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Secondary Curriculum Review
Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA)

CC. Ian Williams, QCA
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The Children's Food Campaign's response to the consultation on the Secondary Curriculum Review

I am pleased to submit a response to the above consultation on behalf of the Children's Food Campaign which is co-ordinated by 'Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming' (please see www.childrensfoodcampaign.org.uk). A draft of this response was circulated for comment to all 172 national organisations that support the Children's Food Campaign.

The Children's Food Campaign is pleased that the need to teach pupils about food in the context of healthy eating has been recognised by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). However, we have a number of reservations about the Review's proposals, and believe that they represent a missed opportunity to improve substantially children's food knowledge and thus their diet.

1. Summary

The Children's Food Campaign recommends that all pupils be provided with both practical and theoretical food lessons at Key Stage 3, which teach the subject in the context of healthy living. The positive impact on children's health of such lessons is so significant that we believe that it is wrong that they remain optional, as proposed in the Review.

2. The Crisis in Children's Diets and the Health Consequences

It is no exaggeration to say there is a crisis in children's diets. The National Diet and Nutrition Survey found that:

- 92% of children consume more saturated fat than is recommended
- 86% consume too much sugar
- 72% consume too much salt

- 96% do not get enough fruit and vegetables.¹

The Chief Medical Officer has compared the crisis in children's diets to a health 'time bomb' which must be defused.²

The children's diet crisis leads to serious health and well-being problems. The former Chair of the Food Standards Agency (FSA), for example, has warned that for the first time in more than a century life expectancy may fall, with the real prospect that parents may outlive their children.³

The most high-profile health issue is the dramatic rise in childhood obesity. The UK now has the highest level of obesity in Europe, and childhood obesity is rising at an alarming rate: one in three children is now overweight or obese.⁴ Obesity in children under 11 has risen by over 40% in ten years. If this trend continues, half of children will be obese or overweight by 2020.⁵

The consequences of childhood obesity are clear: incidences of high blood pressure, raised cholesterol and even clogged arteries in children are rising. Obesity in childhood is likely to develop into obesity in adulthood, increasing the risk of heart disease, diabetes or cancer in later life.⁶

The psychological impact of obesity can be as damaging as the physical effects for many children. Being overweight or obese is associated with increased levels of distress, disadvantage, and psychological problems.⁷

Alongside the problems associated with obesity, junk food diets are causing other health problems. For example, type 2 diabetes – once known as "late onset" and traditionally found in the over 40s – is increasingly found in adolescents.⁸

Junk food diets also have significant effects on children's behaviour, concentration, learning ability and mood. Children with diets lacking in essential vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids tend to perform worse academically, cannot concentrate and are more aggressive.⁹

We believe that compulsory food and cooking skills lessons are an essential part of the fight against this epidemic of diet-related ill-health.

3. The Importance of Food Teaching

There is considerable evidence demonstrating the positive impact of cooking lessons on children's future health. Dr. Martin Caraher, Reader in food and health policy at City

¹ J. Gregory et al., *National Diet and Nutrition Survey: Young People Aged 4-18 years* (The Stationery Office, 2000)

² *Health Check: On the state of public health: Annual Report 2002* (Department of Health, 2003)

³ "Official: fat epidemic will cut life expectancy", *The Observer*, 9 November 2003

⁴ *OECD Factbook 2006 – Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics* (OECD, 2006)

⁵ *Health Survey for England 2004* (The Stationery Office, 2006)

⁶ D. S. Freedman et al., "Relationship of Childhood Obesity to Coronary Heart Disease Risk Factors in Adulthood: The Bogalusa Heart Study", *Pediatrics* Vol. 108 No. 3 (2001) pp. 712-718

⁷ Information on the personal and social effects of obesity are detailed at: <http://www.youngminds.com>

⁸, *Storing up Problems: the medical case for a slimmer nation* (Royal College of Physicians, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Faculty of Public Health, 2004)

⁹ C. Van de Weyer, *Changing Diets Changing Minds: how food affects mental well being and behaviour* (Sustain, 2005)

University, concluded that teaching children cooking skills is vital if we are to improve children's diet:

"Cooking skills are:

- Necessary for the understanding of what constitutes a healthy life;
- An important part of an empowerment process for individuals who wish to exercise control over the diet and food intake, whether by cooking and preparing their own food or by knowing/understanding the processes that go into ready prepared foods; and
- A vehicle by which citizens can engage with the social norms of a society in which food is central both for existence and identity."¹⁰

A report for the Health Education Authority suggested that developing children's food skills could have a positive impact on their health:

