

Research Bulletin No 4:

Marketing the school food: top marks programme and healthy eating messages.



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Background

In September 2007 concern over rising levels of childhood obesity and dental hygiene, resulted in the introduction of nutritional standards for school lunches in Northern Ireland, with standards for other food and drinks in schools being launched in the following year (April 2008) through the school food: top marks programme.¹

School food: top marks is a joint venture by the Department of Education (DE), the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Public Health Agency (PHA). The aim of the 'top marks' programme is to ensure that all food and drinks provided through schools make a significant contribution to childhood nutrition, and schools are supported to enable children and young people to develop knowledge and skills to make healthier choices. A series of resources and good practice guidance booklets have been commissioned as part of this programme to assist schools adopt an effective whole-school approach to food in schools policy.

To help assess the impact of this programme, research exploring attitudes towards food in schools and eating behaviours was completed in 2008, and again in 2012. A total of 209 school principals participated in the most recent wave of research, alongside 212 teachers, 1119 parents, and 3306 children from schools across Northern Ireland. Qualitative research was undertaken with nutritional standards co-ordinators, area managers, area supervisors and catering managers, and school catering staff. Further details on the sample structure and research methodology, as well as policy background to the programme are presented elsewhere.²

A series of seven research bulletins have been produced outlining the key outcomes of this research and making recommendations for future action with a full list of these bulletins available within the School food: top marks research background and approach bulletin. This fourth bulletin describes the marketing of the school food: top

¹ Since the completion of this research, a review of the school food marketing and promotion strategy has taken place. Following consultation with stakeholders the school food: top marks programme has been renamed and rebranded to school food (try something new today). The aims and objectives of the programme have remained the same.

² Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No. 1: School food: top marks, research background and approach. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

marks programme. The paper details specific issues such as brand awareness and use of resources, and outlines the types of communication among key stakeholders involved in school food, including principals, teachers and catering staff, children, and parents.

Marketing of school food: top marks

Marketing may be defined as the process of communicating the value of a product or service to customers, for the purpose of selling that product or service.³ Effective marketing is fundamental to the success of a programme. In order for school food: top marks to become established and flourish within the school environment, there needs to be a multi-level approach to ensure *all* stakeholders buy-in. This involves a two-staged approach: firstly, the Food in Schools Forum should maximize engagement with all school stakeholders including chairpersons of Board of Governors, principals, teachers and catering staff as well as parents and children. Secondly, schools themselves need to ensure there are regular and accessible channels of communication both internally and externally to ensure that information is passed effectively between school staff, board of governors and the catering team within the school, as well as communicating to pupils and their parents.

Branding

As part of the marketing strategy for the school food: top marks work, a brand logo was developed.¹ This was to be displayed in schools and on parental communication to raise awareness of the quality of food available in the

“Youngsters are used to the fast food world and there are new products coming on... MacDonald’s keep up, KFC keep up... so you need to this, especially in the post-primary, to be able to create a brand”. Focus group; area managers and area supervisors.

school setting. The research found **around only 1 in 4 (26%) of principals and chairpersons of Board of Governors (24%) said that the green and red school food: top marks logo was displayed in their school** while 37% of teachers said the same. Although not reaching statistical significance, **more primary school principals said the logo was displayed in their school than post-primary principals (27% and 23% respectively)**. This finding perhaps goes

³ Kotler, Philip; Kevin Lane Keller (2009). *A Framework for Marketing Management* (4th ed.). Pearson Prentice Hall.

some way towards explaining why **more than twice the proportion of primary children (33%) recognised the school food: top marks logo compared to post-primary children (13%)**. Moreover, **11% of primary school children's parents recognised the logo compared to 6% of parents with children in post-primary education** ($p < .001$).

