

Research Bulletin No 3:

Adherence and attitudes to nutritional standards and healthy eating policies in schools



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Background

In Northern Ireland, standards for school lunches were introduced in September 2007 followed by nutritional standards for other food and drinks sold in schools in April 2008. These nutritional standards were launched as part of the School food: top marks programme - 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) - to ensure that all food and drinks provided throughout the school setting make a significant contribution to childhood and adolescent nutrition.

To help assess the impact of the school food: top marks programme¹, research exploring attitudes towards food in schools and children's 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 in Research Bulletin No.1.²

A series of information bulletins have been produced outlining the key outcomes of this research and making recommendations for future action. An outline of the seven bulletins is provided with Bulletin 1, School food: top marks, research background and approach.² This third bulletin specifically focuses on schools' adherence and barriers to the implementation of nutritional standards.

Compliance with the nutritional standards

More principals are now fully compliant with both sets of standards, compared with 2008. Compliance with the nutritional standards for school lunches increased from 66% in 2008 to 69% in 2012; while compliance with the nutritional standards for

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.

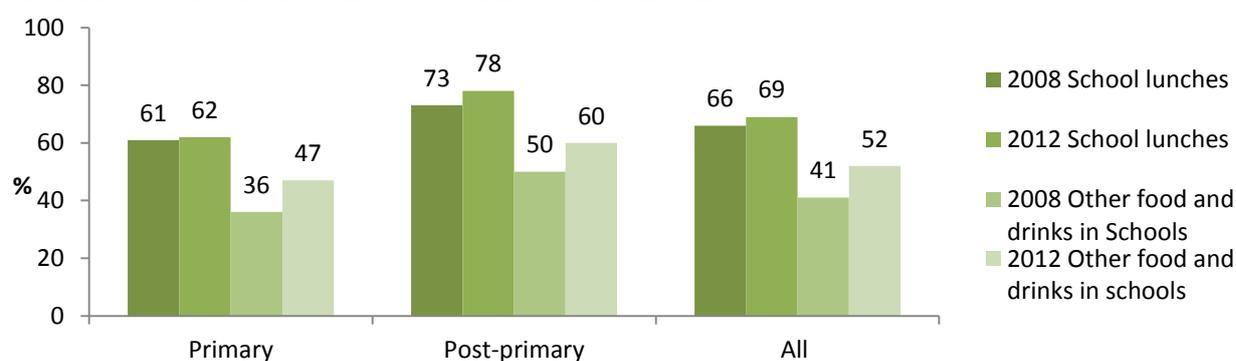
² Gilmore G, Beattie K. Research Bulletin No. 1: School food; top marks, research background and approach. Public Health Agency, Belfast 2016. Available at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

other food and drinks sold in schools has increased from 41% in 2008 to 52% in 2012.³

In both years of the research, principals in post-primary schools were more likely to indicate that their school fully complied with both sets of standards, compared with primary schools: yet post-primary pupils were more likely to say that they consumed non-compliant break time snacks and drinks supplied by their school than primary pupils (see Research Bulletin No. 5).⁴ This disparity may indicate that post-primary principals adopt a different view of compliance than that envisaged by the nutritional standards, and reflect the wider range of eating outlets available within post-primary schools – for example, post-primaries were more likely to have vending machines and a tuck shop (see Bulletin No. 5).⁴

However, in both years of the research, **principals were more likely to indicate they were fully compliant with the nutritional standards for school lunches, than those for other food and drinks sold in schools** (see Figure 3.1). The most recent data collected in 2012 reveals that 69% of principals maintained 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.

Figure 3.1 Proportion of principals indicating their school was fully compliant with the nutritional standards in 2008 and 2012



Barriers to implementation

Research participants were asked if they had experienced any barriers in their attempts to implement the nutritional standards for school lunches, and the

³ It was not possible to determine statistically significant differences as the question format changed slightly between 2008 and 2012.

⁴ 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>

standards for other food and drinks sold in school. Different groups of stakeholders cited a range of barriers, including parental influences; external sources of food; the availability of non-compliant food in school; training issues; monitoring; and perceived attitudes towards the standards. Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

Parental influences

When principals were asked if they had experienced any difficulties in implementing the standards in full, those who had experienced problems most commonly cited issues to do with **a lack of parental support** (55%).

