

An Introduction to School Food Matters by Stephanie Wood
(from Why School Food Matters presentation Friday 16 May 2008)

Good morning everyone. It's great to see so many of you here today at Richmond Theatre. I'm Stephanie Wood and I'm here to tell you all about School Food Matters.

I set up the project back in July after meeting environmentalist Zac Goldsmith, and we got talking about school food. I'm a parent with two small children at a primary school in Sheen. At our school, we were so disappointed by the quality of the school meals that we opted out of the borough contract to look for something better. But when I got talking to Zac, we wondered how we could help more schools. Wouldn't it be better to work together to improve school food for the whole borough? In fact, why not two boroughs – Kingston was right next door! Then we got really fired up and thought if we could make improvements locally, why couldn't this work on a national level?

Working with two boroughs, let alone local authorities all across the country, seemed like such a mammoth task but once I'd started looking around to see who was doing what, I found wonderful examples of best practice at local authority level – we'll be hearing about two of these examples later.

But first things first – we needed to identify our goals – what do we want for our children? We'll be discussing School Food Matters' goals in depth this morning, but let's just have a quick look now. You'll note that, in the interests of sustainability, I have given you no notes whatsoever, but all this is on our website – easy to remember – schoolfoodmatters.com. For today, I have here this great big slide.

Kitchens – the heart of the matter. In my research I found that school kitchen facilities were either limiting, or completely eliminating any possibility of producing freshly prepared food on site. A fully equipped kitchen is certainly an aspiration – and this was clearly recognised by Merton Council as a priority – but having limited facilities doesn't mean you can't serve good quality food – Roger Sheard from Bradford City Council will tell us later about how a third of his schools get around the kitchen problem.

OK, goal # 2. **Food sourced locally and sustainably** – Jamie Oliver's campaign did such an amazing job to raise the nutritional standards of school food – (it directly led to the formation of the SFT and millions of pounds worth of government investment to improve school meals) - so with the SFT taking care of food standards, why not build on this and look at how school food is sourced and tackle a few environmental issues while we're at it?

Each year in England, the public sector spends a massive 2 billion pounds on food. Wouldn't it make a great impact if we spent that on local sustainable food? Roger Sheard recognised the obvious benefits and he'll be able to tell us how they changed the way they sourced school food up in Bradford.

3 Cooking and Growing Programmes – Hands up those who remember making a Victoria Sponge in Domestic Science? Wouldn't it be useful to show children how to prepare a whole healthy meal – better still how to *grow* a meal? There's so much talk about food security – a world food crisis – why not give our children some really important skills that they might well need to rely upon in the future?

Just on a practical level – trying to get children to eat healthy food can be tricky but I know my children will eat anything that they've cooked for themselves – however healthy! And if they've grown it....what a wonderful sense of achievement. My 8 year-old daughter brought home a handful of rocket leaves they'd grown at school – a really peppery, challenging taste for a child, but she loved it.

And children make great ambassadors for cooking and growing your own - which is good as some parents just don't enjoy cooking, or couldn't imagine being able to grow something to eat. If their children come home with the idea, they are much more likely to get involved than if it is recommended by another healthy eating campaign.

Prue Leith will be able to talk about cooking in schools, and we've got Chris Collins to share his experiences of gardening with children.

Farm links In my work with SFM, I talk about "personalising the food chain". Bill Graham at FACE (which stands for Farm and Countryside Education) came up with that saying and I hope he doesn't mind but I've stolen it! It describes so eloquently the value of meeting the farmer, seeing the crop growing in the field, then sampling the food on the plate – farm gate to school plate. SFM wants to reconnect children with where their food comes from and as luck would have it, this is the Year of Food and Farming, which continues to spread this important message across the country. Tony Cooke will talk later about some mind-boggling research done for the Year – a report called 'Concrete Children'. At the Year's London launch I heard a head teacher report that children in his school couldn't recognise an onion, let alone say where it comes from. I met a farmer recently who asked a group of secondary school children if they knew what clover was – they all shouted out 'margarine'. There's clearly a lot of work to be done in this area!

And what a great opportunity to dispel that stereotype of the farmer wielding a shotgun, yelling "get off my land!" I've met lots of farmers during my work with SFM and not one of them has yelled at me or threatened me with a firearm!

So we've got the kitchen worked out, we know where our great quality food comes from ... now where do we eat it? The **eating environment** often gets forgotten in the school food debate but it's so important. If children don't like the dining area because it's noisy and overcrowded, if they have to queue for ages only to find out that their choice of meal has run out or it's being slopped onto those horrible plastic prison trays, they simply won't eat school meals – and who can blame them? Jackie Schneider from the campaign group Merton Parents has done lots of work in this area and can tell you that by listening to the children, schools can make small changes to their dining arrangements that make for a much more pleasant lunchtime experience.

And finally ... **a designated champion** from each school. This is the important bit! It seems like such a daunting task to make all these changes but if each school has one champion, who talks to the champion at the next school ... before you know it we've got a team of champions all working towards the same goals. I've spoken to 32 schools during my research and in everyone of them I've found someone who has the energy and enthusiasm to make a difference in their school. Sometimes it's the head teacher, sometimes a parent or governor and I've found that students themselves have lots to say on the matter – school councils can be a great place to start.

And no-one should ever underestimate the power of the parent – that's why we wanted parents to gather here today. Jackie Schneider will tell you that an organised bunch of parents, with a shared vision will always make things happen.

Stephanie Wood
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