Post-primary girls were more likely to remember the top marks logo than boys (15% compared to 11% respectively: $p < .05$) and the youngest post-primary pupils were almost twice as likely to recognise it compared to their older counterparts - 21% of 12 year olds, 11% of 14 year olds and 8% of 15 year old pupils recognised the logo; $p > .001$). Pupils in secondary schools (17%) were also more likely to have seen the top marks logo; compared to only 8% of grammar school pupils ($p < .001$).

Logo placement

Of those who did have the top marks logo on display, the majority of principals (89%) and teachers (80%) said **it was displayed in the canteen or cafeteria**. The majority of pupils in school where



the logo was on display said it was placed in the canteen (76%). Fewer pupils recalled seeing the logo displayed elsewhere in the school such as the hall, or foyer, corridors, or classrooms (25%), while a small proportion of teachers reported it was displayed in school magazines or newsletters (8%).

School food: top marks resources for schools

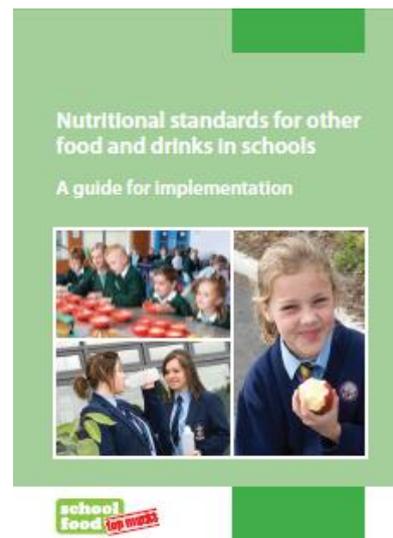
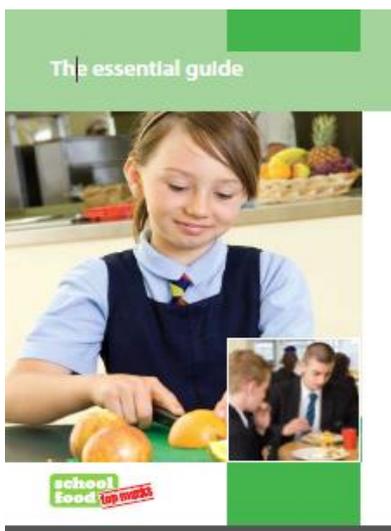
A number of resources were developed for use in schools as part of the school food: top marks programme. These were designed to help schools adopt an effective whole-school approach when implementing the policy. The following section of the bulletin provides a brief overview of each of the resources and details information on teachers' awareness of these and how useful they considered each resource.



Bite is a magazine produced by the Education and Library Boards⁴ and the Public Health Agency in conjunction with the Department of Education (see left). It aims to keep schools up to date with the latest information on school food, the resources available and provides an opportunity to share examples of how a whole school approach can improve the nutrition and wellbeing of pupils and staff.

Around 1 in 3 of the teachers who participated in the research had seen the Bite: Food in Schools magazine (32%). Of these teachers, 6 in 10 (60%) had actually used the magazine; and of these, 85% described it as ‘very useful’ or ‘quite useful’ (44% and 39% respectively), and 5% said it was ‘not very useful’.

Three bespoke documents were produced by the Public Health Agency: **School food, the essential guide**; the **Nutritional standards for school lunches, a guide for implementation**; and finally, **Nutritional standards for other food and drinks sold in schools, a guide for implementation** (see below). The first of these (The essential guide) aimed to introduce the standards and raise awareness of the school food programme, while the latter documents were developed as practical implementation guides for school lunches and other food and drinks sold in school.



⁴ From 1 April 2015 the 5 Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have amalgamated to become the Education Authority.

The research explored school staff awareness of these resources, and how useful school staff considered each resource. Teachers were least likely to be aware of the Nutritional standards for other food and drinks sold in school implementation guide (48%), compared to that for school lunches (55%) or the essential guide (62%). It was encouraging to note that the majority of those who had used the resources had found them useful (see Table 4.1). In all cases post-primary school teachers were more likely to be aware of all three resources (results not shown), a finding possibly related to the greater compliance with standards reported by post primary schools principals.