“Pack lunches are a nightmare unless you have a principal that’s willing to stand up and tell parents what they are not allowed to send in. They send what they like...” Focus group; nutritional standards co-ordinators.

Principals and catering staff felt that parents undermined healthy eating efforts in schools by providing children with foods high in sugar, fat or salt that did not comply either with nutritional standards or individual school healthy initiatives (e.g. healthy breaks schemes).⁵ However, only a third of principals communicated with parents once a term and only 18% of principals provided parents of post primary children with information on healthy snacking (see Research Bulletin No 4).⁶

Principals felt that the poor diet of children in the home environment had led to reluctance to try healthier foods served in school, a factor which resulted in increased food waste and, in some cases a drop in numbers attending the canteen. While catering staff⁷ verified that there had been a reduction in the numbers of pupils taking school meals after the initial introduction of nutritional standards

“At the beginning there were so many changes, and the kids were used to getting chips 5 days a week, But now they have got used to it... and they don’t have a problem with it now at all.” Interview; school catering manager, Belfast Education and Library Board (ELB).⁷

⁵ Foods brought into school by pupils are not subject to the nutritional standards. Healthy lunchboxes and healthy breaks are a discretionary element of the Food in Schools policy- “Restrictions on food that children can bring into school is a matter for schools, in consultation with parents, and with the support of education and health partners, to determine how best to support healthy eating in their school”. Available at <https://www.deni.gov.uk/articles/food-schools-policy> Accessed 9 November 2015.

⁶ Beattie K, Gilmore G, Research Bulletin No.4: Marketing the School food: top marks programme and healthy eating messages.

⁷ From 1 April 2015 the 5 Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have amalgamated to become the Education Authority.

(particularly in post-primary schools), it was pointed out that most numbers had now increased following this initial decline. Catering staff felt children had now got used to the healthier options, with certain dishes like curry, pasta, and roast dinners very popular with pupils.

External sources of food

Principals and caterers specifically mentioned the negative impact of children bringing in unhealthier types of foods from external sources. Children's access to fast food outlets or shops selling confectionery items was felt to undermine efforts to implement the nutritional standards. This appeared to be an issue especially in the post-primary sector and posed difficulties for staff. Staff maintained the effective marketing strategies used by the private food industry drew children towards unhealthier food available outside school and discouraged uptake of the more nutritious school meals. Some caterers however, indicated that although this was a difficulty it could be counteracted by other school policies such as keeping pupils on-site at break and lunch times. The importance of onsite policies was particularly highlighted by those working in the post-primary sector, emphasising that this necessitated a whole school approach, rather than a narrow focus simply on school meals.

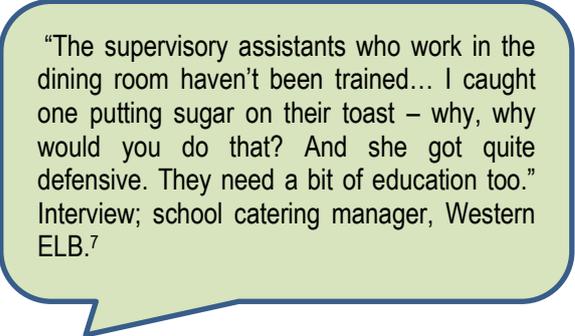
Availability of non-compliant food in school

Implementation of the standards were not only hampered by foods brought into school, but also by the type of foods sold in the school outside of the canteen. All those who took part in the qualitative research believed the standards for other food and drinks served in schools were essential, although unfortunately not always implemented in full. It was argued this had created a "... *good cop, bad cop*..." scenario, where children were able to obtain non-compliant items such as crisps, sweets and chocolate from the school tuck shop or vending machines, while the canteen only stocked healthier items.

