

School Food Experiences in Alternative Education Settings: Research and policy briefing

July 2025



Special schools and alternative provision settings require intensive and highly individualised approaches to school food. This is due to the requirement to 1) meet the varied and specific feeding needs of pupils, with a focus on prioritising children's safety; and 2) provide foods that their pupils find familiar and appealing, to ensure inclusivity for those on restrictive diets. This creates specific challenges for these schools in implementing the school food standards and school feeding programmes.

Key recommendations for policy:

- 1** We encourage the Department for Education's advisory committee working on revising the current **national school food standards to take into account food provision in alternative education contexts and the complex and varied feeding needs of their pupils**. This should include consideration of any flexibility, adaptations or additional guidance required.
- 2** National school feeding programmes (e.g. free school meals programme, national school breakfast programme, school fruit and vegetable scheme) should also **consider how the additional needs of children attending alternative education settings** can be met through **tailored, inclusive school food guidance**, as well as **additional resourcing, funding and support**.
- 3** Schools are trying their best to support and encourage healthy eating through a range of activities. However, they require external support to make meaningful changes to their food and eating culture/ethos. For example, the provision of **staff and governor training, adapted food education resources** and support with the **development of designated school food leadership roles and pupil engagement on school food (e.g. through School Councils)**.



Key recommendations for research:

- 1** **Improved communication channels between school students, parents, school management and catering teams** may inform future changes to school food provision. Further work is needed on how this can be done effectively within alternative education settings.
- 2** A key focus for future research is to develop a clearer idea of **what 'healthy food provision' and 'positive eating environments' look like for alternative education settings**, including from the **perspectives of pupils**.
- 3** School food interventions tailored to this population also need to be **designed and evaluated for their impact** on dietary intake and eating behaviours, ensuring they are inclusive of children with diverse special educational needs and disabilities, and effectively address the dietary inequalities faced by children attending these schools. **A wide range of other outcomes that are important to schools and families** should also form part of future evaluations, such as school engagement, well-being, skills and widening food exposure.



Why did we do this research?



The diets of children and young people in England fall short of recommendations for fruit and vegetables, fibre, and oily fish, whilst children are over-consuming foods and drinks that are high fat, salt and sugars.



Children spend a lot of their time in school, so the foods and drinks served in school are an important part of their diets. In England, there are national standards to ensure that food provided in school contributes to a healthy and balanced diet.



170,000 children attend alternative education settings (e.g. special schools or alternative provision) in England.



Children attending these schools often have special educational needs or disabilities that impact on what they eat. These children are at higher risk of having a poor diet.



Little is known about how alternative education settings (special schools and alternative provision) meet the school food standards, how they support children to have a healthy diet, and the challenges they face in providing healthy school food for their pupils.



What did we do?

FEAST: Food and Eating Environments in Alternative Education and Special Schools Study:

A team of researchers at the University of Birmingham, Northumbria University and the University of Edinburgh have been looking into the food provided in alternative education settings and how schools support healthy eating.

They visited eight schools in the Midlands and Northeast of England and spoke to **90 children, parents and school staff** about their experiences of school food.

FINDINGS

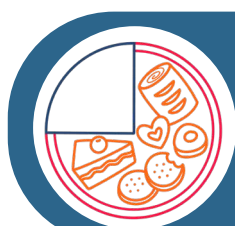
How well did schools meet the school food standards?

Students at most schools could get a balanced lunchtime meal which included a source of protein, starchy foods, dairy and vegetables or fruit.

However, most schools in this study were also serving foods high in fat, salt or sugar too often during the school day

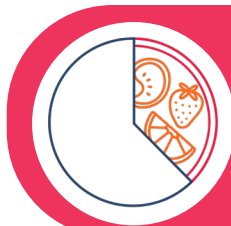


7 out of 8 schools were providing starchy foods cooked in fat or oil several days a week, such as roast potatoes, potato wedges and hashbrowns



6 out of 8 schools were providing desserts, cakes, biscuits and pastries that contained confectionery such as chocolate chip cookies and pain au chocolat

Schools were also not meeting standards designed to ensure a balance of nutritious food in children's diets



Only 3 out of 8 schools were ensuring that fruit or vegetables were available across the whole school day (not just at lunch)



Only 2 out of 8 schools were ensuring that wholegrain varieties of bread, rice and pasta were available each week

The school food standards were difficult to apply across the whole school. Schools applied the standards flexibly to account for pupils' wide ranging and individual needs

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Special school staff member:

“There's no way they're going to meet the school food standards or eat within the school food standard expectation, absolutely no way, they have a diagnosis that means that they cannot do that, it's not a choice. Not just being fussy eaters, this is a medical condition.”

In some schools, the requirements of the standards were not fully understood, e.g. the need for breakfast and breaktime provision to meet the standards, as well as lunchtime provision.

Overall, there was little monitoring of the school food standards in the schools.

What did schools, pupils and parents think about school food?

Schools found it difficult to put together a healthy menu within a limited budget that pupils would be willing to eat.

While healthy eating was valued across all schools, ensuring pupils ate some food at lunch took greater precedence than providing a "healthy" menu.

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Quote from staff at an alternative provision site:

"I just think what's important here, what are our priorities, is it that the children eat, and they have energy to get through the day and maybe for some of them it's the only meal in the day? Or that we expose them to fine dining and widen their choices? Because you've got to balance it out somehow"

Schools worked hard to meet individual pupil dietary needs and requirements, such as providing off-menu items, food with modified textures (e.g. blended) and support for feeding for pupils who need it.

Schools also strived to give pupils choice over what they ate, using tailored communication methods (e.g. food pictures, talking prompts, communication devices), and to promote independent eating.