Table 4.1 Teachers’ awareness and attitudes towards programme resources (N=212)

	Awareness %	Used %	Useful %
Essential guide	62	80	96
Nutritional standards for lunches: implementation guide	55	66	90
Nutritional standards for other food and drinks sold in school: implementation guide	48	71	92



In earlier research conducted in 2008, school stakeholders maintained that the main difficulty in implementing the standards was the food parents sent into school, which frequently did not comply with nutritional standards – a finding replicated in this wave of the research.^{5,6,7} Subsequently the Public Health Agency produced the **Healthier lunch boxes booklet** offering guidance to teaching staff on how to work effectively with parents and children to promote healthier food and drink choices in lunchboxes

(pictured above). This includes information on what should be included in a healthy lunchbox, plus ways this teaching can be integrated within the rest of the curriculum.

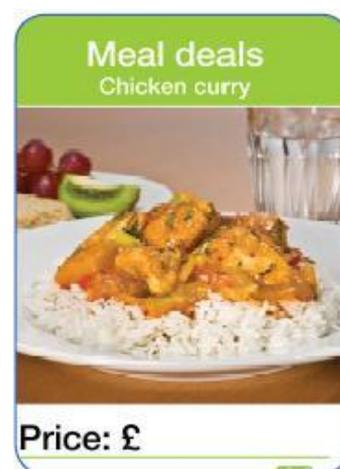
⁵ Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No. 3 Adherence and attitudes to nutritional standards and healthy eating policies in schools. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealthagency.hscni.net>

⁶ Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No.5: The influence of school nutrition policy and practice on children’s eating habits. Public Health Agency. Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealthagency.hscni.net>

⁷ Beattie K, Gilmore G. Research Bulletin No. 6: Uptake and factors impacting on demand for school meals. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealthagency.hscni.net>

Slightly less than half of all teachers (49%) had seen the 'Healthier lunch boxes' leaflet, and 71% of teachers who reported having seen the resource indicated that they had used it. Of these, 37% maintained that it had been 'very useful' and 55% found it quite useful.

In addition, special promotional packs were sent out for use in cash cafeterias. These contained nutritionally balanced menu cards or 'Meal Deals' advertising foods available and offering customers a choice of main course and dessert for a set price. However, **only one in six (17%) teachers were aware** of the **Meal Deals** resource operating in canteen. Of those who did know about the Meal Deals marketing tool, six in ten (60%) teachers had made use of it. Numbers were too small to allow for any meaningful analysis as to how useful or otherwise teachers found the meal deal resources.



Awareness of School food: top marks

The most recent data collected in 2012 reveals that **69% of principals reported they had implemented the nutritional standards for school lunches** in full, while **52% said the same of the nutritional standards for other food and drinks** sold in school (see Bulletin No. 3).⁸ Nevertheless, while over half of parents (58%) were aware of general restrictions on certain foods within their child's school, **only one in three (33%) parents had heard of the nutritional standards for school lunches, while fewer (27%) were aware of nutritional standards for other food and drinks in schools.**

Parents with children in primary school were more likely to be aware of the nutritional standards for school lunches than those with post-primary children (42% and 29% respectively; $p < .001$). They were also more likely to know that there were general restrictions on certain foods that operated within their child's school; over three

⁸ Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No. 3 Adherence and attitudes to nutritional standards and healthy eating policies in schools. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealthagency.hscni.net>

quarters (78%) of parents of primary children were aware of school rules about certain foods, compared to only 48% of parents of post-primary children. However, principals revealed that primary schools actually do have more healthy eating policies in place compared to post-primary schools (see Bulletin No. 5).⁹

Communication mechanisms

One key potential avenue of communication for all stakeholders involved in school food is the 'school nutrition action group' (SNAG). These groups allow multiple stakeholders (Board of Governors, principals, teachers, catering staff, pupils and parents) to discuss policies relating to food in schools and instigate change. Nevertheless, most principals who participated in the research did not have a SNAG operating in their school (70%).