"If schools are selling Mars Bars then it is defeating the purpose. Because a child will always go for the Mars Bar over a dinner. They will always go to the vending machine than spend their money on the canteen. If schools sell rubbish the children will buy rubbish." Interview; school catering manager, North Eastern ELB⁷

Staff Training

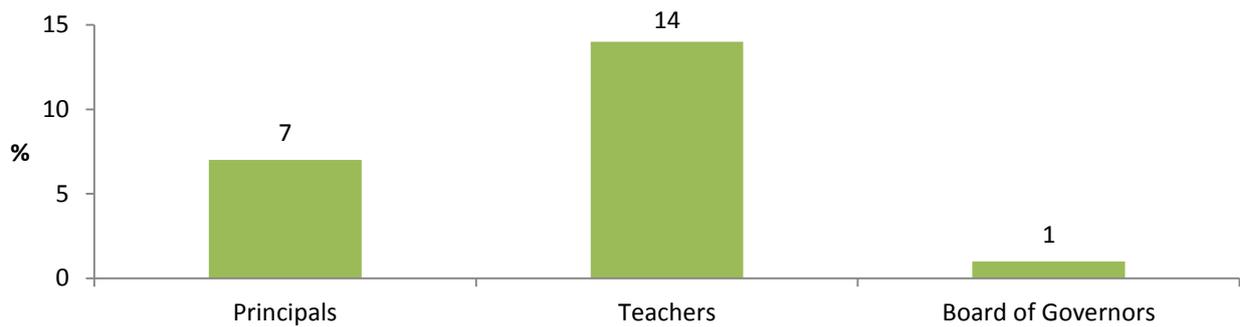
Education and Library Board (ELB)⁷ school catering staff who participated in interviews described the training they had received in order to implement the standards. They cited a two-fold benefit associated with the training – not only did catering staff now have more knowledge of children’s’ nutrition and food preparation, but importantly, the training and on-going support resulted in Education and Library Board⁵ catering staff adopting more positive attitudes towards healthy eating issues in schools, and encouraged ‘buy in’ to the programme. However, **the lack of training dissemination to other groups who worked within the school** was highlighted as a barrier to implementing the nutritional standards, hindering the development of more positive attitudes towards healthy eating. It was pointed out that as dining room or supervisory staff were employed by individual schools rather than the ELB⁷ catering service, they had not received the same training in the nutritional standards. Several of the ELB⁷ catering staff felt that some of those who worked in the dining room failed to encourage healthy eating practices amongst the children, and could benefit from training explaining the purpose of nutritional standards, and why they had been introduced.



“The supervisory assistants who work in the dining room haven’t been trained... I caught one putting sugar on their toast – why, why would you do that? And she got quite defensive. They need a bit of education too.” Interview; school catering manager, Western ELB.⁷

Research with principals, teachers and chairpersons of Boards of Governors also revealed the **majority of school staff had not attended training on the School food: top marks programme** (see Figure 3.2). Since the introduction of the top marks programme, 7% of principals and 14% of teachers who participated in the research had attended a training workshop on the implementation of the standards, while 1% of chairperson’s of Boards of Governors chairpersons had attended training.

Figure 3.2 School-based stakeholders who had attended workshop or training on school food: top marks (2012)



Monitoring the standards

From January 2007 to March 2011 the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) conducted inspections relating to the ‘nature, range and quality of healthy eating policies and practices in schools’. However, the monitoring of standards in schools continues to be the responsibility of the Education Authority and Board of Governors of individual schools.

In 2012, when the second phase of the research was conducted, principals were asked if they monitored the food and drinks sold in their school. Almost 57% of principals said that the food and drinks sold in the canteen were monitored, although less than 1 in 4 (24%) used the school food: top marks check lists. Just over half (54%) of principals monitored what was sold in their school tuck shop, with only 3% using school food: top marks checklists to do so.

“And I think once the monitoring is away now things are creeping back in again...There’s nobody with that individual task of actually monitoring what they are doing” Focus group; area managers and supervisors.

Indeed, a key theme emerging from the qualitative research was a lack of effective monitoring, with no external body responsible for ensuring schools adhered to the nutritional standards. Those who participated in the focus groups reiterated the importance of monitoring in order to maintain the momentum of progress to date. It may be speculated that this lack of monitoring impacts on the adherence to standards and therefore the dietary intake of children in school (see Bulletin No. 5).⁸

⁸ This is discussed in further detail in 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.publichealth.hscni.net>

Attitudes to nutritional standards

Attitudes towards the nutritional standards have improved since their introduction in 2008. When the standards for school lunches were introduced, catering staff initially felt that there was a great deal of extra work involved, particularly in preparing all the vegetables and fruit required for the new recipes. Others pointed out that although there was more work involved in food preparation, there had been a corresponding

“I’ve been in the service 24 years and since nutritional standards have come in I can genuinely say it has been the best food we have ever had. And I would stand over that and would say I am happier working now and I would hate to see it going back... if it went back to fried food all the time, chips and fizzy drinks... (General agreement within group)”
Focus group; nutritional standards co-ordinators

decline in other time intensive activities as a result of the standards, such as the production of high-calorie pies and cakes.

