'Live it'** component describes how students are supported to develop the opportunities, competencies, agency and dispositions needed to apply their knowledge and skills in contexts beyond the classroom, whether facilitated by the school or outside it, for example by engaging with local food environments, making healthy and sustainable food choices and preparing meals for themselves and others.



Food education is distinct from the provision of food in schools, although the two are closely connected. Food provision sits within the wider food environment experienced by children. This broader environment also encompasses the availability and diversity of food beyond school, particularly within homes and social settings, as well as the ways in which society shapes their relationship with food, including through traditional and social media.

In order to understand school leaders' and teachers' perspectives of the impact of food education on attendance, engagement and behaviour, attainment, wellbeing and a sense of belonging, Public First interviewed representatives from 14 schools that are recognised for delivering strong food learning.

Schools were purposely selected because they met 3 or more of the following criteria to be considered to be doing food education 'well' in line with the Food Education Mapping Project Report's findings around 'Learn it, See it and Live it':

- **Food education goes beyond a single lesson or topic**
- **Pupils receive practical food learning opportunities**
- **Food education is connected to the wider school environment**
- **There are food education opportunities beyond the classroom**
- **Food education reaches a broad range of pupils**
- **There is some leadership or ownership of food education**
- **The school can point to why food education matters**

30–45-minute interviews were conducted online with each school with one or more representatives from the school such as the head teacher, food teacher and/or head of department. In total, across the 14 schools, Public First interviewed 5 senior leaders (some of whom were food teachers), 10 head of department and lead food teachers, 2 food teachers and 1 MAT coordinator for food. Fieldwork was conducted across April and May 2026.

Interviews focussed on staff perceptions of the impact of food education in their schools starting with an overview of food learning opportunities, the reasons they have chosen to prioritise the subject area, their views on its impact on wider pupil outcomes beyond developing food knowledge and skills themselves and what they see as the enablers and barriers to delivering good food education.

All sessions were audio recorded and transcribed with consent. Thematic analysis was carried out by Public First. Key patterns were identified across transcripts.

The research is not designed to be representative of food education across the school system and its impact but provide an insight into the perceived impacts of it in schools that have actively chosen to invest and prioritise it.

When referencing schools in this report, we are referring to the schools interviewed throughout the research.

The Existing Literature

We conducted a rapid review of the existing evidence on the relationship between food education and pupil outcomes across attendance, engagement and behaviour, attainment, wellbeing and a sense of belonging. The review adopts a broad understanding of food education, encompassing not only curriculum-based learning about cooking and nutrition, but also the wider ways in which pupils encounter food, participate in food cultures within school, and develop the confidence and capability to apply this learning in their own lives. This reflects the 'Learn it, See it, Live it' framework set out in the Food Education Mapping Project (Best Food Forward, 2025).

Across the literature, the most consistent and well-supported findings relate to food literacy, confidence, enjoyment, agency and aspects of wellbeing (Bailey, 2019; Omidvar et al., 2023; Caraher et al., 2013). There is also emerging evidence, and a strong plausible case, that food can play a role in shaping pupils' sense of belonging, particularly where learning is practical, participatory and embedded within the everyday life of the school (Jones et al., 2021; O'Rourke, 2021).

Whole-school approaches to food show encouraging links to attendance and learning outcomes

While the direct evidence linking food education to core educational has, until now, been limited, there are promising indications that food, health and learning are closely connected, particularly where food is embedded within the wider life of the school (Belot and James, 2011; O'Halloran et al., 2020).

Belot and James (2011) provide one of the strongest quantitative signals. Their evaluation of improvements to school meals found associated gains in attainment and a reduction in authorised absences, suggesting a link between food, health and pupils' ability to attend and learn. Although this intervention focused on food provision rather than education alone, it demonstrates the wider educational relevance of food-related change.

Evidence specific to food education is less direct but remains constructive. Evaluations of integrated school food systems show that embedding food across teaching, culture and community engagement can support more connected, participatory and inclusive school environments (Jones et al., 2021). This aligns with the 'Learn it, See it, Live it' model, which highlights how food education, when delivered through activities such as cooking, growing and wider community engagement, can strengthen relationships within and beyond the school (Best Food Forward, 2025).

Other research reinforces the educational relevance of these approaches. O'Rourke (2021) found that headteachers often prioritise food education because it enables purposeful and meaningful learning experiences that support health and engagement. Evidence from garden-based learning also suggests links between experiential food-related education and academic outcomes, particularly where learning is applied across subjects (Williams and Dixon, 2013).

At the same time, studies of the broader school food environment highlight ongoing challenges in measurement and consistency. O'Halloran et al. (2020) note that variability in definitions and methods makes comparison difficult, but their findings reinforce the importance of looking beyond isolated interventions to consider the wider context in which pupils experience food.

Overall, the literature points to food education as contributing most clearly to the conditions that support learning, particularly when it forms part of a wider, coherent school approach to food (Belot and James, 2011; O'Rourke, 2021; O'Halloran et al., 2020).

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Early food education may shape lifelong health, attitudes and behaviour

The long-term impact of food education is less well established, but several strands of research point to plausible and potentially significant lifetime effects.

Whole-school and experiential approaches report shifts in how pupils understand food across its social, environmental and health dimensions (Jones et al., 2021). These attitudinal changes are important because they support the development of agency and informed decision-making over time.