However, of the remainder who did have a SNAG in their school, most of these included pupils (95%), teachers (90%) and catering staff (54%), while only one in five SNAG groups included parents (20%), and approximately one in seven had a member of the Board of Governors (15%). However, the frequency of SNAG meetings varied, ranging from every week to once every two to three years.

Communication with school food stakeholders

As part of this research, principals were specifically asked about their communication with teachers, Board of Governors, parents and children regarding issues to do with school food. Principals reported communicating most frequently ('at least once a term') with the catering team (71%). Over two thirds of principals stated that they communicated at least once a term with pupils about school food (68%). However, communication with parents and Boards of Governors was more limited: **approximately one in three principals (34%) communicated at least once a term with parents, and fewer than one in ten (8%) said the same of their Boards of Governors** (see Table 4.2).

⁹ Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No.5: The influence of school nutrition policy and practice on children's eating habits. Public Health Agency. Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealthagency.hscni.net>

Table 4.2 How often does your school communicate with each of the following groups about school food (n=204; principals' responses)

	At least once a term %	Once a year %	Less than once a year %	Don't know %	Never %
Catering team	71	11	5	2	6
Pupils	68	23	5	1	3
Parents	34	47	10	3	6
Board of Governors	8	33	32	4	23
Teachers	48	33	10	3	6

Despite 68% of principals' maintaining they communicated with pupils at least once a term (see Table 4.2), the majority of post-primary children indicated they had never been consulted about any aspect of school food (61%)¹⁰ (see Table 4.3). Overall, **slightly over two in five (41%) pupils said they had been asked their opinion about food sold in their school**, with the issue of canteen food most frequently discussed.

Table 4.3 Have you ever been asked about any of the following? (Post-primary pupils; multi-response, N=2024)

	%
Choice of foods available in canteen	29
Choice of foods in school vending machine/ tuck shop	11
Cost of buying lunch in canteen	20
Cost of buying foods in school vending machines/ tuck shop	8
Length of queues in the canteen	16
Seating arrangements in canteen	7
Canteen décor	5
Time allocated to eat lunch	13
Never been asked my opinion	61

¹⁰ Primary children were not asked this question

Table 4.2 (page 10) indicates that only 34% of principals communicated with parents once a term, whilst 47% limited communication to once a year - factors which may explain poor parental knowledge of nutritional standards noted earlier. Poor parental awareness of nutritional standards (specifically in relation to school meals) were echoed within the qualitative work with school caterers, who felt that parents had little understanding of the developments made in relation to school meals. Moreover, data collected from

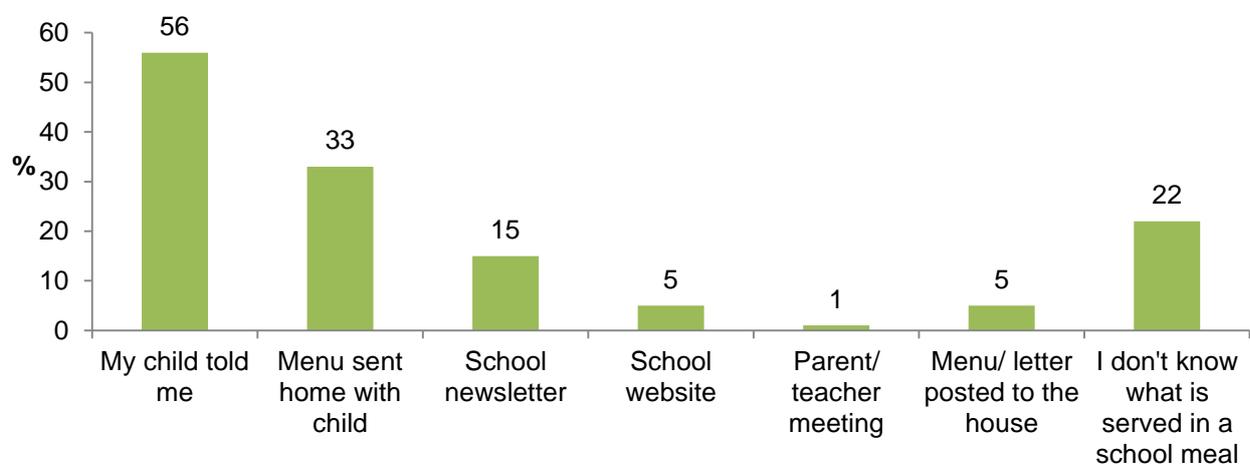
“Parents need more information, they don’t realise how the Nutritional Standards are applied to what their children are eating... it really doesn’t mean anything if they don’t know the background to it and what has gone in, and the work that goes into it.” Interview; school catering manager, Southern Education and Library Board (ELB).⁴

