

School Meals: The Perfect 10

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. You would think that the sixth largest economy in the world would be able to organise itself to provide decent school meals for its children, but alas, the UK has faltered. It's astonishing that the Manchester United number 10 has done more for hungry schoolchildren than the occupant of number 10. The former knows all about childhood hunger. The latter thinks the so-called free market can deliver everything.

Ross Stephanie Slater, welcome to Renegade Inc. Stephanie, you are the founder of School Food Matters. It's odd, isn't it, that we're sitting here in 2021 having to go back through what is a fundamental conversation about why school food matters? What was the impulse for founding School Food Matters and why are we still having this conversation?

Stephanie Slater But it was very straightforward. I was that parent who popped her children into the local primary school back in 2007, and the food being served there was completely appalling. And I just wanted to fix it for my kids. It was a very sort of selfish desire to sort things out for my two. But what was interesting, it wasn't just me that thought that. Only 26 percent of children across the whole London borough where the children went to school, were eating school food and a lot that was going in the bin. So it wasn't just me that thought something needed to change. It was just massive waste of money and children weren't getting the nutrition they needed.

Ross Just give us an example of the food that was on that trolley, if you like, because we have a definition in our house, we call food live food and dead food to try and make that differentiation with kids. What were you seeing?

Stephanie Slater There was nothing very live on the plate, let me tell you now. And it was really interesting to me because it was a frozen ready meal that had been made in a factory in Wales and then shipped into schools in London, reheated and served. So everything was looking a bit sad and beige and most of it was going in the bin.

Ross Right.

Stephanie Slater It was interesting to me that all the people I met in school catering wanted to get into this job because they loved children and they loved food and they wanted to cook. And very few of them were cooking. They were just reheating. So we started running this campaign. I didn't realise it was going to be a charity. But when we started looking at the service, one of the reasons we ended up with this offer was that the council thought that they needed what they called a kitchen-less solution. They didn't think the kitchens in the schools could produce fresh food on site. And when we actually had a look, there was very little investment that had to be made to get cooks cooking again. So we managed to completely transform the catering for 38 primary schools. And out of those 38 primary schools, only one school cook walked. The rest of them really wanted to do the job.

Ross What has happened then within those schools where you've reignited the passion in the kitchen and got those kitchens moving again? What's happened to the pupils and what's happened to the people making those meals?

Stephanie Slater Well, it's quite interesting because what we're talking about now is 2011, when we made over the contract. And the most significant thing is the meal price actually came down because double the number of children started eating a school dinner. So that was going to be a win immediately. The quality of the food improved. So we were talking about not only a well cooked meal, it was also the provenance of the food was better. We were having high welfare meat and dairy, organic dairy, and chicken and beef was soil association, free range. So all of those things that we were looking at back then in 2007 completely transformed the school meals system in this London borough. And all of the schools were cooking fresh on site. Nothing was coming in from the factory.

Ross What was the effect on the pupils?

Stephanie Slater Well, it was really interesting because we went into some of the schools and interviewed some of the young people. And my favourite quote from that time was a young boy in year six who just said, it just tastes nicer.

Ross Lovely, what beautiful simplicity. So where are you now, mission wise? Because you've obviously accomplished what you set out to initially. What next?

Stephanie Slater Based on the lessons we learned in the schools in our part of London, we were invited to be part of the school food plan. I don't know whether you remember that, Ross? That was 2012 when Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent were tasked by then Secretary of State Michael Gove to write a new plan for school food. So because of what we learned over here about economies of scale and the price being right, we were invited to be part of that. So we were very much looking about the quality of the food on the plate at that point. But the sad reality is in the last 14 years, our focus has changed not so much to quality, but access and making sure that children are getting the right nutrition, because despite there being school food standards, which we absolutely celebrate, not all schools are delivering. And that's partly because nobody's looking, nobody's asking, nobody's monitoring. So that's the big change that we want to see happen. It's really interesting, there is some good evidence around impact of breakfast on children's behaviour and attainment. There's still a little bit of an evidence gap when it talks about attainment and school meals, so there's a bit of an evidence gap there. But if we're happy with anecdotal evidence, talk to any teacher about a child trying to learn who is hungry or trying to learn when they're sugared up. I mean, it's common sense. We know from our own kids that you're not going to get a good performance if we're hungry or sugared up.

Ross And you touched on it there. There's an evidence gap, but there isn't a common sense gap is there? Let's get away from this absolute sort of obsession with evidence. I know as a parent, it's blatantly obvious if my kid's eaten or not or had too much sugar or not, the common sense gap. And it seems to me School Food Matters has brought a load of common sense back into schools, the classrooms and school kitchens to say, actually, we just sort of lost our mind for a little bit over here. Why don't we get back to making decent food so kids are happy?