International research strengthens this perspective. Bjørkkjær et al. (2023) describe a potential “triple dividend” of food education, encompassing public health, sustainability and long-term wellbeing, and advocate for more systematic provision within education systems. While not causal, this framing positions food education as a long-term societal investment.

There are also emerging examples of sustained impact from experiential food education programmes, although sample sizes and evaluation designs remain a limitation (Jones et al., 2021). Wider reviews of school-based healthy eating interventions also point to promising outcomes while highlighting the need for stronger long-term evidence (Samad et al., 2025).

The wider literature on childhood food environments provides further support for the importance of early intervention. Studies such as Alves et al. (2023) highlight the relationship between early-life nutrition and adult outcomes, reinforcing the importance of establishing habits early in life. While much of this evidence focuses on the home, it suggests that schools may have an important and underutilised role in supporting healthier long-term attitudes and behaviours.

Food education works best when treated as a core part of school life, not an add-on

Across both research and practice, the most promising approaches to food education share a common set of characteristics: they are practical, embedded, inclusive and sustained over time (Best Food Forward, 2025; Jones et al., 2021).

International examples illustrate this clearly. Japan’s Shokuiku programme integrates food education across curriculum, culture and daily routines, while maintaining strong links to families and communities (Oudat et al., 2025). In Australia, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden programme has demonstrated sustained associations with improvements in cooking skills, wellbeing and enjoyment of school (Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, 2022). At the same time, evaluations of programmes such as Food Dudes highlight the importance of ongoing adaptation and reinforcement to maintain impact at scale (Bangor University, n.d.; Upton et al., 2014).

Evidence suggests that embedding food within school systems, rather than relying on isolated initiatives, is key to sustained success (Jones et al., 2021). These insights align closely with evidence from other areas of education, including financial education and relationship and health education, where impact is strongest when learning is embedded within the curriculum, reinforced through practical experience and supported by coherent policy and leadership (Brader, 2024; House of Commons Education Committee, 2024; Long, 2025).

Taken together, the literature suggests that food education is most promising when it is treated not as an optional enrichment activity, but as a foundational part of school life.

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Building a more robust evidence base will help demonstrate impact more clearly

The current evidence base provides a clear and consistent direction of travel, but it also highlights the need for greater depth and precision.

Across the literature, three areas for development stand out. First, many studies are based on relatively small samples, short timeframes or self-reported data, with limited use of administrative measures such as attendance or attainment. Attrition over time can further reduce the strength of findings (Understanding Society, n.d.).

Second, the breadth of the term “food education” presents both a strength and a challenge. While frameworks such as ‘Learn it, See it, Live it’ set out in the Food Education Mapping Project capture the full experience of food learning, variation in definitions across studies makes it difficult to compare findings or build cumulative evidence (Best Food Forward, 2025).

Third, much of the existing research focuses on intermediate outcomes, such as knowledge, confidence and attitudes. While these are important and often necessary precursors to wider change, they are not always directly linked to longer-term educational outcomes. Reviews of the school food literature have highlighted the challenge of establishing clear causal relationships between food-related interventions and attainment or wellbeing (Levy, 2013).

The opportunity is therefore to build on the existing evidence by connecting these intermediate outcomes more clearly to longer-term impacts, rather than treating the absence of definitive causal evidence as evidence of no impact.

Framing the current research

This body of evidence presents a clear and increasingly coherent case for food education as a contributor to engagement, wellbeing and the wider conditions for learning. It identifies consistent positive signals, particularly where food education is practical, participatory and embedded, while also highlighting the need for stronger evidence on its relationship with core educational outcomes such as attendance, behaviour and attainment (Bailey, 2019; Omidvar et al., 2023; O’Rourke, 2021; Levy, 2013).

The work that follows builds on this foundation. Rather than seeking to establish causal impact at system level, it explores how schools that have chosen to prioritise food education understand and experience its effects in practice. In doing so, it focuses on the relationship between a broad ‘Learn it, See it, Live it’ model of food education and the outcomes that matter most for children’s ability to thrive: attendance, engagement and behaviour, attainment, wellbeing and a sense of belonging (Best Food Forward, 2025).

By grounding the analysis in the lived experience of schools, this report seeks to contribute to a more detailed and practically relevant understanding of how food education can support children not only to learn about food, but to flourish within and beyond school.



School perceptions of good food education

Qualitative interviews with school leaders, food department heads and food teachers asked participants their views on food education across a number of areas:

- The reasons why the school had chosen to prioritise and invest in food education,
- The perceived impact of food learning on pupil attendance, engagement and behaviour, attainment, wellbeing and a sense of belonging at school,
- The enablers and barriers to implementing good food education.

This chapter draws on the qualitative findings across these different outcomes.

The interviews consistently find that schools that invest in food education believe it supports pupils in ways that reach beyond food knowledge alone, particularly through wellbeing, attendance, engagement and confidence.

However, many were careful to stress there are many factors that influence outcomes, particularly around attendance and attainment. The findings should be read as the views and experiences of schools that have chosen to prioritise food education rather than representative of the whole school system.



Why schools prioritise food education

Skills for life

Schools primarily prioritised food education because they saw it as essential preparation for life. Teachers repeatedly described food learning as a lifelong necessity. All children need to eat, many will need to cook for themselves or others, and all benefit from understanding how food affects their health and wellbeing.

Knowing how to cook, how to select dishes which are value for money, tasty and nutritious, and help our young people have a safe, healthy life and be successful in their futures, and equally the social side around preparing meals, eating together, that's all really important and really valuable life skills...that's highly recognised by our [academy] trust.

