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School Meal Spending: Aces and Dunces

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Six-year-old Ben was struggling manfully with the circle of dried-out roast meat on his tray at Hawkedon primary school near Wokingham yesterday. He tried to cut it with his knife, but failed. Then he decided to pick it up whole and bite into it, but his small teeth made little impression and a couple of minutes later it dropped back on to the plastic tray before skidding on to the floor. He looked relieved and concentrated happily on his boiled carrots, ketchup and biscuit instead.

Kimberley, aged eight, was enjoying her meat more, but hesitated when asked what kind it was. "Umm, non-vegetarian meat, I think." Esme, who had already declared herself exceptional by liking her soggy cabbage, was clear though: "It's chicken."

"It's lamb", the dinner lady whispered to an intermediary, since she had been told not to talk to the press by her catering company, Initial Rentokil. On closer examination the meat appeared to be a mixture of chewy bits compacted with spongy bits that had spent some time in a factory mould.

But it wasn't all bad. There were plates of fresh fruit as well as the boiled vegetables, and the bread and butter pudding looked real, even if the gravy didn't. You could choose water instead of the flavoured, coloured squash drink - but none of the children did.

Hawkedon is a successful and energetic primary school served by Wokingham local education authority and its contracted caterer, Initial. When asked on March 16 by the Soil Association how much was spent on the ingredients of its school meals, Wokingham's education contracts department said just 27p, putting the authority at the bottom of a new league table of English primary schools drawn up to highlight the state of school meals. The number of children taking school meals in Wokingham schools, at just 33%, also puts the LEA near the bottom of the Soil Association league.

Both Initial and Wokingham now dispute the figure for the cost of food and say it is higher, somewhere between 40p and 50p, though they refused to tell the Guardian exactly how much. They would not tell the headteacher at Hawkedon, Alan Youd, either.

"I'm not sure what they spend," Mr. Youd shrugged. "I thought it was about 32p. Initial says it's a lot more, but won't tell me how much, and Wokingham said, 'We can't tell you, we don't know; it's all in the contract'."

According to Mr. Youd, the catering contract came up for renewal this year and was put out to tender, but no other companies were really interested. "It's been extended for a year. We're not really happy with it."

A spokesman for Initial said the company had been flooded with inquiries about its food since Jamie Oliver's television series. Asked what was in the lamb, the company said it was a well-known national brand purchased from supermarkets across the country.

Mr. Youd has looked at opting out of the LEA contract altogether, but feels that he lacks the expertise to run the kitchen as well as the school. He also says the problems go much deeper than the standard of catering. He estimates that about a third of his pupils never eat at a table at home, and some children of all ages still struggle with knives and forks at school.

But the Jamie Oliver effect is already being felt. "They are changing the menus," Mr Youd said. He has been told that the new ones will contain more homemade food, though a look at what will be on offer reveals pork sausage plaits and chicken hot dogs.

At the other end of the spending league are London's affluent boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea and Wandsworth. Wandsworth told the Soil Association it allocated 70p to ingredients for school meals. (The Isles of Scilly spend 90p per head, but exceptional transport costs distort that figure.)

Wandsworth has used Harrison Catering for its meals since last year, having ended a contract with the catering giant Scolarest 18 months early. "We decided by mutual agreement that it was not working, either on standards or service, a spokesman for Wandsworth LEA said. "There was too much processed food and too high a staff turnover."

Harrison Catering also provides school meals for Lambeth, Southwark and Ealing, though the amount allocated to ingredients is lower, at 54p in Lambeth for example. The amount charged to pupils differs widely too.

In Wandsworth they pay £1.85 for a meal in which the food has cost 70p; in Lambeth they pay £1.35 for a meal worth 54p.

Harrison's managing director, Geoffrey Harrison, said: "There may be small local differences, but we don't make a lot more money out of one borough or another. Our overall menu is light on processed foods and the vast majority is cooked on site." Just over 50% of pupils in Wandsworth take the school meals on offer.