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Some useful web sites for more information:

www.deni.gov.uk www.eatwell.gov.uk www.investingforhealthni.gov.uk

Parents of pupils at voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated schools should contact their school in the first instance



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

October 2006

Introduction

Whatever our age, the food we eat affects our health. Encouraging healthy eating habits in children contributes to their healthy growth and development in the short term and is an investment in their health for the future. As you are aware, school meals have received a lot of attention and it is understandable that parents want to know more about what they can expect. This information leaflet is designed to give you a better understanding of what your child should be eating and drinking at school.

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. These outline the requirements that school caterers must follow when providing school lunches. The Standards note that some foods do not make significant contributions to overall nutrition and so should be limited. For example, fried potato products will be limited to twice a week, while we will offer at least one type of vegetable every day and serve more fruit and fruit based desserts. The Standards also provide advice on healthier cooking methods, particularly in relation to reducing fat and salt. Information on where to find the Standards, and a range of other related services, are given at the end of this leaflet.

As well as school meals the Initiative will also be including other areas of food provision in schools such as tuck shops and vending machines. The Department is presently considering the timetable for introducing these particular changes.

Why do we need Nutritional Standards?

We know that many children's diets are unbalanced; they contain too much fat, salt and sugar, too little starchy carbohydrate e.g. bread and

pasta, and too few fruit and vegetables. There is also 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 and to continue to do so into their adult lives.

When and how will the Standards be introduced?

We've already begun! Over 900 schools are now operating to the Standards with the remainder joining the programme during this autumn term. Your child's 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 funds 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 such as lighting and heating nutritionally balanced school meals continue to represent very good value for money.

How can parents help?

Your school should be able to inform you about what's on the menu each day, how healthier options are being promoted and how lunchtimes are managed. You can help by encouraging your child to choose the healthier options when they go to the school dining room, and by encouraging them to eat healthier options at home. If you get a daily menu from the school, it will be helpful if you discuss it with your child and help them to decide on what they should choose.

Even if your child takes a packed lunch instead of a school lunch we would ask you to think about what they eat when they are at school.

Feel free to discuss any aspect of your school's meals with the Principal and Catering Supervisor.

Remember,
we cannot succeed without your help. Remember too that if young people see you enjoying the foods that are good for them, they are more likely to try them and enjoy them as well.