Although some schools had strong uptake in food, nutrition, hospitality and catering key stage 4 qualifications, the reason for taking a whole school approach to food learning was not presented as a narrow vocational argument. **The broader rationale was generally that food education gives pupils practical knowledge and skills they will use regardless of their future career path.**

Whatever you do, I guarantee you will eat every day and being able to cook meals from scratch yourself puts you in a better position to make healthy choices and also it's a budgetary thing as well...you're spending less money if you're cooking from scratch rather than using jars of ingredients and ready-made dishes.

It's the life skills, isn't it?...It's something that we're setting up for them for their future life for young adults...they learn from getting things wrong and the skills that they learn from that down to resilience and perseverance...all those sort of life skills, which are really important, I think food's a great area to do that safely and to succeed, but also to learn from mistakes.

...You need to have all of those skills to prepare, to cook, to tidy up, to then eat together. And they are those enabling skills as well - as people move through their lives in order to help them be confident, happy, healthy, successful... food's not just cooking, it's those independent skills, reading, science, problem solving, leadership, using your own initiative, and thinking it through.

Tackling the impacts of deprivation

Schools serving disadvantaged communities in particular prioritised food education because of its potential to tackle the impacts of deprivation. Schools often referenced the need for food education in the context of local deprivation, health inequalities, food insecurity, childhood obesity, malnutrition and in some cases the prevalence of fast-food outlets. Food education was seen as one route through which schools could give pupils knowledge, practical skills and confidence that they may not otherwise acquire outside school given the demographics of the local area.



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We know that within this area there is a high proportion of families with coronary heart disease. We know that there is a higher proportion of families that suffer bereavements because life expectancy is the second worst in the country.... it would be ignorant of us to think that we're going to have any sort of impact on social disadvantage if we didn't prioritise the health and wellbeing of our young people through an excellent food curriculum in its widest possible sense.

...The disadvantaged students... from backgrounds perhaps where there is no cooking at home or that's not seen as a priority at home, they can see in school, at this school, how important it is to learn to cook and what the value of it is... even if they're not getting that message at home, they are understanding that that message is important and we're really working hard on that in school.

We've got a high number of pupil premium students, and we make a massive focus on making sure that those students have got skills for life because they might not get those at home.

We have an afterschool club as well for year sevens only, but that is by invitation only. We target PP pupils for that. We're provided with a list of PP learners, so who can get more value from actually learning to cook. And they take their food home. And for the last lesson, we invite the parents to come in and we do an afternoon tea and the parents join us for that and the children make the scones and the sandwiches.

The demographics of the schools often influenced the approach to food learning including teaching recipes that families could afford to make again, using recognisable ingredients from local supermarkets, helping pupils think about cost, and making sure participation did not depend on parents being able to provide ingredients. Accessibility was seen as being a crucial consideration, because those most likely to benefit from the lessons may be the least able to participate.

[The shopping is] delivered on a Monday morning and that is all the ingredients for every child to be able to cook for the week. And then we ask parents for a voluntary contribution, which many parents do, but we don't expect that. We build that into our curriculum budget. You wouldn't expect parents to provide chemicals for a science experiment in science. So why would you expect parents to provide food for a food studies lesson?



In terms of food, we provide all the ingredients. We're in a really high pupil premium area...45% plus pupil premium so we currently provide all the ingredients. We don't ask for any donations, and they do half a year of food and they do half a year of DT with lessons every week. We cook every other week.

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I think that is number one. There's got to be access for all because the minute you give children a list of ingredients and say, bring this in, there's always going to be those children whose parents are too busy or whose parents are not around to buy them or can't afford it and then those children are left not being able to take part when really, those are the children you should be targeting.

We're very much about removing any possible barriers to learning...we're not asking for a termly or annual fee for history, music, French, etc., so why should we for this as a basic requirement?

Lack of curriculum time beyond KS3

For some teachers, the focus on food learning was driven by the end of Key Stage 3 (KS3) marking the last formal opportunity some pupils have to learn to cook unless they opt into food at GCSE. This made the provision of food education in years 7-9 especially important. Schools wanted pupils to progress on from KS3 with transferable skills, not just a handful of recipes, and to feel able to prepare simple, affordable food independently.

What we do with our year nines is, we really try and foster a love of cooking. This might be the last time some of those children would ever get taught to cook ever so we're really trying to go, right, this is important for you guys. We want to make sure you're skilled up. You make sure that you understand why it's better to cook your own food than to go and buy something.

Readiness to learn

Some schools also chose to invest in food education due to its impact on wider school priorities around readiness to learn. Breakfast, school meals and healthy food choices were seen as part of a wider culture of fostering wellbeing at school. While this research has focussed on food education rather than food provision alone, the interviews show that schools often experience the two as connected. Pupils learn about food in lessons but also experience the school's values around food every day through breakfast clubs, canteens and communal eating.

We're trying to have a proper breakfast club...that's our next thing in our inclusion focus...it's around breakfast and having children in early in the morning so that we're getting that good start to the day...I think we know how important it is because we [provide breakfast before] exams and we just really want to get to that point where we're doing it for every child every day.

Career pathways

Other schools suggested the availability of high-quality jobs in the food and hospitality industry was a driver for pursuing good food education for their pupils.

The whole vocational and industry side of things is really important. We definitely, around our area, we have a lot of opportunities for jobs in these sectors. They're crying out for our students and so they go on to be very successful.