"Skills, and particularly the confidence to use them, could be an important determinant of health behaviour ... The data presented here and elsewhere support the development of a national policy to enhance cooking skills. For example cooking classes or some practical element of 'hands-on' skills should feature in a young person's curriculum at some stage at school".¹¹

More recently, the School Meals Review Panel, commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills to advise on the revision of school meals standards, agreed, saying:

"The Panel is convinced that cooking is an essential life-skill and that no child should leave school unable to cook for themselves. It is also desirable for children to have a practical understanding of where food comes from, and how it is produced and treated. Whilst a purely academic knowledge of food may also be valuable, the focus at primary and Key Stages 2 and 3 should be on practical cooking skills."¹²

The Panel was clear that food education should be compulsory:

"All children should be taught food preparation and practical cooking skills in school in the context of healthy eating. Far more emphasis should be placed on practical cooking skills within the curriculum space currently devoted to Food Technology, and the KS3 review should consider this"¹³

Then Secretary of State for Education, Ruth Kelly welcomed these proposals, saying that:

"Practical food education is important for all children".¹⁴

From documents seen by the Children's Food Campaign, we understand that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) originally wanted compulsory cooking to be a part of the curriculum, and are unconvinced of the validity of the reasons given not making food skills compulsory.

¹⁰ Dr Martin Caraher, *Briefing for the School Food Trust* (Centre for Food Policy, City University, 2006)

¹¹ Tim Lang, Martin Caraher, Paul Dixon and Roy Carr-Hill, *Cooking Skills and Health* (Health Education Authority, 1999)

¹² School Meals Review Panel, *Turning the Tables* (2005)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2005_0108

We believe, in light of the available academic and Government-commissioned research, that the health benefits practical food skills lessons provide to children is such that all pupils should take cookery lesson.

Moreover, teaching children to cook is the most effective way for the Government to improve cooking skills in the home. We understand that the Government is wary that public health policies – such as cookery lessons for adults – might be perceived as the actions of the “nanny state”. Although we disagree with this view, we recognise that it is easier for the Government to teach cookery to children rather than adults. Given the truism that today’s children will be tomorrow’s parents, teaching food skills to children is the single most effective thing that the Government can do to improve the cooking skills of parents in the future.

4. Current Problems with Food Teaching

There is a general acceptance among teachers, parents and school inspectors that the current food curriculum does not equip children to cook healthy meals.

Ofsted’s recent report¹⁵ highlighted their inspectors’ reservations about the teaching of food technology in schools:

“Pupils, parents and head teachers have expressed their concerns about food technology in the curriculum to government officials and inspectors, namely that too little time is spent learning how to cook nutritious meals and too much time is devoted to low level investigations and written work, the value of which is unclear.”

As such, Ofsted recognised the conflict between children’s need to acquire life skills and to fulfil the requirements of the current Design and Technology (D&T) curriculum. The report highlighted that:

“There is a fundamental and so far unresolved dichotomy between teaching about food to develop skills for living and using food as a means to teach the objectives of D&T.”

Ofsted emphasised the need to resolve this dichotomy:

“Clarify the relationship between the teaching of food as a life skill and the use of food as a medium for teaching design and technology in order to remove the confusion for teachers and curriculum developers.”

The report went onto say:

“The vast majority of teachers interviewed for this survey said that their pupils’ standards of cooking skills had fallen since the advent of food technology: the subjects’ knowledge and skills had expanded but without additional time to teach the new content. A majority of pupils were not being prepared to cook, independently, a sufficient variety of nutritious meals, using a wide range of ingredients and techniques.”

Ofsted also identified a number of other problems with the teaching of food:

¹⁵ *Food Technology in Secondary Schools* (Ofsted, 2006).

- “there is a shortage of specialist teachers of food technology. As a result, provision is reduced and, in some cases, abandoned, together with the closure of specialist teaching rooms.”
- “pupils are required to bring their own ingredients: as a result, in many schools, a number of pupils are unable to take part in cooking because they can afford, forget, or refuse to bring ingredients”
- “most schools where the work is timetabled in 50 or 60 minute single lessons find it difficult to provide enough time for practical cookery”

As Ofsted recognised, funding needs to be provided to ensure that pupils are provided with effective food skills lessons.¹⁶

The problems with the teaching of food skills are especially telling in light of the crisis in children’s diet-related ill-health the UK faces.

5. Our Concerns With The Proposed New Curriculum

The Children’s Food Campaign welcomes, as far as they go, the changes suggested by QCA and the Department for Education and Skills to the cooking curriculum. We especially welcome the emphasis on practical cooking and food skills, to complement theoretical learning about food. However, we are deeply disappointed that food technology remains an optional part of the curriculum.