Those who participated in interviews and focus groups discussed how the

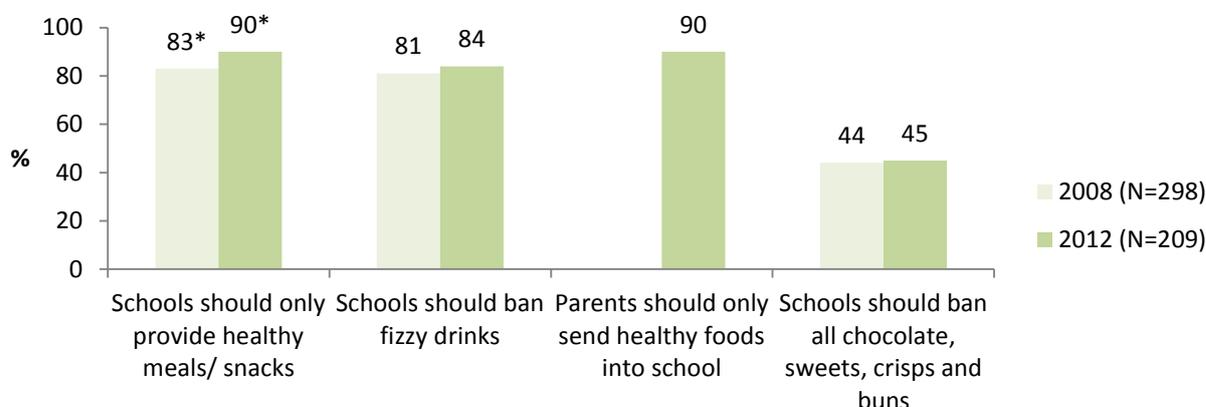
standards, coupled with the extensive investment and training of catering staff, had not only improved staff skills and knowledge but had also changed the ethos of the catering environment in schools. ELB⁷ catering staff spontaneously described how attitudes towards food and food quality had changed, and described how this impacted on their everyday working practices, resulting in a much improved service. Respondents discussed at length how the new ways of working had given them a satisfaction and pride in the food they served.

Attitudes to healthy eating within the school setting

Key stakeholders (i.e. principals, teachers, school governors and parents) maintain they recognise the importance of healthy eating, and the important role that schools play in contributing to their pupils’ nutrition. Indeed, **principals’ attitudes towards some key aspects of the nutritional standards appeared to have improved over the duration of the research.** For example, a larger proportion of principals in 2012 felt schools should only provide pupils with healthy meals than in the first wave of the research (90% compared to 83% in 2008; $p < .05$). There was also a small increase in numbers of principals who felt there should be a ban on sugary carbonated drinks,

(from 81% in 2008 to 84% in 2012, see Figure 3.3), although this was not statistically significant.⁹

Figure 3.3 Principals' attitudes towards healthy eating issues in 2008 and 2012¹⁰



In general, **attitudes varied towards different aspects of healthy eating in schools**. Most of the adult stakeholders participating in the research were of the opinion that schools should only provide healthy meals and snacks for pupils (90% of principals, 82% of teachers, 84% of the chairpersons of school Boards of Governors, and 80% of parents – see Figure 3.4). Similarly, there was a general consensus that there should be no fizzy drinks in school (84% of principals, 89% of teachers, 72% of the chairpersons of Boards of Governors, and 77% of parents). However, when asked about a similar ban on crisps, chocolate and confectionery items, healthy eating attitudes became more ambiguous. **Fewer than half (45%) of principals felt that schools should have an outright ban on chocolate, sweets and crisps and buns**, as did 39% of teachers, 31% of school governors and 43% of parents. However, there was general agreement that parents should only send healthy foods into school, with 90% of principals agreeing with this statement (results not shown).