Attendance

Across all interviews, food education was consistently reported as being one of the most popular subjects and was often oversubscribed, particularly GCSE courses and enrichment clubs.

“ We have 40 spaces each year at GCSE and it’s a course that’s oversubscribed every year. If we had a bigger school and the money for investment, then we could teach more children.

“ What we do at the end of our day is something called elective curriculum, and this is fitted into our timetable day and we run four sessions a week...students have the option to come learn about food, cook, and it is very much baking, cooking for pleasure. There is exceptionally high uptake of that.

“ [Food based enrichment sessions are] the most highly attended afterschool clubs, apart from obviously some of the sports clubs. Students just have that genuine love and passion for it, but that’s something that we try and instil as soon as they come to us.

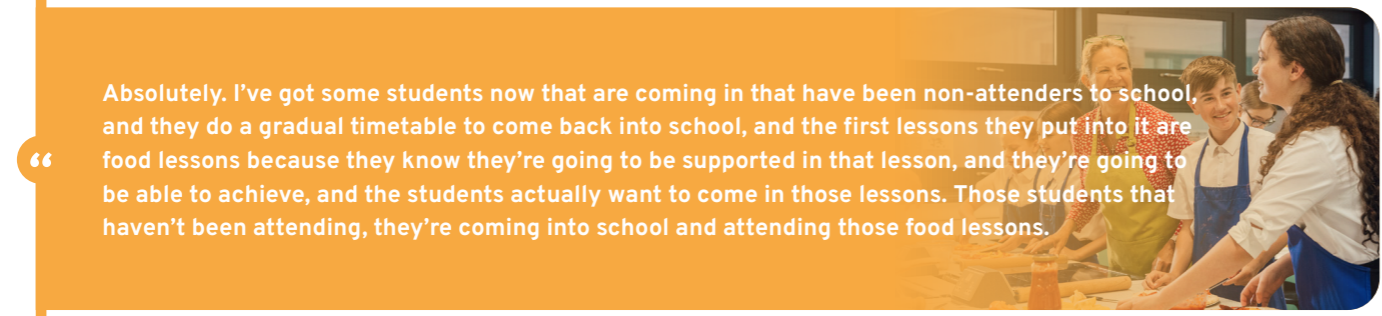
Schools consistently described the popularity of food lessons as an incentive for some pupils to come into school. While schools stressed that attendance is a complex issue and improvements can’t be attributed to any one subject or intervention, **food learning is viewed as something that can be used to re-engage pupils struggling with attendance.** This was especially true for pupils with historically weak attendance, pupils experiencing anxiety or disengagement, and pupils on phased returns or bespoke timetables.

“ We have some very difficult kids that do not rock up to school. Their attendance is extremely low...the only lesson they will come to is food tech because they really enjoy the practical element, they enjoy that, they can feel like they’re quite relaxed...you do find that students tend to want to come to food tech quite a lot.

“ Absolutely. I’ve got some students now that are coming in that have been non-attenders to school, and they do a gradual timetable to come back into school, and the first lessons they put into it are food lessons because they know they’re going to be supported in that lesson, and they’re going to be able to achieve, and the students actually want to come in those lessons. Those students that haven’t been attending, they’re coming into school and attending those food lessons.

“ We’ll have some school refusers, but they won’t ever drop food. That won’t be the one they want to drop, that’ll be the one they want to keep.

“ [You can’t] strip away other extraneous variables to say that this has caused this, but what we do know from the student feedback is that food lessons are some of our favourite lessons. We know that some of our children need to come to school to receive those hot meals. We know that our breakfast club, our magic breakfast is highly attended...We also know that the attendance on days where food is taught is better, and we know that behaviour is better in food lessons than it is in other lessons. So those are factors that we could substantiate.



“ Some of the pupils that we have currently that have struggled with school attendance, at parents evening recently they said if it wasn’t for your subject we don’t think they’d be coming into school. We have some pupils that it is the thing that’s pulling them in.

“ I think it’s really hard to measure obviously because there’s no direct link because lots of things impact on attendance and belonging, etc. However, I think the fact food, hospitality and catering is a popular option in an all boys school, it’s a popular option, nobody ever opts out of it.

“ We engage with our parents and invite them to come in to cook with students...If attendance is lower, it’s a really positive way to invite people into school... It’s not quite as scary coming in to think, “Oh, I’m coming in to do math...I’m coming in to meet this teacher. I’m coming in to cook with my child,” and they love it. It’s building that relationship with the school confidence and establishing themselves with key members of staff, but then just developing relationships between the parent, carer and child themselves, that has been huge.

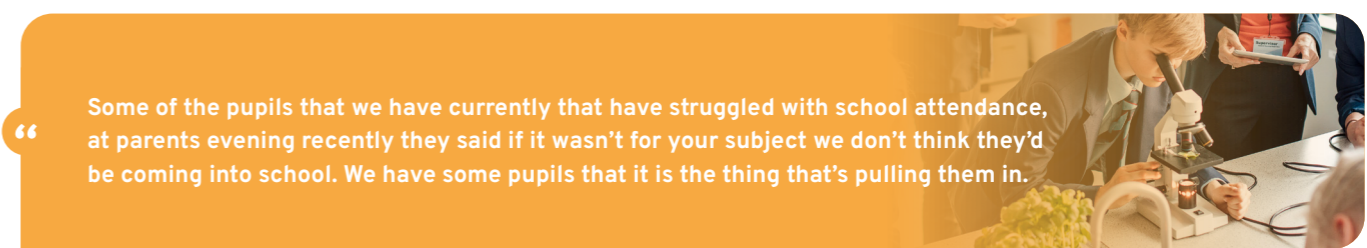
“ School staff who were interviewed provided several reasons why they thought food education had a positive impact on attendance in their schools, especially for those pupils for whom it was a particular issue. **Some schools expressed that food lessons were practical and more relaxed than some other lessons, which allowed children to feel more comfortable. Others suggested that the nature of food lessons enabled children to feel a sense of achievement during the course of one lesson, which built confidence and resilience** when mistakes were made but rectified.

