

Merton Parents for Better Food in School

In 2005, a group of parents and school governors in Merton came together to improve the quality of school food. They called themselves Merton Parents for Better Food in School.

They set themselves the following goals:

- To persuade the local authority that the current provision of school meals was substandard.
- To win funding for a working kitchen in every school.
- To improve the quality of ingredients and cooking standards.
- To make the council set up an effective monitoring system.
- To encourage schools to improve lunchtime arrangements.
- To draw up aims and objectives of a good quality school meal service and persuade the local authority to sign up to them.

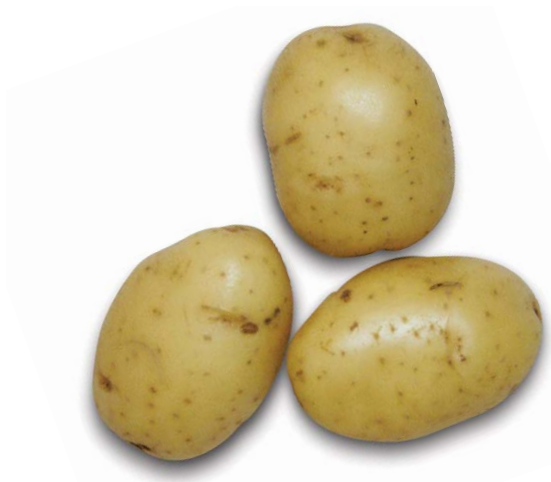
Merton Parents are now well on the way to achieving all of these goals.

What does this mean to Merton Parents?

- In response to parent lobbying Merton Council announced an investment package to refurbish school kitchens allowing them to produce fresh food on site.
 - A parent voice on the LEA committee responsible for drawing up new contract specifications and awarding a new contract for school food.
- Removal of plastic, prison style trays. Proper plates are now available in all schools.
 - The involvement of a healthcare professional.
 - More food that appeals to children by abandoning such appalling practices as serving up brown chunks of apple, prepared hours earlier .
 - Increased the amount of fruit and vegetables available
 - Encouraged schools to take a fresh look at lunchtime arrangements to allow less queuing and extra time for eating.
 - Improvements in the dining room environment such as tablecloths, menus displayed properly and in some schools, children with packed lunches and those taking the school meal being allowed to sit together.
 - A thriving parent group with members from nearly every single school in the borough.
 - Merton Parents were featured in a teachers' TV programme as an example for other parents to form their own groups.



BEST PRACTICE



Improving the Dining Experience Competition

This competition was initiated by Merton Parents to get school councils to make an audit of their own facilities, and to come up with an improvement plan for their school. To encourage them to take part Merton Parents offered excellent prizes including, cash for the school council to spend, a mains fed water cooler, an all expenses trip to a farm and a reception at the House of Commons. Entries were judged by a panel including, a journalist from the Wimbledon Guardian, the Chair of the Local Authority Catering Association and local parents. The winning school, Aragon Primary, received their prize from England rugby star Andy Hamilton. The top four schools were taken to the House of Commons for lunch to discuss their ideas with their respective MPs. Runner-up schools visited the offices of The School Food Trust. Every school council that entered was given a framed certificate and a box of fruit to share.

Work in Progress

To date most of Merton Parents success has been in primary schools. Merton Parents are calling for a national audit of lunchtime arrangements in secondary schools. Students, in co-operation with school staff, could carry out and register their findings nationally. This will help the government make provision by supplying them with up to date information on length of lunch break, seating capacity, number of fresh drinking water points, etc. Schools could then use this information to develop their own school food improvement plans. Merton Parents are currently lobbying The Soil Association to call a school food conference for secondary school students.

Future Plans

Merton Parents are currently researching a scheme to get farmers to send a range of seasonal vegetables into the class for children to investigate. Following a specially prepared scheme, children would learn how to prepare fresh vegetables, experiment with cooking them and then eat them in the classroom. The children would then receive some of the same vegetables to take home and prepare for their families.

Merton Parents have set up a farm-twinning scheme with Rushall Farm in Berkshire. Starting with 10 schools in the borough, the farm will visit the schools in the winter term and talk about growing. The schools will then visit the farm in the summer to witness the harvest. Merton Council will manage the scheme with a commitment to eventually involve every school in the borough.

The setting up of Merton Parents for Better Food in Schools has had a profound effect on school meals in Merton. They are delighted with the physical changes they have initiated (e.g. kitchen building programme, increase of fruit and vegetables, etc) but they are most proud of establishing a parent and student voice in the planning and delivery of a better school meal service.

And finally, a few words from Jackie Schneider, Chair of Merton Parents

"It is amazing what can be achieved when the whole community pulls together. It was the combination of parents, governors, catering staff, schools and local government working together that finally got 39 kitchens built in Merton Primary schools and a new improved menu. That's why I am so excited by School Food Matters. Improving school food is too big a job for individual schools to take on alone. Community support will be a huge asset in campaigning for better resources and highlighting the need for better food education. We can do something about the obesity crisis facing our kids. Getting food right in schools is a vital first step."