

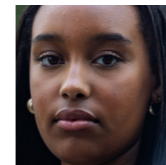
**BIG FOOD
IN SCHOOLS**

**QUICK
CHEAP *and*
PROFITABLE**

Who is benefitting from the
rise in grab-and-go canteen
culture at the expense of
child health?



FOREWORD



By the time the lunch bell rings, the grab-and-go section is always the busiest place in school. Students run past the main meal to avoid long queues and wasted free time. The shelves are filled with packaged sandwiches, pizza slices, paninis and fizzy drinks, the smell of pastry and cheese dampening the air. It looks tempting at first, but week after week, becomes beige, bland and boring. When I spoke to peers from other schools, we shared how repetitive the options feel and how little they reflect the diversity of our school communities. There are healthier options, like fruit pots or yoghurt, but these often cost more and are hidden at the back, overshadowed by the cookies and cakes.

Grab-and-go is popular because it's quick. But convenience doesn't always leave us feeling ready to learn. It can be difficult to focus when your lunch hasn't truly fueled you.

If the Government follows through on its commitment to improve school food, it would send a powerful message to students: that our health, budgets and voices matter. We don't "only want junk." We want affordable food that tastes good, reflects our cultures and dietary needs and helps us concentrate and succeed. If students were genuinely listened to, the school canteen could become somewhere that supports our wellbeing, instead of somewhere we grab whatever is quickest and cheapest.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Grab-and-go food and soft drinks now make up a substantial and routine part of the food on offer at secondary schools in England. Despite these items frequently falling short of the School Food Standards (SFS), they have become embedded, reflecting a complex interplay of school food system pressures. This research examines how commercial incentives are actively shaping the secondary school food marketplace around profit-making grab-and-go, how current provision affects young people, and what needs to change for it to better support students' health and wellbeing.

The research combined qualitative evidence from stakeholder interviews and student focus groups with quantitative evidence from a menu analysis and survey of secondary school students across England. Despite young people being most affected by what is on offer, their voice is often missing from debates about school food – this research should be used to put them in the spotlight. The research comes at a pivotal policy moment, with an update to the SFS and the expansion of free school meals (FSM) underway, alongside ongoing concerns about weak SFS monitoring and non-compliance.

Grab-and-go is not inherently problematic and can play a positive role in busy school days. However, this research suggests that current provision prioritises convenience and profitability over nutrition. We found that school meals in secondary school are shaped by the following:

01

Dominance of unhealthy grab-and-go: Its popularity and affordability is edging out main meals which are more expensive and nutritionally balanced. This disproportionately impacts students on FSM.

- a. The grab-and-go offer in secondary schools in England is dominated by nutrient-poor, predominantly carbohydrate-based items, including pizza, rolls, pastries and chips, which are cheaper than main meals.
- b. A third (32%) of students surveyed buy grab-and-go at morning break at least 3-4 times a week. It's even more popular at lunch, with 60% of students surveyed purchasing at least once a week and 40% at least 3-4 times per week.
- c. This dominance disproportionately impacts students on FSM – 38% of survey respondents on FSM reported buying grab-and-go at breaktime at least 3-4 times a week, compared to 30% of students not on FSM. This gap widened at lunchtime: 56% of students on FSM bought grab-and-go at least 3-4 times weekly, compared to 36% of students not on FSM.

02

Commercial incentives: This increasing reliance on grab-and-go is partially because stakeholders throughout the supply chain are shaping a secondary school food marketplace that relies on unhealthy grab-and-go to drive profit.

- a. Margin pressures push caterers to prioritise grab-and-go and soft drink items.
- b. Manufacturers and suppliers view secondary school food as a growing commercial market, which is reflected in the increase in products designed specifically for secondary schools.
- c. Commercial influence is reinforced through branding, promotional 'best seller' lists and sponsorship at events like the LACA conference, signalling what is desirable and acceptable for school provision.