We are also very concerned by the DfES’s view that all of the children currently studying food technology will continue to do so after the change in curriculum.¹⁷ This assumes that every school will continue to teach the new and improved curriculum to the same number of pupils.

The Ofsted Report and evidence from organisations in the Children’s Food Campaign coalition both suggest that many schools currently teach food technology without any pupils doing any practical cookery at all. It seems likely that many schools will discourage children from opting for the new food technology curriculum so that they can avoid the necessary equipment and teaching expertise to teach the new curriculum.

We believe that Government must recognise that substantial new investment is needed in both cookery equipment and teaching skills if the new curriculum is to work. However, even if extra funds are made available, we believe that all schools will only make this investment if they are forced to by cookery bring a compulsory part of the curriculum.

6. How to Improve the Secondary Curriculum Proposals

Cooking should play an important part in any curriculum. Without cooking skills, the healthy living choices people can make are severely limited. Dr. Martin Caraher stated the importance of food skills not only in providing people with food choice, but also avoiding becoming dependent on ready-prepared meals or pre-cooked food:

“Cooking skills prepare people to make choices in a fast changing food world. Without the skills, choice and control are diminished and a dependency culture emerges.”¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ Articulated by Janet Dallas of the DfES to members of the Children’s Food Campaign in February 2007.

¹⁸ Dr Martin Caraher, *Briefing for the School Food Trust* (Centre for Food Policy, City University, 2006)

Martin Caraher also found that an inability to cook limited the chance of a person having a varied and hence healthy diet:

“Poor cooking skills could be a barrier to widening food choice in later life and thus reduce the chance of eating healthily. Indeed a recent study from the National Consumer Council (2003), reported respondents on low incomes identified [one of] the barriers to a healthy diet as being ... not being able to cook”.¹⁹

Other studies have shown increased fruit and vegetable consumption among child and adult participants in food skills clubs/classes. Food skills lessons do have an apparent effect in improving the diets of participants.²⁰

Although we welcome voluntary cookery lessons as proposed by the DfES, we believe these are no substitute for food skills becoming a compulsory part of the curriculum. Voluntary lessons will tend to be most popular with pupils who already value food skills highly enough to attend non-compulsory lessons. These will be the children who, if no school-based cookery lessons are available, would probably be motivated to learn to cook at home. The nature of such voluntary lessons is thus that they will not attract those who currently have no inclination to learn cookery.

Similarly, while we are pleased to see that diet is part of the curriculum for the Personal Well-being element of the Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHEE) curriculum we have two major concerns. The first is that, like food technology within the D&T curriculum, PSHEE is not compulsory. The second is that this theoretical teaching will be ineffective if it is not simply connected with practical food skills lessons. Educating pupils in the need to eat healthily will not work if children are not taught how to prepare meals from healthy, fresh ingredients (see above).

If the two elements of the curriculum under which food education and skills can be provided are both remain optional, we fear that many children will receive no food education whatsoever at Key Stage 3, and will be considerably disadvantaged as a result.

Compulsory cooking in the D&T curriculum would offer the opportunity to combine a practical cooking teaching element with a theoretical healthy eating element in PSHEE, if this was also made compulsory. An imaginative, flexible approach to food teaching could see lessons on aspects of food and health fitted into Science, Geography and Physical Education lessons as well as D&T and PSHEE lessons. Such a flexible and imaginative cross-curricular approach appears to be at the heart of the Curriculum Review’s recommendations, and we believe that it is entirely appropriate and entirely feasible that such an important subject as food be taught in this manner.

Together, theoretical and practical food lessons would provide pupils with a rounded food education which would teach them not only about the need to eat healthily but the means to produce healthy food for themselves.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ S. A. Revill, A. J. Adamson, R. Stacy, J. Hooper and P. Moynihan, “The effect of an after-school ‘Food Club’ on intake of foods and nutrients by children from deprived social backgrounds”, *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 60 (2001); J. Cresswell, *Get Cooking Project Report* (Greater Glasgow Health Board Health Promotion Department, 1995)

7. Conclusions

Currently, the requirements of the D&T curriculum mean that very few pupils receive practical cooking lessons at Key Stage 3.

We believe that cooking lessons are crucial in providing children with the means to choose to live healthier lives, and should be an essential part of any lessons children receive on healthy living.

As such, we would like to see cooking become a compulsory part of the Key Stage 3 curriculum, and believe compulsory cooking lessons would have a positive impact on children's future health.

Ends.