“If you look at the menus that are going home to parents it just says fish fingers, it doesn’t say anything else – like how are people meant to know that it is really good fish in those fish fingers?” Interview; school catering manager, Belfast ELB.⁴

parents revealed that **more than one in five parents did not know what was served in a school meal (22%)**. The remainder who said they did know what type of food was available were given this information by their child (56%) (see Figure 4.1): however, it is

unlikely that the nutritional value of this meal is relayed to parents though this mechanism. Comparatively few parents found out about the content of school meals via more reliable mechanisms such as a school bulletin or magazine (15%), letters or menus posted to the house (5%), or at parent/teacher meetings (1%).

Figure 4.1 Parents’ sources of information about school meals (multi response; N=1086)



Types of healthy lifestyle messages communicated

In general, principals were more likely to target pupils with healthy eating messages, rather than parents. Nearly all the principals who participated in the research indicated that the healthy eating messages listed in Table 4.4 were communicated to pupils in their schools. However, principals working in the post-primary sector were more likely than those in the primary sector to provide messages to pupils about making healthier meals (100% and 83% respectively; $p < .001$); messages about healthy eating and obesity (100% and 92% respectively; $p < .05$); and how to read food labels to determine the nutritional content (100% and 83%; $p < .05$) (results not shown).

Primary schools were more likely to target parents with healthy eating messages than their post-primary counterparts (see Table 4.4). For example, primary schools were more likely to deliver messages highlighting the importance of breakfast than post-primary schools (68% and 42% respectively; $p < .001$), despite findings that post-primary children are less likely to eat breakfast on school days (see Research Bulletin No. 2 for more detail).¹¹

It was also interesting to note that **primary schools were over three times more likely to give parents information about healthy snacking compared to post-primaries** (66% and 18% respectively; $p < .001$); despite findings that post-primary school pupils are more likely to consume unhealthier snacks, and to bring these snacks from home (see Bulletin No. 5 for further information).¹²

¹¹ Beattie K, Gilmore G. Research Bulletin No. 2: The influence of deprivation on knowledge, attitudes and healthy eating behaviours. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealthagency.hscni.net>

¹² Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No.5: The influence of school nutrition policy and practice on children's eating habits. Public Health Agency. Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealthagency.hscni.net>

Table 4.4 Healthy eating messages conveyed to parents (principals; N=202)¹³

	Primary parents %	Post-primary parents %
Benefits of breakfast ***	68	42
Importance of drinking water ***	71	34
Importance of a balanced diet ***	67	34
Why & how to reduce high fat and sugary foods ***	12	45
Why and how to increase fruit and vegetables ***	47	12
Healthy snacking ***	66	18
Health and the food you eat ***	38	17
Sugary food and tooth decay ***	47	11
Healthy eating and obesity ***	45	13
Eating healthy food and feeling energetic ***	40	12
Importance of physical activity ***	59	24
How to make a healthier meal ***	63	10