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Quote from special school senior leader:

"Choice is such a big factor, and also reinforcing that choice. So our pupils who have a blended diet or pureed diet they will choose their meals when coming in first thing in the morning, and they choose from photos... So that reinforcing that choice, that you made that choice this morning, this is what your dinner is and this is what it is now that you're eating,"

However, schools wanted to do more to give children independence in choosing school food and eating independently.

Pupils and staff wanted higher quality school food, with more flavour and variety, and bigger portion sizes for older children.

Schools required extra resources to meet the needs of children attending alternative education settings, such as additional catering staff, specialist equipment, and additional support staff.

Staff wanted more training on how to provide suitable meals for children with swallowing problems and increase children's exposure to a wide range of foods.

How was the eating experience?

Some pupils and staff found the dining room noisy, busy, crowded and overwhelming, but schools usually offered a range of eating spaces for pupils, which included smaller or quieter spaces (e.g. classrooms) for pupils to focus on eating.

In one alternative provision site, schools offered a range of eating experiences that students could select from, including family-style service in the dining hall, eating in a designated quiet space or taking a takeaway box outside.

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Quote from alternative provision site:

"We've got [a quiet space] so they can go and eat in the smaller group... they just don't like eating in front in others. So a lot of times they will go and eat in the quiet space"



However, classroom environments did not always support the social aspects of eating.

Staff sometimes used screens in classrooms to either enhance the lunchtime experience (e.g. images of food and calm music), or for sensory regulation and behaviour management (e.g. videos, films).

Serving food in classrooms meant that some food choices were limited and could impact on the quality of the food.

Dining in classrooms also meant that classroom staff and pupils didn't interact much with catering teams, which hindered discussion about school food and pupil feeding needs.

How did schools approach school food and healthy eating?



Schools believed that healthy eating was important for pupils, particularly for improving attendance, concentration and behaviour.



Schools also wanted to prepare pupils well for adulthood, which included how to have a healthy diet and how to shop for and prepare healthy food. In one special school, teaching staff organised supermarket shopping trips for pupils. Pupils planned breakfast provision for the upcoming week, created a shopping list, and visited a local supermarket to purchase food.



Other schools organised restaurant visits or arranged for students to run a school cafe, making and sharing recipes with peers and staff.



Special school staff member:

"They have to share a recipe with their peers, and then they taste it, and they critique it, and they say what they like, say what they maybe could do to change it in the future. So I think eating and food is a social thing, it's celebrated, and it's really important."



Some schools paid for free school lunches, free breakfast or free fruit for all pupils to ensure children were not going hungry during the school day.



Some accessed additional sources of funding to do this e.g. charitable funding. Staff also paid out-of-pocket for additional snacks for children.



However, school feeding programmes (e.g. breakfast clubs and the school fruit and vegetable scheme) were not effectively tailored for special schools e.g. modified texture options were not available, and schools had limited choice over the supplied foods.

How did schools approach school food and healthy eating? (cont.)



Some schools included healthy eating education across a range of subjects, including Science, Personal, Social, Health and Economic education, and Food Technology. Many used adapted curriculums and equipment to enable children with wide ranging needs to take part in food preparation.



In some special schools, a range of equipment was available to ensure lessons were accessible for pupils with a variety of needs, including voice-activated devices, height-adjustable equipment adjustable for wheelchair users, and specialist tools for pupils with mobility difficulties.



Many schools had activities to increase children's exposure to a variety of foods and develop their food skills.



Some schools had the facilities to be able to promote healthy eating through food growing and gardening experiences, whilst others wanted to do more.



However, schools struggled to teach practical food preparation skills due to limited facilities and equipment, costs of ingredients, and a lack of tailored teaching resources.



Most schools did not have rules about the food that could be brought from home due to concerns about over-burdening parents. Packed lunches and snacks sometimes contained sugary or energy-dense foods and drinks.



Some schools had well-intended practices in place that contrasted with healthy eating messages, e.g. using sugary foods as rewards, or selling cakes in pupil-run cafes.



Pupils wanted more opportunities to input into the design of menus and food provision.



Teacher from special school:

"For our most complex learners, we would probably say that the snacks are less healthy, because the focus with those really complex learners is trying to teach them to communicate; therefore, we're using their motivators, which are sometimes biscuits and crisps."

What next?

This research has helped to identify the facilitators and challenges of providing healthy food, meeting the school food standards, and supporting healthy eating in alternative education settings.

The research team are now considering what solutions are needed to work towards better school food in alternative education settings. These solutions should be tested and evaluated in practice, in a range of different alternative education settings, including special schools and alternative provision.

We would like to work with special and alternative provision schools; pupils, parents and professionals involved in these schools; organisations working to support children with SEND and their families; and national and local policy representatives to continue this work.

Want to find out more or get involved?

Get in touch at feast@contacts.bham.ac.uk

Webpage: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/projects/feast-project>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25500/epapers.bham.00004409>

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Acknowledgements:

With thanks to study co-investigators Irina Pokhilenko, Corinna Grindle, Gurbinder Lalli, Carlie Bruce and Ffion Robinson and the Expert Advisory Committee for their guidance. Thank you also to our Practice, Parent and Child Advisory Groups.

Funding statement:

This study is funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Public Health Research programme (NIHR164391). The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Citing this research briefing:
Murphy M, Brownlee I, Pallan M, Defeyter M, Friedman S, Tanner J, Round E & Sevel E. (2025) School Food Experiences in Alternative Education Settings: Research and policy briefing.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25500/epapers.bham.00004409>



FUNDED BY

NIHR | National Institute for Health and Care Research

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