Although there were no statistically significant differences between principals who were and were not in favour of the nutritional standards for school lunches, and the likelihood that they had implemented these, this was not the case with nutritional

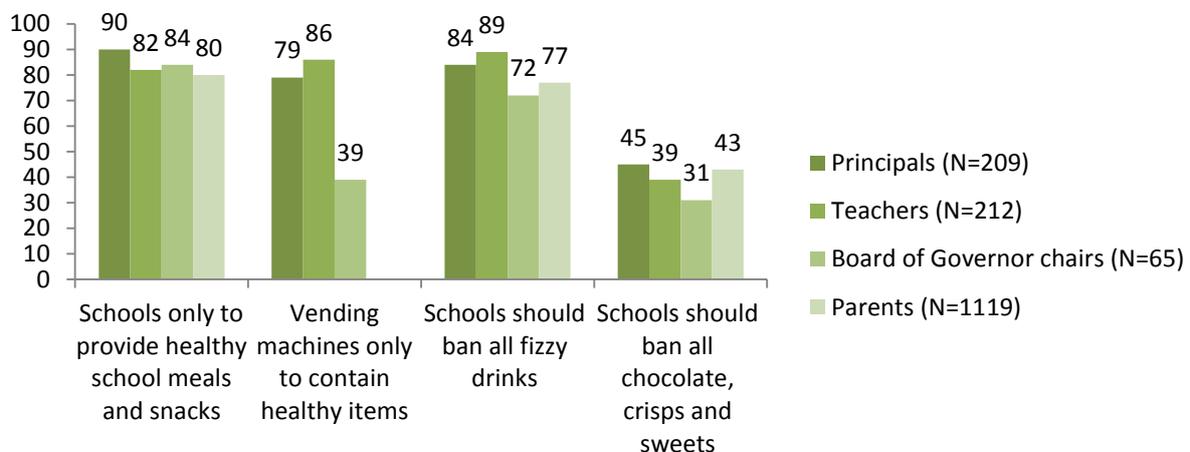
⁹ The Nutritional Standards do not permit sugary carbonated drinks to be provided in a school. It is a matter for schools if pupils are permitted to bring sugary carbonated drinks into school.

¹⁰ Principals' were not asked to respond to the statement 'Parents should only send healthy foods into school' in the 2008 research. *** 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).

standards for other food and drinks sold in schools. **Principals who were in favour of the standards for other food and drinks sold in schools were more than twice as likely than those who were not in favour to have implemented this policy** fully in their schools (55% and 24% respectively; $p < .05$, not shown in graph).

Different groups of stakeholders varied in their attitudes towards healthy eating issues in schools (although it was not possible to calculate statistically significant differences) (see Figure 3.4). In general, **chairpersons of Boards of Governors tended to show less positive attitudes towards healthy eating in schools**. For example, although the majority of other school staff agreed with the statement ‘vending machines should only contain healthy items’ (79% of principals and 86% of teachers), fewer than two in five (39%) of the chairpersons of Boards of Governors said the same. Similarly, although 89% of teachers and 84% of principals maintained that fizzy drinks should be banned from schools, again chairpersons of Boards of Governors were less likely to feel there should be a veto on these, with 72% maintaining fizzy drinks should be banned from school. Chairpersons of Boards of Governors were also the least likely of all the adult stakeholder groups to say schools should ban chocolate, crisps and sweets – approximately three in ten (31%) of those who responded to the survey held this view, compared to 45% of principals, 43% of parents and 39% of teachers.