Stephanie Slater Yeah, yeah. And a lot of that happens has to happen in schools and governors need to keep an eye on it. They're not being asked to report on any of this at the

moment. So, you know, we're not there yet, Ross. We've made some fantastic changes and some great examples of good practise. But we want every child to have access to good nutrition and a good experience of food at lunch time. It's a very social occasion, too. We want to get back to children sitting down together and learning about social skills because, as you said, it's about well-being. It's about pastoral care as well. We have a duty of care. When children are at school, we need to be giving them the good stuff and teaching them about food that's going to keep them happy and healthy. It's common sense to me.

Ross Isn't there an opportunity there to use that lunch hour, obliquely, if you like, as an ability for children to learn more about the things that they're putting in their body?

Stephanie Slater Yeah, I absolutely agree. And we always talk about it as being a lesson, sitting down together and learning about what you're eating, where it's come from. We think he's a really interesting and important lesson. So there are schools that do this brilliantly where they invite the children to grow veg in their school grounds and take the vegetables to the kitchen and then it ends up on their plates. We've seen wonderful examples where they say, 'today's potatoes are being grown by year two'. It's a glorious thing. I mean, I think what we've seen during lockdown, during school closures, that one of the few activities, extracurricular activities, that has being able to continue is school gardening.

Ross Right.

Stephanie Slater With all of those, the children of key workers and vulnerable children in schools, the one area they could do for outdoor education was work in the school garden. We've got fantastic examples of how that's been successful. I haven't come across a school in 14 years that hasn't been able to grow anything. There is always a way of doing this. We worked at a school which is just up from Elephant and Castle in the London Borough of Southwark, surrounded by social housing, no green space whatsoever. We put it on the roof. The students in this secondary school completely thought we had a can do attitude, a fantastic lead within the school and they literally walked at the top with the bags of compost and set up a roof garden, and it's a wonderful thing to see.

Ross The other bit here is about inner city schools, because there are so many distractions, if you like, on the high street - you know, chicken shops through to products that we know are engineered to play to people's taste buds and they find impulse response very, very difficult. What are the sort of headwinds that you're fighting when you're putting healthy food out there and then there are all the Turkey Twizzlers also in the market?

Stephanie Slater It's tough. I mean, you may have heard of the expression of obesogenic environment that talks about, if you like, if you focus on the child. When you think about a child's walk to school and how many influences they have on the way - bus stops covered in offers of cheap junk food, the advertising they see on billboards. So the walk to school is fraught with possibility to eat food that we describe as high in fat, salt and sugar - HFSS foods. And obviously, you may know there's a big push within the child obesity plan to curb some of the powers of the advertisers, to be mindful of what they're showing to children to have an impact on their health.

Ross People who have low incomes are almost always time poor. Time poverty often relates to the ability to go into a shop, buy something very quickly, eat it on the hoof and move on. Is that another headwind that you're facing - the time poor who will impulse buy and not go home and sit down and start cooking at 10 o'clock at night?

Stephanie Slater Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we know that there's lots of evidence to show the correlation between low income and poor diet, health inequalities. So obviously, we need to look at the high street. Obviously, we need to look at advertising. But yes, we need to do what we can to support families to eat on a low income. And there's some really interesting work going on at the moment. I think it's a brilliant idea. But when you start talking about cooking skills and recipes, when families are struggling just to get home by 10 o'clock and grab what they can from the high street, it can sometimes be an issue. But there's some wonderful community cooking opportunities. There are wonderful opportunities within schools for children to learn those skills. And we just want to really make families curious about what they can do on a low income. There's obviously government levers that need to be pulled too. We know the healthy start voucher. We've managed to get an increase in the value of that to support families eating more fruit and veg. So it's a two pronged attack. We need to be working with the families who are struggling, but we need some government regulation to support them to eat well.

Ross There will be people watching this who are in the same position that you were in, in 2007. They'll be sitting their thinking, I've seen what is served on the plate at my kid's school. It's dead food. It's from a packet. It's mystery meat and all the rest of it. What can they do to start to change the culture within their school - and I'm not advocating them being pushy parents and all the rest of it - but so they can go in, take a leadership role and start to do similar work that you've done to change that thinking around school lunches?

Stephanie Slater I'm a firm believer that you just need to start the conversation and if you like, a non combative way because schools are absolutely under the cosh. I mean, obviously, the year they've had has been terrible for them and for everybody. But they're just trying to get things back on the straight and narrow now and just trying to get the children through the dining room is a bit of a challenge with Covid regulations. However, there's nothing wrong with starting that conversation, saying 'we love our school, our school is great. It could be even better if we did something interesting around lunch. Should we do this together'? It's very much a collaborative approach and that's what we recommend to parents. Parents phone us all the time with this conversation - 'how do I do it'? We have template letters that you can send to your head if you need to, but it's about starting the conversation and also finding out who else cares about this, too. So it's gathering a gang of people so you're not doing it on your own. And just to do it in a really positive way - I can make my school even better.