Methods used to promote healthy lifestyles

The healthy eating messages highlighted above were more likely to be portrayed to children through the curriculum (88%), healthy eating posters (92%) or announcements/ talks in assembly (88%) (results not shown). However, schools used a diverse range of mechanisms to communicate with parents, including the school magazine (48%), open nights (59%), with letters, emails and phone calls the most popular (72%) (Table 4.5). School meal taster sessions were the least likely method used at present to promote healthy eating (29%), and were least likely to be used in the future, with 57% of principals having no plans to introduce these.

¹³ *** signifies a p-value of less than 0.001, where the observed difference could only be expected to have occurred by chance in 1 in 1000 times in repeated tests; ** signifies a p-value of less than 0.01, suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 1% of the time, and * suggests the difference is statistically significant at a p-value of less than 0.05 (suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 5% of the time).

Table 4.5 Methods of communication with parents (principals, N=202)

	Already use %	Plan to use %	No plans to use %
School magazine	48	8	44
School open nights	59	13	28
School meal taster sessions	29	14	57
Cookery demonstrations	41	13	46
Cookery skills/classes	40	14	47
Letter/emails/phone calls to parents	72	9	19

Parents were asked about different methods used by their child's school to convey information about school food or healthy eating (Table 4.6). Over half (51%) of the parents who participated in the survey were aware of information leaflets about healthy eating, while slightly over one in four (27%) indicated their school provided healthy eating recipes (see Table 4.6). In keeping with the data collected from principals, comparatively few parents indicated their schools provided taster sessions for school meals (6%), or cooking skills programmes for parents (4%).

Significantly more parents of primary school children were aware of adult cookery classes being offered by the school than parents of post primary children (7% and 3% respectively; $p < .01$). However, parental participation in these programmes was low (7%) as was future demand - only around four in ten (38%) parents appeared interested in this option (see Table 4.6, page 15).

Post-primaries school parents were more likely to be aware of information being offered via websites (22%) compared to the parents of primary school children (14%; $p < .001$). Post-primary schools were also more than twice as likely to be aware of healthy eating recipes in comparison with primary schools (33% and 14% respectively; $p < .001$). However, parents reported using these resources infrequently (see Table 4.6, page 15). Given that most of the non-compliant foods and drinks consumed by children in school come from home, and consumption of food and drinks items high in fats, sugar and salt was more prolific amongst post-primary pupils (see Bulletin No. 5 for more detail) the type of information or the format in

which it is delivered to parents may not be suitable. This is an issue that should be explored in more detail in future research.¹⁴

Although 29% of principals maintained they offered school meal taster sessions, few parents reported being aware of these (6%). However, despite parents' lack of awareness of this resource, these were most frequently used when parents were aware such sessions were available. School meal taster sessions were also one of the most popular potential avenues of communication, with more than half (52%) of all parents saying they would be interested in these.

There were no statistically significant differences between the communication mechanisms primary or post-primary parents favoured in regards to receiving healthy eating information from schools (results not shown).

Table 4.6 Parents' awareness, use and interest in different avenues of communication about school food (parents; N=961)¹⁵

	Aware (all) %	Aware (primary) %	Aware (post-primary) %	Used ¹⁶ %	Interested in (all) %
Taster sessions for school dinners	6	8	5	17	52
Cooking skills programs for parents	4	7**	3**	7	38
Websites with healthy eating information	19	14**	22**	5	41
Healthy eating recipes	27	14***	33***	10	66
Information leaflets on healthy eating	51	60***	47***	15	46

Parents recruited via primary schools were also more likely to have been offered information leaflets than those from post-primaries – six out of ten (60%) parents with primary school children said their child's school offered this, compared to 47%

¹⁴ Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No.5: The influence of school nutrition policy and practice on children's eating habits. Public Health Agency. Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealthagency.hscni.net>

¹⁵ *** signifies a p-value of less than 0.001, where the observed difference could only be expected to have occurred by chance in 1 in 1000 times in repeated tests; ** signifies a p-value of less than 0.01, suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 1% of the time, and * suggests the difference is statistically significant at a p-value of less than 0.05 (suggesting that the observed outcome would be expected to occur by chance only 5% of the time).

