

**KIERRA BOX**

## OFFER KIDS CHOICE



I can't remember what school lunches taste like. Not because they weren't memorable – they were, although for all the wrong reasons. Or because I left school a long time ago – I finished my A-levels last June. But because for all but the first year of secondary school, I avoided them. Lunches at our

school didn't taste terrible, and weren't over-priced as school lunches go, but even as a 12 year old I knew they were unhealthy.

Young people do care about what they eat, and not just because they want to look like the people they see on television. We care about what we eat because we understand the implications for our health and well-being, and because we value our bodies and the benefits of nutritious food to our physical and mental agility.

The first day I was allowed to leave school at lunchtime, I hid. But it was a long search for a food outlet in the local area that sold food I wanted. We were surrounded by takeaways, and newsagents filled with chocolate bars. Schools know that they have a captive audience among primary school children and the younger years of secondary schools – but even older children rarely have much idea of where to eat in the local area. We are taught to trust our schools, and to regard them as a source of authority



in our lives. Why, then, do they exploit us and fail us in this crucial area? It has been shown that young children have difficulty distinguishing between children's television shows and the advertising in the breaks. Why is it so hard to accept that this may extend into educational establishments? When we move from classroom to the lunchroom, from facts and figures to nutritionally empty, high fat and sugar foods, isn't it natural that we should accept these eating habits as correct and carry them away with our homework?

Eventually, I started buying my lunches from a local baker where I was treated like an adult consumer, with a wide choice of food prepared as I watched. Why are young people not given these rights in schools? As I got older, I became increasingly concerned about where my food was coming from – was it organic? Fairtrade? Locally produced?

With the help of the charity Envision some friends and I set up an alternative canteen one day a week in our lunchroom, selling home-cooked, healthy food for affordable prices. There was no contest. The school canteen closed early that day as our classmates voted with their feet and moved to eat our food instead of the chips and beans that had been forced upon them since the beginning of school.

The way forward is clear: the government must listen to the pupils. We are discerning consumers and innovative thinkers, and the overhaul of our school meals system should be carried out in conjunction with us. We need choice and variety, not just a healthy "alternative" but a range of healthy foods geared toward different tastes, complemented by fresh fruit, juices and water – not by Mars bars, Coke and Pepsi. Who knows, if this kind of change had begun earlier, maybe I would be able to tell you how our school food tasted.

• Kierra Box is a co-founder of youth empowerment organisation

Hands Up For...

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