Ross Yes.

Stephanie Slater And there should be somebody on the governing board, on the governing body, who is responsible for school food. So find out who that is. And food is a really great way to bring people together. It's a common denominator isn't it. Everybody eats. So everybody's got an opinion. It tends to be quite emotive. So we need to get past parents getting the report from their children - you know, a year eight child going. 'our school food's disgusting'. The launch pad, if you like, is, 'I'm really interested in food. I'm passionate about

food. Can I come and have lunch'? That's the first thing I'll be asking. Make your own, you know, go and have a look. Make your own mind up.

Ross What a wonderful place to stop. I don't think we've ever finished an interview by saying, let's go and have lunch. It doesn't normally happen on this one. It's good. Stephanie Slater, School Food Matters, the founder, congratulations on your work. Here's all power to you for another wonderful five years. And you've made a really real impact. Thank you very much for your time.

Stephanie Slater Thanks Ross

Ross Johnbosco Nwogbo, welcome to Renegade Inc.

Johnbosco Nwogbo Thank you very much.

Ross Johnbosco, this free school meals and the school meals that are being served in schools, isn't just a fiasco, it's a national disgrace. People must look across from other countries at the U.K., the privatised U.K., and see what we're doing to our children at lunchtimes. We can't put a decent meal in front of them when they're learning and growing and think that we have lost all semblance of duty of care, ability to look after our young, all because we have a privatised school lunch and school meals programme that ultimately prioritises profit over the well-being of our children?

Johnbosco Nwogbo Absolutely. Of course, you might remember that one of the kind of underlying rationales for privatisation is the idea that private companies will do a service better and that they will they will do it for less money. So it's much more cost effective for communities and families to use them. But what we have seen, the evidence has shown us, that private companies do not care very much about very much else. They pretty much just care about the profit and they will do whatever it takes to maximise it. And in the case of free school meals, what we've seen is that private companies try to cut corners in terms of staff. They hire a few staff as they can absolutely get away with and hire them on a pittance so people don't have the right amount of motivation to do a good job. And also they try and cut corners in terms of the quality of the food. We're all familiar, of course, with the scandal around Chartwells recently, but that's not new. That's something that has been happening in schools across the country for many years now.

Ross So let's just talk about Chartwells and the scandal for the people who don't know it, brilliantly picked up by the Twitter account, Roadside Mum. She started sharing these pictures of woefully inept school lunches. The business model's dead simple, isn't it, really? They get 10, 12, 15 pounds per capita per child. And then what they do is go to suppliers and try and keep as much of that 15 pounds as possible because, ultimately, that floods their books with cash. We'll come to the cynicism in a second. But that's the basic business model, isn't it - 15 quid a head and try and get away with one pound fifty for lunch?

Johnbosco Nwogbo Exactly. But much broader than that, it's exactly the same business model as well for the provision of the meals that kids actually have in school. You might remember, of course, that the scandal was with respect to food parcels that were being delivered to parents or to kids at home because they couldn't go to school during lockdown,

that the food that they actually do have in schools follow pretty much the same pattern. Not only do they pretty much scrape off significant portions of the money they are paid to deliver the service, they actually cost councils or they cost schools much more than it would cost if the councils themselves ran the service in-house. The government doesn't actually keep numbers for the percentage of schools that deliver their services in-house compared to those that outsource that service. They did a survey in 2014 that found that around 60 percent of schools use a council service. But what that doesn't tell you is that a significant portion of that are also outsourced because councils themselves then outsource that service to a private company. For example, Brighton is responsible for the school meals of almost all primary schools in the Brighton and Hove area. But they then outsource that service to a company called Caterlink. These companies are making a killing. And part of the business model as well, is to continue to expand. The bigger you grow, the more money you are able to make. I think that there is an element, an underlying element, that doesn't get spoken about very much. It is our attitude as a society to, quote unquote, welfare, because free school meals are theoretically welfare programmes that are only received by children whose parents are within a particular range in terms of their income. And we almost feel that they deserve to be, that is, society almost feels as though they deserve to be treated the way they are by these companies. And the companies themselves exploit society's quite lackluster attitude toward the welfare of these kids, kind of bypassing the entire point of a school meals programme to begin with, which is that children deserve a nutritious, healthy meal at that stage in their life so that they can develop normally. And these companies put themselves between the children and their food and extract a great deal of profit, smash the producers, smash the children in the process.