“ There’s that sense of immersion that some children struggle to find in other subjects. Time goes really quickly. There’s a lovely end product. It’s not a delayed gratification like you have to have with some lessons, why am I doing this? You make something, you gain a skill, it’s there straight away.

“ They come to school, they absolutely adore practical work, and they feel better about themselves...they take real pride in what they’ve done, and that ripple then cascades into other subject areas and just their general sense of confidence, belonging, belief.

“ I think that food education is one of those things where the children get success quite quickly because I also teach woodwork and textiles and art and a variety of different things, but sometimes you find children can get quite frustrated that it takes a long time to see what their hard work has gone into, but I think in food you do get that within an hour, you’re getting that really positive outcome where you’ve pushed yourself, it’s turned out brilliant, you get to eat it, everybody else in the classroom’s buzzing and I think that we do work really well with some of those children that are probably quite disaffected elsewhere.

“ Some schools suggested the food rooms and the food department was seen as a safe space for children who find the school day challenging, often engaging with the department in an informal way.



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“ At break and lunchtime those sort of students will gravitate towards us. It's almost like a safe space...students feel safe to come here and talk and chat and occasionally they'll get something to eat maybe or a drink.

“ My subject sure has saved some kids, you know, some kids have gone off the rails in previous years, but they've come here as their safe space. Sometimes when they're off wandering school and they shouldn't be they end up in here.

Schools also saw attendance as connected to the wider food experience in school. This included the quality of school meals, whether pupils can get breakfast, whether the canteen feels welcoming, and whether school is a place where pupils know they will be fed and cared for. In some schools, the canteen and breakfast offer were described as central to creating a warm, practical reason to be in school. **The schools experienced an additional driver for attendance when food education is combined with a wider school food ethos which enables children not just to 'Learn it' but to 'See it' and 'Live it' too.**

“ I would say food in its broadest sense here is a big driver of wanting to come to school. I think the food curriculum is important, but to sort of broaden it out to the food experience here...I get here at 7:00 in the morning and there's often students waiting outside because it's warm and it's a nice place to be and every child knows if they come into school, they're going to get something to eat if they haven't eaten so that is really important.

“ That word belonging is huge in education at the moment and what more is there than sitting around the table with everybody and sharing food together. I think that is really important. Our school has good attendance and we're always striving to improve it.



Engagement and Behaviour

Schools frequently linked food education to behaviour, largely because of the distinctive environment of a food classroom. The engaging environment and task-based focus required in food rooms were seen as an important driver of the resultant behaviours in food lessons reported by schools. Food lessons involve knives, heat, equipment, allergens and shared workspaces. This means expectations around behaviour are not arbitrary and pupils can see why rules matter. Schools described food lessons as requiring trust, responsibility, respect for equipment and careful adherence to safety routines, which pupils did respect and observe.



“ They know that if they're misbehaving, they're not going to cook because it means they're not safe in the kitchen. I always say to them, if I can't trust you in a theory lesson, I can't trust you on the other side of the room.

“ I think that does help with behaviour. I do think it helps with understanding expectations because there's a reason for the rule that's very quickly evident if rules get broken. In the food room, things can become dangerous very quickly. So it's really obvious for children why you've got rules, they're not just there because you've got a rule.

Some schools described food classrooms as being run as if they were professional spaces with pupils expected to manage their own workstation, listen to instructions and take responsibility for their area. This structure can help pupils understand expectations and routines in a way that feels purposeful rather than purely disciplinary.

“ I think the way we run our food lessons, they're quite professional. So there's lots of respect, there's lots of teamwork and that's really nice, but there's also a little bit of banter, lots of proper kitchen sort of chat, which is nice... it's respectful and it's a nod towards kitchen hierarchy. We look at professional kitchen structure and we kind of work a bit like that really. So all my students are basically station chefs.

“ We have a zero tolerance policy anyway, but certainly because they know like Gordon Ramsay is like 'yes chef' and that demand respect... they know that they'd be booted out the kitchen if [they misbehaved] in a real job... they do get the [need for] that respect, they're like, well I'm not going to muck around with the knives, because it's dangerous.

Some schools gave examples of using food lessons as a way of encouraging good behaviour across the school and in other subjects. Because food lessons are popular, some pupils are motivated to maintain good behaviour so that they can continue attending practical sessions or food-based enrichment clubs.

“I’ve got kids that are on a behaviour management report and they’ll come up to me and go, “Miss, I’ve got all ones because Mr. X said that if I didn’t get ones, then I can’t do cooking.”... I do find that staff try and use it as a bit of like behaviour management to try and help with that.”



“For other students...they find it tricky in other lessons, perhaps because we move about in food lessons, there’s lots going on. For students that have trouble keeping their attention it actually means that it’s perhaps one lesson where their behaviour isn’t a big issue and that they’re having success.”

