

how the feed me better campaign happened

2005 – a big year for school dinners

When I signed up as a dinner lady to make school dinners at Kidbrooke school in Greenwich, I wanted to show people what rubbish their kids were getting fed at school and how little government was spending. Basically, I wanted to get rid of the junk. I had to prove that, for the same price as a bag of crisps, just 37p, I could produce a properly cooked, nutritious meal at lunchtime.

I had no idea that Jamie's School Dinners was going to be the start of such a massive campaign and that it would get such enormous support – from parents, teachers and kids all over the world.

The Jamie's School Dinners TV programme

At Kidbrooke, the kids were eating a quarter of a ton of chips every week. The food budget was 37p per meal and Nora and her team of dinner ladies had become totally unmotivated by the food they served.

I needed a set of menus that we could serve to the 15,000 school children across Greenwich, for the same price, to set an example for the whole country and show the government it could be done. With help from the army, we got all fifty head dinner ladies together and trained them to peel and chop veg, and to make their own fresh meals again. Afterwards, each school had a chef working behind the scenes for a week to help them get up and running with the new menus. To get the kids to accept the new food, I had to all of the junk food so there was no alternative.

It was the one of the hardest things I've ever done but it worked. A year later, Nora's still serving the same food, the kids love it and they have a portion of fruit, and vegetables or salad with every meal.

Feed Me Better

The Feed Me Better campaign was fantastic. I needed loads of support to go to the government and get them to change, so I wrote a manifesto asking for five things:

1. Guarantee that children receive a proper, nutritionally balanced meal on their plates.
2. Introduce nutritional standards and ban junk food from school meals.
3. Invest in dinner ladies: give them better kitchens, more hours and loads of support and training to get them cooking again.
4. Teach kids about food and get cookery back on the curriculum.
5. Commit long-term funding to improve school food.

Suddenly, School Dinners was making the front pages of all the papers. We set up a web petition and hoped to get 10,000 people to sign up. After a week we already had 25,000 signatures.

Over 5 million people were watching the programme. 116 MPs signed a cross-party motion of support. Pressure was mounting on the government and an election was round the corner.

It turned into one of the biggest ever web petitions and after four weeks I had over 270,000 signatures to take to the Prime Minister. Tony Blair announced he was taking immediate action to set up a School Food Trust and pledged £280 million to improve school meals.

Since then, the School Meals Review Panel recommended a set of tough new standards for school food which the government have accepted and they'll start to come into force this autumn. School meals will have to contain a basic level of nutrients, which kids need for healthy growth and schools won't be able to sell junk food any more.

What a fantastic result!

Autumn 2006 - Return to School Dinners

Now I've made a follow up programme to show what's happened to school meals over the last 18 months. I wanted to highlight some of the problems that people need to know about before things are really going to change in our schools.


Kidbrooke is still cooking my menus, but now that all the junk has gone, including the crisps and sweets and fizzy drinks that used to make a profit for her meal service, Nora's struggling to meet her budgets.

I went to Lincolnshire – like several other parts of the country, the primary schools there don't have kitchens so cannot cook their own hot meals. We found a way of getting a hot meal service in place by hooking up with a local pub.

So many kids still don't get a hot meal at lunch time and I wanted to help parents realize how much junk their kids are actually eating. Because if chocolate bars, fizzy drinks and crisps are part of their daily diet, they are going to face a load of health problems later in life.

I also went to meet the Education Secretary and the Prime Minister again, to see if they were prepared to make a long-term commitment to sorting the problem. We still needs loads more money to feed our kids better in school. The dinner ladies need some fast track training and schools and parents need to be educated about cooking and eating proper meals at home.

Find out what happens in Return to School Dinners on 18 September.



September 2006