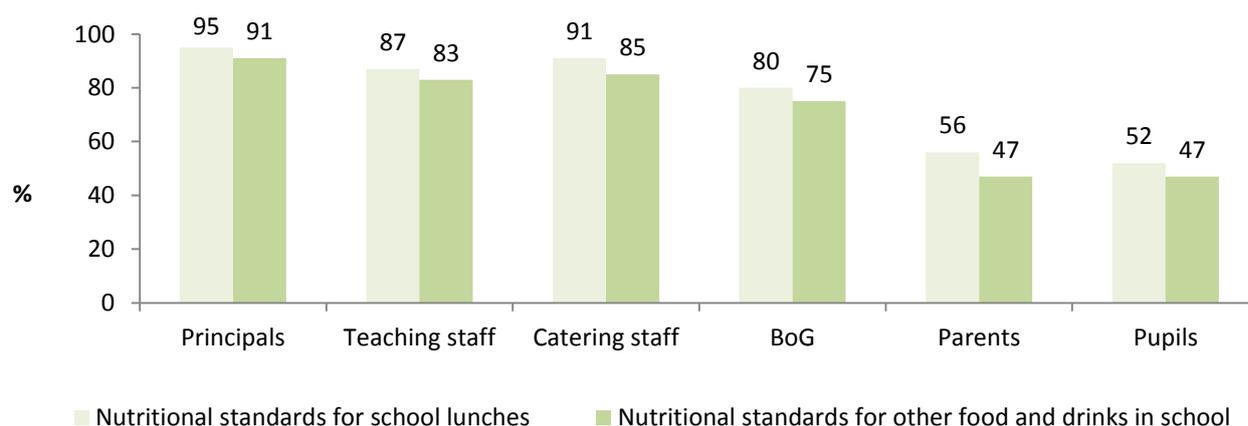
Figure 3.4 Differences in stakeholders' attitudes towards healthy eating issues in schools (2012)



Perceptions of support

Principals were also asked about how supportive they thought other key stakeholders were of the nutritional standards. **Principals believed that there was greater support from key stakeholders for the nutritional standards for school lunches rather than for the standards for other food and drinks sold in schools** (see Figure 3.5). For example, principals were more likely to (wrongly) think that catering staff were more in favour of the nutritional standards for school lunches than the standards for other food and drinks sold in schools (91% and 85% respectively) – yet catering staff unilaterally cited the nutritional standards for other food and drinks in school as key to the success of standards for school meals and healthy eating in school. (See Research Bulletin No. 5).¹¹

Figure 3.5 Perceived stakeholders' support for standards in 2012 (as reported by principals, N=209)



On the whole, **principals (mistakenly) felt that parents and pupils were less supportive of the standards than other stakeholders, such as teaching staff.** However, there was a general lack of awareness of the nutritional standards among parents - only one in three (33%) had heard of the nutritional standards for school lunches, and 27% knew about nutritional standards for other food and drinks sold in schools (not shown in diagram). Parents with children in primary schools were more likely to be aware of the nutritional standards for school lunches than those with post-primary children (42% and 29% respectively).

¹¹ This is discussed in further detail in 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.publichealth.hscni.net>

Nevertheless, contrary to principals' beliefs, a larger proportion of parents actually displayed higher levels of agreement with certain healthy eating statements than some school staff. For example, a larger proportion of parents agreed that schools should ban chocolate, crisps and sweets than did teachers and chairpersons of Board of Governors (43%, 39% and 31% respectively)¹². Although, principals believed that fewer than half of parents and pupils were in favour of the standards for food and drinks sold in schools (47% respectively) (see Figure 3.5); 94% of parents themselves maintained they supported healthy eating rules in school (see Figure 3.6).

Principals were more likely to have implemented the standards for other food and drinks sold in school if they thought parents were supportive of the policy. More than two out of three (67%) principals who felt they had the support of parents adhered to the standards, in comparison with 39% of principals who thought parents at their school did not back the standards for other food and drinks sold in schools ($p < .001$; not illustrated).

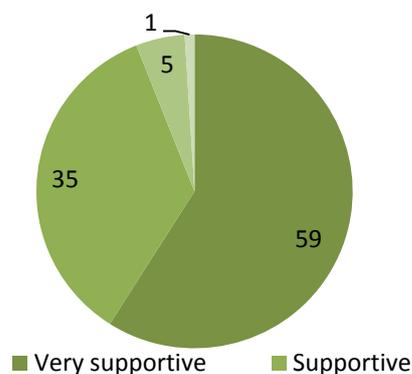
In a similar vein, **principals who felt their Board of Governors backed the standards for other food and drinks were more than three times more likely to have implemented these in their schools than those who felt they did not have school governors support** ($p < .001$). More than six in ten principals (62%) who felt their Boards of Governors approved of these standards have implemented them in full, compared to 21% of those who felt their school governors did not approve of the standards (not shown in diagram). This suggests particular efforts should be made to promote 'buy in' to the top marks programme amongst Board of Governors, and improve their understanding of the importance of good nutrition in childhood and the role schools can play in this.