“...We’ve got a specific session for the autistic kids in school and sometimes you’re saying, you need to go to your maths lesson, you need to go to your science lesson if you want to go to food tech on Thursday, you know?”

“Some schools also suggested that in the same way food education is able to re-engage children who find attending school challenging, it can also impactfully improve engagement in lessons and throughout the school day amongst children at risk of exclusion.”

“...Our project for our children at risk of exclusion is a really positive project where the boys will cook together and bake together and there’s never any bad behaviour. We never get poor behaviour in food studies lessons.”

“Those that are maybe labelled as less able, difficult, or challenging [are impacted more positively]. And I think part of that is because the practical aspect, busy hands, it suits them, and they can just work, they just get it, and they can work and organise themselves.”

Attainment

Food education was seen, in the schools where interviews took place, to support pupils’ attainment in a holistic and indirect way. In some schools, this link was clearly recognised, particularly through the broader lifestyle changes it promotes, which help to underpin improved learning outcomes.

“...Food is one of those subjects that instils some key characteristics and key values.... those real soft skills have such an impact on their wider academic achievement. It cannot be ignored. When it is ignored and it’s sidelined, then you see children struggling more elsewhere in school.”



“Obviously we teach cooking, but we also talk about nutrition and the impact of eating well and healthy eating has on lifestyles, how eating can affect your mental health and your wellbeing, and we discuss with the ways in which that they can be healthy and have healthy lives... What we’re teaching them is so important because that does impact directly.”

“It goes back to hunger and concentration... if young people know that it helps to fuel their bodies so they can concentrate, they can focus more, which then means they’re more engaged in lessons and that contributes to the overall attainment.”

“Literacy and numeracy skills...are vital, but without having food, you’re not fuelled for the day to be able to concentrate, to engage, feel well, and go about your daily life.”

“Schools also suggested that the skills taught in food education are cross-curricular and a powerful way of reinforcing learning going on in other subjects across the school.”

“The cross-curricular links in food are really strong. The concepts that we teach here link strongly to some of the themes that they’ll pick up in geography, some of the themes that they’ll pick up in science, and I think them being able to come into this room and put that knowledge into practice just gives them that context and helps them to solidify those principles...so that would be my view in terms of how it helps with attainment across the school.”

“To me food lessons are the most important lessons in the whole curriculum and you can teach any subject through food. You can teach maths, English, science, geography, history, art, all of those subjects. There’s not many subjects in the curriculum that you could say every subject can be taught through and food is one of those as well as PSHE.”

I'm doing curriculum days with other subjects. I had one with maths where we got together and it was international maths day but we did it around cooking and math because obviously there's numeracy in cooking, there's English, there's science, so many subjects in teaching food...we had a day where we kind of looked at scaling recipes up and down, looked at quantities, looked at measurements, looked at weighing, and then they were able to then take a scale down recipe and produce cakes.

As with attendance, schools suggested that food education is a particularly good way of building confidence in children's abilities, which can then be taken through into other subject areas.

For a lot of the children, being able to achieve with their hands is something they're able to do that they can't necessarily achieve with a pen.

Some of the feedback from parents is that the student comes to our lesson and the practical element might be something that they're really strong in and parents will turn around and say he finally feels that he's good at something and that confidence then builds into other lessons because he's realised that, okay, math is a bit tricky but I do maths in food when I'm frosting or I write paragraphs in food so I can probably write [in English lessons].

Having success after that hour or two hours is really important for those [disadvantaged] students. And, and I think that in food, they do get that success.

In some schools, the connection between food education and overarching academic attainment was expressed more as an aspiration, yet it was grounded in a strong intuitive belief about the value of food education in supporting broader learning.

Obviously, I'd love it too. That would be fantastic. I think it's quite hard to comment on.

No, I don't know. I'd like to think that when they engage with my lessons and they develop a little bit of their numeracy and their literary skills, that might empower them to go onto other lessons they might be shying away from.

Overall, the research suggests that schools delivering good food education are able to see how it empowers children to thrive in other areas of the curriculum. This is by developing the soft skills needed to do well at school and giving them an opportunity to put learnings from other subject areas into practice, which can reinforce their learning.

Wellbeing

One of the clearest ways in which schools could identify the wider impact of food education on pupils was on pupil wellbeing, sense of belonging at school and development of their softer skills. Every school talked about the impact of food learning on day-to-day wellbeing and the skills it teaches from resilience through to teamwork.

It's about developing that confident, successful, happy, healthy individual, which is partly why this role [hers] came about in order to support that and contribute to improved behaviours, attitude, outcomes, confidence, personal development, and everything.

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.

It is a basic need for all of us: cooking, understanding food, being able to select food, buy food, that's just a life skill, and it encompasses so much else in terms of physical health, mental health, social, emotional well-being, socialising with others, dining with others, teamwork and leadership. So I think the whole range of skills, the qualities that it promotes, are absolutely vital and the difference it can make to young people in terms of their confidence, their resilience, their engagement, is huge.

Most importantly, they [practical lessons] help them develop as a real person, their self-confidence, their esteem, their resilience, their independent skills.

It gives them that confidence. Sometimes you get kids, "I can't do it. I can't do it." And then by the end of the lesson, "I've just done it." And that sense of achievement and pride that they realise they can do it and that confidence, that self-belief, that's something that I enjoy from my teaching, seeing them make that progress.

