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A guide for **school catering staff** on new nutritional standards for school meals in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Whatever our age, the food we eat affects our health. Encouraging healthy eating habits among children and young people contributes to healthy growth and development in the short term and is an investment in their health for the future.

New Nutritional Standards for School Meals

The Department of Education, in association with the Education and Library Boards, other school authorities, the Food Standards Agency and the Health Promotion Agency, is introducing new nutritional standards for school meals.

The Standards outline the requirements that school caterers must follow when preparing school lunches. The Standards note that some foods do not make significant contributions to overall nutrition and so should be limited.

They include limiting fried potato products to twice a week, offering at least one type of vegetable every day and serving more fruit and fruit based desserts. The Standards also provide advice on healthier cooking methods, particularly in relation to reducing fat and salt.

The document *Catering for Healthier Lifestyles* outlines full details of the Standards and a copy should be available in your kitchen. Further copies can be obtained by contacting us at the number on the back of this leaflet or downloaded from our website. We are presently reviewing this document in light of developments in Great Britain.

As part of the Initiative the Department is proposing to ban foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar and will also be including other areas of food provision in schools such as tuck shops and vending machines. The Department is consulting on the timetable for introducing these particular changes.

Why do we need Nutritional Standards?

This initiative comes at a time of increasing concern about child obesity and a greater awareness of the need for healthy eating. Research in Northern Ireland shows that one in five boys and one in four girls is either overweight or obese. Children who are overweight or obese face greater risks of developing serious illness later in life, such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer. Our aim is to encourage and enable children and young people to make healthy choices.

When and how will the Standards be introduced?

The nutritional standards have already been introduced to over 200 schools with a similar number joining the programme in January 2006. Your school is one of those that will be involved at this stage.

Will healthier meals cost more?

The Government is providing the Boards and other school authorities with additional resources to introduce the standards and improve the nutritional value of school meals. While the price of a meal will have to go up from time to time to cover increases in wages and overheads nutritionally balanced school meals continue to represent very good value for money.

What are the benefits of healthier eating in school?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet contributes to:

- Healthy growth and development
- Improved concentration
- More energy for exercise
- Better behaviour

What can you do to help?

School catering staff have a crucial role to play in implementing the nutritional standards. There are a number of ways to encourage children and young people to select the healthier choices you have on offer. Some suggestions are listed below:

- The way in which food is presented is very important in influencing decisions:
 - make sure healthy options are always on display and place them at the beginning of the servery, so pupils see them first;
 - make use of simple garnishes, for example parsley, lemon slices, as attractive presentation will increase the uptake of foods such as vegetables, fruit etc.
- Actively encourage children and young people to have a healthy diet. Offering a free sample of healthier choices or new dishes you are introducing to the menu will encourage children to try them.
- Work with other staff, for example, teachers. You may be able to offer healthy choices to reinforce healthy eating messages that have been taught in the classroom.
- Introduce theme days, for example, linked to the curriculum or festivals, competitions and prizes.
- Take part in national or local promotions such as the Schools Salon Culinaire.
- Display healthy options attractively and prominently on the menu.