

Sam Ward

Collaton St Mary CE Primary School



When I first applied to take over the Catering at Collaton St Mary I didn't realise what an important task I was about to undertake. I had always worked in the catering industry but with three small children wanted something that suited school hours. Although I think I spend more time at the computer now and with my head in a file than I ever did before!

Pam Wigfall, our School Governor, was adamant she wanted to change the way food was served. Previously lunches were taxed in from a nearby school and were re-heated in the servery area. The servery has now become a fully fledged operational kitchen and on offer is a variety of well-balanced, freshly prepared local and seasonal food. Our vision is to enhance the children's education through all aspects of school life with a commitment to promoting healthy lifestyles through cooking, growing, and farming, helping them to understand about food consumption and production and make informed choices of their own.

Opting out of the Council Catering system and deciding to run every aspect ourselves has been no picnic but it was necessary to enable us to take control and change the way our children eat and learn about food. When the local press ran an article on what we were doing saying it was a very 'bold move' at first I felt it was a daunting task to get the whole process up and running - from equipping the kitchen, health and hygiene training, compiling standard recipes, sourcing appropriate suppliers, menu planning, nutritional analysis, changing the dining environment etc... The list goes on... So I set about doing a three phase plan, firstly changing what was immediately important which was to cook with fresh produce on site and then gradually build to improve the service and integrate it into the school.

I spoke to local suppliers and explained our needs and our vision, creating a better link with our suppliers helped enormously, especially when it came to asking for help in achieving the Food for Life Partnership criteria. I conducted a questionnaire at the school asking the children for their favourite foods, likes and dislikes in order for me to plan my menus. I wrote to 'AGA' explaining what we were doing and trying to achieve and they sent free tablecloths, pupil aprons and chef hats which has greatly enhanced the dining area.

The children enjoy the many social benefits of eating together around smaller family style tables in a bright relaxed environment with brightly coloured table cloths and 'proper' plates. The kitchen staff are proud of the food they serve, although at first the added workload was a little tiring, they now rise to the challenge, with improved confidence they enjoy their working day. The meal time assistants too feel much more part of the process encouraging the children to taste and try the foods on offer. The whole dining team feel as if they positively contribute to the children's lunchtime experience.

The children's health and diet is extremely important to me and my aim was for the kitchen to be an integral part of the school, teaching the children where their food comes from and encouraging them to care about what they eat. The headteacher, Penny Millington views this as a great strength of the school, with her support things are seen to fruition. Without the support from her, the Governors, staff, parents and pupils none of this would have been achievable.

Year 6 started a healthy tuck shop, which they run themselves. We set up a SNAG group, we have created a garden area in the school grounds where each class has a growing bed. We contribute to the local economy

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by sourcing local produce and we use organic milk and produce where possible. The children are relishing the new food. It is extremely rewarding to see the children taking such an interest in and really enjoying their food. They can see and smell the food being cooked in their school kitchen. I can hear the children discussing when lunchtime is and what they are having. They ask questions about where their food comes from and they love it if we cook anything that has come from the school garden which they have grown! There is nothing more rewarding for me than when a child proudly shows me their empty plate. What more could you want!

Our dinner numbers have increased dramatically and there is a real sense of pride about 'our school food' from pupils, staff, and parents. Through working with the Food for Life Partnership we have been able to structure our vision. With the help of a committed head, governors, staff, parents and pupils we have now started to embed food education, cooking and growing activities within our school curriculum. At times I venture out of the kitchen and go into the classroom. It is great for me to be a part of their learning in this way. It highlights to the children the importance of the food they eat and increases their awareness of the role diet plays in their lives.

The kitchen has become an integral part of the school and teachers have liaised with me in order to make links with their curriculum learning. Year 1 and 2 have been learning about where their food comes from, covering sustainability and their environment. I knew when I first took on the job that I didn't want to simply go in to work, cook and go home. I was and still am passionate about changing the perception of school food. As a school we are constantly learning and evolving.