¹⁶ Base is taken as parents whose schools provide each service and who are aware of each avenue of communication: base for Taster sessions = 60; base for Cooking skills = 41; base for Websites = 176; base for Recipes = 251; and base for Information leaflets = 492

of parents with children at post-primary schools ($p < .001$). Overall 15% of parents had used such leaflets (Table 4.6).

The Public Health Agency and *Safefood* developed a specific leaflet to aid primary school parents provide a healthy packed lunch for children. **Half of parents with primary school children had seen the ‘Are you packing a healthy lunch?’ leaflet** (50%), and of these, most (96%) had read it. The majority (88%) of respondents who had read the leaflet felt that it was either very useful or quite useful (29% and 59% respectively). Parents who said they had learned something from the leaflet were asked if they had put this into practice by changing anything they gave their child for lunch – 69% of these parents said they had altered their child’s lunch as a result. There were no statistically significant differences according to parental demographics and whether they remembered receiving this leaflet, or having used it.



Conclusions

- The Food in Schools Forum needs to be more proactive in marketing current resources to assist schools adopt an effective whole-school food policy. For example, school staff awareness of the Healthier Lunch Box leaflet was relatively low, as was the Bite magazine, despite findings showing that teachers who had used these had found them helpful in their efforts to implement healthy eating policies.
- Only slightly more than one in four (26%) of principals and 24% of chairpersons of Board of Governors who responded to the survey said that the green and red School food: top marks logo was displayed in their school. In order to improve the marketability of the food in schools programme, display of the logo needs to be more wide-reaching. The Food in School Forum and school catering should work with principals to encourage them to display the logo, and ensure they are adequately stocked with posters advertising the programme.

- Moreover, findings suggest that when the logo is displayed, this tends to be limited to the canteen only – a venue frequented by children already taking school meals. In order to attract new customers (i.e. children who have packed lunches, as well as parents and visitors to the school who do not generally visit the canteen) it is suggested that the logo be more prominently displayed in areas of high traffic; for example school reception area, corridors and classrooms, and that schools should be given clear instructions as to placement.
- Findings suggest that display of the logo is more widespread in primary schools, and subsequently primary children, and their parents, are more likely to be aware of the logo than those in the post-primary sector. Given this finding coupled with the lower consumption of school meals among post-primary children, it is imperative that efforts are made to improve visibility of the food in school branding and marketing in the post-primary sector.
- The findings suggest that parents' awareness of the nutritional standards is limited with only one in three (33%) of parents having heard of the nutritional standards for school lunches, while fewer (27%) were aware of nutritional standards for other food in schools. Moreover, more than one in five parents did not know what was served in a school meal (22%). In order to increase awareness and promote healthy eating in schools - and improve the sales of school meals - it is vital that parents are informed of the rationale behind the nutritional standards, and what this entails for food served within their school. Moreover, parents need to be made aware of the quality and the nutritional value of a school meal, in order to increase the likelihood of switching from packed lunches.
- In order to improve awareness and knowledge of the food in schools programme and the school meals service, it is important that current communication channels between parents, school, school caterers and the Food in School Forum are improved. The findings suggest that the majority of principals communicate with parents infrequently, with only one in three (34%) principals communicating at least once a term with parents about issues to do with school food.
- Where there was communication between schools and parents, this was most proactive in the primary sector. Primary schools were more likely to actively

target parents with healthy eating messages and information than those in the post-primary sector, despite findings that post-primary school pupils are more likely to consume unhealthier foods and snacks, and to bring these snacks from home.