The food aspect of DT is actually taught within our health and wellbeing faculty. We make a conscious decision that food isn't separated out from that notion of health and wellbeing and our health and wellbeing faculty encompasses food, PE, and what we call our ASPIRE curriculum. It would be known as PSHE in some other organisations.

Schools also described how food education supports wellbeing at home and in family life. Pupils take recipes, skills and enthusiasm home; parents ask for recipes; children cook for family members; and food lessons create conversations at home. Staff described this as a major part of the value of food education.

I had a gorgeous conversation with some parents at parents evening...we taught them to make omelettes in a lesson. And she was like, "Do you know he makes me that omelette every Saturday morning for my breakfast?" And that, that's why you do it so that they can learn these things here, take them home and actually put them into practice.

When children make something and take it home, I get lots of emails from parents saying, "Can we have the recipe, we really enjoyed it and want to make it at home again." Every time I have a parent's evening, the same sort of feedback from parents, they love the food, the children bring home, and they're making those meals at home for their children, which is amazing.

We hear quite often things like parents evening where they'll come and say, "Oh my God, they enjoyed it so much. They've started making it for us at home as a family... Food brings families together."

Conditions for successful food education

The Food Education Mapping Project report examined the enablers and barriers to delivering a 'Learn it, See it, Live it' approach to food education, many of which are mirrored by the schools for this report. Schools reflected on several reasons why they were able to deliver food education to such a high standard and broad extent in their schools.

Engagement from senior leadership and specialist food teachers

This included high levels of support from the senior leadership team and specialist, dedicated teachers who drove change across the school.

I think as a whole staff body, you do feel like you can share ideas quite nicely, like you can go up to the head teacher and go, 'I'm thinking of doing something like this. What are your thoughts?' And you do feel you can have that conversation where you can go, this is in place, but I can make this better. SLT are always looking at ways to improve that.

It's the understanding of [the importance] from a leadership level, from governors all the way through that makes it possible.

I think what [is a] barrier is sometimes that senior leadership team, they're not perhaps design technology teachers or food teachers and they don't understand that complexity in the lesson and actually the big value of that. So I think that once you get your senior leadership on board and they understand that, then I think that is a huge benefit to each school.

Having a teacher that knows what they're doing and cares. I think a teacher who is passionate around food and understands food and the nature of the provenance, farm to fork, all of that is important.

...We've had a very stable department here. I've been at the school for 26 years. My technician's been at the school for 10 years, and then we've grown the department and the staff are really committed and, and it's not been an in and out of staff and changing staff. So that's really helped.

[One thing that helps is having] positive staff, strong staff, that are given the opportunity to lead and exceptional support from our school leaders and our trust leaders around recognising the value and importance of food, healthy lives, and that's in the absolute broadest sense, not just food tech lessons.

Conversely, schools identified significant barriers to wider adoption of this approach, most notably a shortage of specialist food teachers and a lack of engagement from senior leadership.

I think it's really important to have a teacher of food who is a subject specialist, not just someone that's done a week's course on food, because I think that knowledge is needed to address, let's say, the cultural issues, to have that knowledge of needs and dietary preferences, and that's not always what you get with a teacher that's done with teaching PE or done with teaching science or something and decides... So I think having a subject specialist teacher is really important.

I think getting teachers that are enthusiastic. I've come across teachers that will not be enthusiastic about food, or unfortunately just because of the whole crisis with teachers at the moment, many schools actually don't have a qualified food teacher or it's just a long-term cover or a DT teacher will teach food.

Resources and Curriculum Time

These schools also suggested that their senior leader's decision to prioritise food education both in terms of curriculum time and resources meant they could deliver a wide range of programmes and ensure equitable access across pupils. The reverse was seen as a significant barrier to food education being delivered across the wider school system too. This was especially the case in the context of the rising costs of ingredients for schools and families alike.

A supportive head teacher who's prepared to give a budget to allow an inclusive cooking lesson.

I think one of the driving factors for us is, I'm quite fortunate that food is well resourced and well supported in this school. We've been providing ingredients for every single student for about eight or nine years now. So we have removed all of those barriers.

Resourcing, making sure that schools do have to invest...that's what makes it successful and that can be a barrier as well...we need to invest in ensuring that the facilities are appropriate and that we use our funding as best we can.

Looking at where I've worked previously, it is the importance, or the lack of importance that maybe management would put on it or the trust is itself. The funding - because they are expensive rooms to set up and then maintain and then have to service and refurbish - over time and also getting staff as well. Staff is a challenge.

Definitely a huge barrier is funding for ingredients, food prices are going up every single week.

Schools felt that curriculum time was key to delivering good food education, with schools needing to make an active choice to ensure sufficient curriculum time not just across the school year but in individual lessons too. For example, some schools have arranged their timetable to allow pupils to have a 2-hour lesson every fortnight which enabled children to practice more complex skills.

When we look at our ingredients for a successful curriculum, we talk about the national curriculum, obviously, and then what's required at Key Stage 2, 3, and then we look at what's required from exam specifications, but then what's important to us is what do the subject experts tell me needs to be taught? And then what does our local intelligence tell us that needs to be taught? And it might not feature on the national curriculum, but it's too important for us to ignore, so we will ensure that it forms parts of our curriculum.

...It's difficult for school leaders to prioritise areas of the curriculum [like food] when the demands and the accountability is so high.



External Partnerships

Finally, several schools spoke about the importance of external partnerships in facilitating a broad spectrum of experiences for their pupils. From connections into local hospitality and food production businesses through to engaging in programmes like BiteBack and using external partnerships to deliver food education, schools were clear that it was a valuable additional part of the food education jigsaw, beyond curriculum.