Parents recruited from primary schools were more likely to know that there were general restrictions on certain foods that operated within their child's school: over three quarters of parents of primary children (78%) were aware of school rules about certain foods compared to just under half (48%) of parents of post-primary children (not illustrated). Nevertheless, parental attitudes towards rules about healthy eating were positive (see Figure 3.6). The majority of parents said they were supportive of

¹² It was not possible to conduct tests of significance

healthy eating rules in their child’s school, with 59% maintaining they were ‘very supportive’ and 35% ‘supportive’ of school food regulations.

Figure 3.6 Parental support for healthy eating rules in schools (reported by parents themselves) (N=1103)



Although parents (ostensibly) appeared to be positive towards the issue of healthy eating in schools, when probed in more detail, attitudes were not as clear cut. For example, akin to principals, most parents had a hard-line attitude towards fizzy drinks, with 78% maintaining these should be banned in schools; yet simultaneously adopting a relatively flexible approach to children eating chocolate bars, sweets and crisps in school. Less than half (43%) of parents agreed or

strongly agreed that schools should ban confectionery and crisps (see Table 3.1).

In terms of responsibility for educating children about nutrition, the majority of parents (63%) strongly agreed that parents themselves needed to educate their children on the benefits of eating healthily, whereas only 16% strongly agreed that it was the responsibility of the school to inform children about healthy eating.

Table 3.1 Parental attitudes towards different healthy eating issues (2012)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
It is the schools’ responsibility to inform children about healthy eating (N=1106)	16%	45%	20%	17%	2%
Schools should only provide children with healthy meals and snacks (N=1112)	31%	49%	10%	10%	4%
Schools should ban all chocolate bars/biscuits/sweets/crisps (N=1111)	19%	24%	21%	34%	3%
Schools should ban all fizzy drinks (N=1112)	41%	37%	9%	12%	2%
Children should be allowed to eat whatever they want at school (N=1109)	3%	10%	15%	46%	27%
Parents need to educate their children on the benefits of healthy eating (N=1114)	63%	35%	1%	1%	1%
Parents need to encourage healthy eating by only sending healthy food into school (N=1113)	41%	43%	11%	5%	-
I don’t have to worry about my children eating healthy food at home now as they eat plenty of healthy food in school (N=1108)	2%	5%	14%	47%	32%

Conclusion

Given levels of concern over childhood nutrition and obesity rates, and the recognition that knowledge, attitudes and skill sets of a variety of key groups and individuals including parents, children themselves and school employees, are important in influencing children's nutrition choices¹³, stakeholders' attitudes towards healthy eating in schools are key to the future sustainability of the food in schools policy.

- Most of those who participated in the research were supportive of the introduction of nutritional standards for school lunches, and the nutritional standards for other food and drinks sold in schools, with 69% of principals fully compliant with the nutritional standards for school lunches.
- School catering staff particularly felt the introduction of regulations regarding school lunches led to improvements in the school meals service, and described the positive impact on everyday working practice in school kitchens. Respondents claimed the food now served to children was of a higher nutritional standard. Moreover, it was felt that the introduction of standards had helped raise awareness of the importance of healthy eating in schools.
- Although compliance has increased over the duration of the research, It is noteworthy that just slightly over half (52%) of all principals are fully compliant with the nutritional standards for other food and drinks sold in schools.
- The importance of a 'whole school approach' was emphasised as key to the success of healthy eating in schools. All those who took part in the focus groups and interviews described the positive effect a whole school approach – particularly limitations on the types of foods and drinks sold in tuck shops and vending machines - could have on the successful implementation of the nutritional standards and on the demand for school meals and food sold in the canteen. As such, it is important that the implementation of nutritional standards for other food and drinks sold in school is given the same weight as that for school lunches. It is suggested that further research should explore barriers to implementation of these nutritional standards. The Food in Schools Forum should work alongside schools

¹³ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Fit futures. Focus on food, activity and young people. Belfast: DHSSPS, 2006. Available at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/ifh-fitfutures.pdf. Accessed 10 November 2015.

to support the full implementation of the standards for other food and drinks sold in schools.