Ross Just explain a little bit more about this, because this is a subject very close to my heart. I mean, they all are. But this when you are exploiting naive children, understandably innocent children and naive parents, let's put it that way, would you mean that the parents feel that they can't complain or do anything about it? Do they feel that they're being given something and therefore they should just doff their cap and say, thank you very much - Oliver Twist, 'please, please, can I have a bit more'?

Johnbosco Nwogbo I think it's a range of things. In a few cases, it's likely to be that the parents are extremely busy. You have to keep in mind that the children who receive free school meals, are children of low income parents. And often in some of the mentality of people around Britain is that these people are people that don't work. On the contrary, the people that work the hardest and the longest, just that the pay is very limited. So they don't have a great deal of time to kind of keep an eye on what their children have been fed in school. But there is also that additional element of parents just feeling that they don't necessarily have the right to complain. And because their children are not practically being poisoned. So they're not going to kind of raise a stink about it. And that kind of goes to just one last point about the fact that quite a lot of parents actually don't claim this benefit because they think it's degrading, even though they've earned it, even though their income is around the spectrum for claiming it, that general attitude kind of informs the ability of these companies to step in and take advantage. Corruption in Britain is quite endemic. And it's not a strictly speaking Conservative problem, but it is an overwhelmingly Conservative problem. And it rears its head across every sector and the one sector in which its effects are extremely pernicious because of just how vulnerable the people that are affected, is in this specific sector. That's why We Own It has been calling for local councils to be given control over this

service and for this service to be run in-house so that local people can have oversight. Parents can have democratic accountability and control over what their children are being fed so that we kind of cut out private companies extracting huge profits at the expense of little children.

Ross Philosophically, this is a non-argument. You can't possibly administer pastoral care, bringing out the best in children if they're learning all morning and then looking after them in the afternoon up until three o'clock and all that comes with that. There is no way if these kids are undernourished, if it's the biggest meal of their day because of the disadvantaged households that they come from. So from a welfare point of view, as you point out, absolutely get it and unarguable, but also I'd argue from a pastoral care point of view, you can't bring out the best in a child if it's hungry or if you're feeding it on food where the packaging of the food seems to have more nutrients in it.

Johnbosco Nwogbo Absolutely. I mean, you could see it in what we see in the universities, for example, in terms of attainment gaps, right? We cannot think of this issue as an issue that affects children, but it's an issue that affects children that then go on to become adults in terms of how they perform in qualifying into universities, and how they perform in universities, and how they then perform in terms of the kind of adults they become in society or in the economy. And that has long term effects, not just for the individual, but for society itself. And these investments we make into our children by way of free school meals, are investments that are beneficial for all of us. And without them, we would not just be stunting the growth of that child who will be unable to learn in class, we will be affecting society's future as a result.

Ross When we think of the model that works and sadly, we always have to go to it - Finland, the Finnish model, Finnish education system. And I say it a lot, after the war, Finland realised that their children were basically feral - the late 1940s. And they said, we really have to get on top of this because if our nation is going to thrive, our first investment has to be education in children. Now in Finland, of course - and I'm not saying we can just transpose this model and put it in the UK but I can say that the principles and the philosophy that I have behind it are absolutely right - is that where we should be looking? Should we be looking at the Finnish policy so you can use food as a learning tool to talk about maybe the cultural difference, maybe the economic difference or where food has come from? So we can put lunch as a lesson, you know, do we look to Finland and say how are these guys doing it?

Johnbosco Nwogbo Well, that's certainly an interesting model to look at. There are models all across Europe. The idea of a public kitchen, for example, is also an interesting idea. But I do think that some councils in Britain are actually doing a relatively good job of this. So Nottingham City Council, for example, had an outsourced service for some time, but then they decided to take the service in-house. And of course, you have to look at this issue, not just from the point of view of the food that the children are eating, and that's the most important. But you also have to look it from the point of view of budget constraints for local councils that then have to run this service. And Nottingham has found itself in a position where it's kind of belt out a catering system that provides high-Quality food to its children. But it's also able to kind of sell its services in a way that allows it to make money, that it then reinvests into that service. And we can also look at a model like Leeds where they're able to because of how much control and how much of the money stays inside the system, they're able to provide for children outside of school periods, because a child maybe fed during

school periods. But when they're not in school, what are they eating? And we need to be able to keep them fed during those periods. So there are councils in Britain that are doing a good job. And we need to really look at these models and try and kind of expand those models across the country.

Ross Thank you very much for your time and effort on this. I know you've campaigned along with We Own It really hard and it has had an impact. We need more people like you. Thanks very much for your time with this.

Johnbosco Nwogbo Thank you so much.