For many schools this enabled the food department to work with ingredients they might not otherwise be able to provide such as fresh fish and to give children opportunities to 'See' and 'Live' food education through things like visiting farms, seeing food processing in action and understanding the vast array of career options available in food and hospitality industries.

I live in the area that I teach, and I do have lots of local relationships. So we've built up relationships with the local colleges, local businesses, and we really, really work hard to keep those relationships going, to build on them each year. So I think that's something that other people could maybe look at as starting off and keeping that, because those experiences, those extra experiences have really, really enriched our curriculum.

...We run various initiatives with the Food Teachers Centre. So looking at foods that the students might not have encountered before, such as trying to get more fish into their diet, because obviously, especially in our demographic, we know that there are deficiencies linked to those types of foods. We try and pick up on the things that are relevant to where we are and where we are situated.

What has been fantastic this year is that we've got the partnership with Best Food Forward. So that's really made... the PSHE section of healthy eating blow up. It was amazing. The content that was there, we got some really nice feedback from that. A lot of teachers who were delivering the content to both Key Stage 3 and 4 were saying that it's really nice, you've got some really nice discussions. So that was lovely.

We are involved in the Bite Back initiative and we run that with our year seven cohort, and this is the second year which we've done that, and that's incredibly popular because it gives a wider knowledge and understanding of food, healthy choices, cost, advertising, the social moral and ethical impact in its broadest sense. And that's delivered as part of the PSHE tutor programme.



Conclusion and Recommendations

In the schools interviewed where pupils are enabled pupils to 'Learn, See and Live' food education, their pupils benefit well beyond the food classroom. Teachers and school leaders see the value of a 'Learn it, See it and Live it' approach to food education not only in teaching pupils how to cook or understand nutrition, but in helping them build confidence, independence, resilience and a more positive relationship with food. This can, in turn, help improve children's sense of belonging and connection with school, their attendance, engagement and to some extent attainment.

This report is based on qualitative research with schools that are recognised as delivering strong food education. **The research consistently indicates that, from the perspectives of participating schools, strong food education contributes positively to the conditions in which pupils can thrive.**

Staff described food lessons as practical, purposeful and inclusive spaces where pupils can experience success quickly, learn from mistakes safely, work with others, and take pride in something tangible. These skills set children up for success across their school life. For some pupils, particularly those with weaker attendance, engagement struggles, lower confidence or fewer opportunities to learn food skills at home, food education was seen as an important point of connection with school.

Schools described how this kind of food education requires investment in both time and resources. The schools in this research had prioritised curriculum time, specialist and dedicated food teaching, leadership support, many provided ingredients to all children, had good facilities and cultivated external partnerships. These same factors can become barriers where they are absent.

The qualitative evidence from these schools shows that a whole school approach to food education that enables children to 'Learn, See and Live' food learning should not be treated as an optional extra. Done well, schools believe it can be a practical and valuable part of helping children develop the skills, confidence and sense of belonging they need to attend, behave and engage, attain and ultimately thrive.

This creates a clear opportunity. The policy landscape around school food and food education is shifting rapidly. Government commitments on free school meals expansion, breakfast provision and updated school food standards signal renewed attention to the role food plays in children's health, prospects and wellbeing. At the same time, the Curriculum

and Assessment Review presents a rare opportunity to address long standing structural weaknesses in how food education is positioned and delivered across the system (Curriculum and Assessment Review, 2025).

However, recent developments instead risk further marginalising the subject. At Key Stage 4, proposed accountability reforms (called Progress 8) risk time and resource being diverted away from food education (Progress 8 and Attainment 8 – an explanation of the proposed improved model, 2026). The reforms, if adopted, would position food qualifications lower down the list of subjects offered to pupils. In practice, this matters because Progress 8 strongly shapes what schools prioritise. The higher priority subjects are more likely to be offered and well-resourced. Positioning food as a 'choice' (marginalised) rather than 'breadth' (a higher priority category) subject therefore makes it more exposed when schools narrow their offer to maximise performance scores.

At the same time, the U-turn on a proposed vocational-focused V level in catering and hospitality, and uncertainty around progression routes at level 3, including the continued absence of a coherent A level pathway, deepen a widening gap between early entitlement and post-16 opportunity (Post-16 pathways: implementation plan, 2026).

This creates a paradox. Food is one of the most immediate and applied forms of learning, spanning science, health, culture, economics and sustainability. Yet it remains the only statutory curriculum area that has no clear defined teaching route at Key Stage 4, and no secure progression into advanced study post-16. Without intervention, the system will continue to narrow rather than expand opportunity, particularly for those young people who would benefit most.

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.

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' 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.

This research finds that good food education is a central ingredient in supporting children to thrive. It goes beyond the acquisition of food preparation skills and nutritional knowledge. It can inherently strengthen the system, enabling schools to help children to attend, engage and behave, contributing to an environment which supports achievement, promotes child wellbeing and develops a sense of belonging. All this whilst also creating credible futures for learners. At a moment of significant reform, taking steps to secure these benefits is both necessary and entirely achievable.

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A Central Ingredient

The Role of Food Education in Supporting Pupil Outcomes

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

Acknowledgements

This work was made possible with the generous support of Fondazione Artemisa.

With thanks to:

The school leaders and teachers

who participated in this research, for sharing their expertise and insights, and their passion for food education

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