- It is suggested that the nutritional standards for other food and drinks sold in schools is given the same legislative mandate as the standards for school lunches.¹⁴ It is important to ensure that the greatest proportion of food consumed on school premises, regardless of whether this is sold by the school or brought in by pupils, is healthy. Subsequently, the Food in Schools Forum should consider working closely with schools providing them with support to develop and implement regional school policies, such as healthy break schemes, or limits to high fat and high sugar items being consumed on school premises, in order to ensure consistent healthy eating messages are delivered to all pupils. As part of this work, the school forum should help schools work with parents in order to implement the new policy.
- Another fundamental issue impacting on the success of implementation of the standards were packed lunches and other food children brought into school. As food purchased outside school or brought in from home currently fall outside the remit of the nutritional standards, unless schools themselves operate strict lunch box policies, children's packed lunches often comprise of foods of low nutritional value – an issue discussed at length in research Bulletin No. 5.¹⁵ Moreover, if children can bring in unhealthier food items (such as sweets, crisps and chocolates) for lunch, they were less likely to choose healthier school meals which adhered to the nutritional standards, and consequently, the concerted efforts that had been made in implementing the standards are undermined.
- It is important that all stakeholders understand the rationale behind the introduction of the nutritional standards, and the importance of good nutrition on children's development. All catering staff had received training on the nutritional standards, although other supervisory staff operating within school canteens had

¹⁴ Due to a gap in existing legislation Nutritional Standards for Other Food and Drinks in Schools are not mandatory at present in the controlled and maintained sectors where food is provided by the school (rather than an Education and Library Board) through tuck shops, vending machines etc. The Department of Education will take forward an amendment to existing legislation to address this gap and ensure that the Nutritional Standards for **Other** Food and Drinks in Schools apply equally to all food provided by grant-aided schools in the school setting. In the interim it is recommended that all grant-aided schools should seek to adhere to the Nutritional Standards for Other Food and Drinks in Schools in line with the "whole school approach" advocated through this policy. Department of Education, and Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. 2013. Healthy foods for healthy outcomes: A Food in Schools Policy. Available at <https://www.deni.gov.uk/articles/food-schools-policy> Accessed 9 November 2015.

¹⁵ 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.publichealth.hscni.net/>

not. Qualitative findings suggest those who had not received training in the standards lacked an awareness of key issues associated with children's healthy eating. Moreover, only 7% of school principals and just 1% of the chairpersons of Board of Governors had attended training on issues surrounding school food and the nutritional standards. Although no statistical tests of significance could be compiled, findings suggest chairpersons from schools' Board of Governors are least likely to hold positive attitudes towards healthy eating in schools. It is suggested that staff at all levels with a remit for children's food in schools should attend a workshop or similar training on nutritional standards. This should provide practical motivating information relating to nutrition in schools and encourage 'buy in' for the school food: top marks programme.

- The most recent obesity prevention framework, 'A Fitter Future for All', launched in 2012 has re-iterated the importance of monitoring and implementing the Food in Schools Policy, alongside other initiatives to increase the uptake of school meals, and healthy breaks schemes in schools.¹⁶ In order to maintain and improve adherence to the nutritional standards, there needs to be effective monitoring of food and drinks products sold within schools. Schools should be encouraged to check food and drinks sold both within their canteen and in tuck shops or vending machines using the existing school food: top marks checklist. Moreover, unannounced inspections conducted by an independent body or organisation should also be implemented, examining food and drinks sold within the school, with accompanying sanctions for schools who contravene the nutritional standards.¹⁷

¹⁶ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. A Fitter Future For All: Framework for addressing overweight and obesity in Northern Ireland 2012 – 2022. Belfast: DHSSPS, 2006. Available at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/framework-preventing-addressing-overweight-obesity-ni-2012-2022.pdf. Accessed 11 November 2015.

¹⁷ From January 2007 to March 2011 the Education and Training Inspectorate conducted inspections relating to the 'nature, range and quality of healthy eating policies and practices in schools. However, the monitoring of standards in schools continues to be the responsibility of the Education Authority and Board of Governors of individual schools.