03

Lack of monitoring & enforcement: Unclear responsibility for monitoring and enforcing the SFS means provision beyond lunch is rarely checked, allowing non-compliant, high-margin grab-and-go products to dominate.

- a. A fragmented procurement system leads to poor enforcement and allows various stakeholders to shift blame for non-compliance.
- b. This allows for non-compliant products to slip through the cracks, frequently listed alongside school-compliant products in secondary school product brochures, creating confusion about which items meet the standards.

Bite Back young people are asking the Government to protect the health of a generation



04

Missing youth voice: Students want to see healthier options that are affordable, appealing and keep them fueled throughout the school day, but in the current state of play, their voices are not shaping what's on offer.

- a. Only one in three survey respondents (33%) felt grab-and-go leaves them with enough energy to concentrate in lessons, and multiple focus group participants reported feeling hunger, fatigue and loss of focus later in the day.
- b. Roughly a quarter of survey respondents (24%) stated grab-and-go does not meet their dietary, cultural or religious needs, with higher dissatisfaction amongst students from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- c. Although secondary school food is often framed as offering students more food autonomy, students told us they do not experience grab-and-go as a genuine choice; they rely on it because alternative options are limited or unappealing.
- d. When we asked the students what they wanted to see change, they were clear: they want healthier, affordable and culturally diverse food, and to be actively involved in decisions about what they eat, with feedback genuinely acted on.

RECOMMENDATIONS

'Student demand' can no longer be used as an excuse for the prevailing grab-and-go culture. Rather, it can and should be harnessed to support healthier, more nutritious options. The findings from this project have clear implications for policy and practice. As a priority, the Government should:

1

Update the School Food Standards to enable all schools to provide food and drink that reflect the latest nutrition and sustainability standards.

2

Introduce a school food accountability framework to enable providers to meet the School Food Standards by providing clear guidelines, sufficient support and accountability measures.

Alongside this, we want to support the Government in shaping a school food system that:

- ➔ Embeds student voice in decisions about school food and dining culture
- ➔ Uses pricing structures to incentivise healthy choices, not undermine them
- ➔ Improves data collection and transparency on grab-and-go and drinks uptake
- ➔ Reduces commercial incentives that favour high-margin, low-quality grab-and-go
- ➔ Ensures compliance with the school food standards is expanded to sixth form colleges
- ➔ Invests in dining infrastructure and lunchtime design to reduce structural reliance on grab-and-go
- ➔ Ensures adequate funding for free school meals

INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, Bite Back launched its Spill the Beans campaign which put the experiences of students in the spotlight – they painted a worrying picture of secondary school food provision in England.¹ Unfortunately, not much has changed since then. However, young people are currently facing a once in a generation opportunity to fix things, with the Government’s commitment to review the School Food Standards ahead of the expansion of Free School Meals to all children in families receiving Universal Credit in September 2026. Through our Bite Back in Schools network, which operates across 200 schools with more than 12,000 young activists, we were able to uncover what’s really going on in the canteen and what we need to do about it.

Grab-and-go and soft drinks now form a substantial and routine part of secondary school food. In practice, grab-and-go includes quick, often pre-prepared and handheld options that tend to be high in fat, salt and sugar. Young people report the wide availability of “beige and bland” foods, including pizza slices, paninis, sausage rolls and chips.

The literature indicates there are many interacting system factors that drive their prevalence, including operational pressures on catering teams, weak monitoring of the SFS, ongoing financial constraints and the challenge of meeting student demand whilst remaining financially viable.² However, there is also worrying evidence of commercial incentives: grab-and-go food and drinks are attractive to suppliers and caterers because they deliver higher profit margins and make up a large share of total sales.³ They are therefore relied on as revenue-generating items, used to balance the books. Healthy foods tend to be expensive to produce but high-calorie, nutrient-poor snacks, often sold two or three times across a school day, are cheaper and sell well.⁴

As it stands, secondary schools are not adhering to the SFS – a recent assessment of 36 secondary schools found compliance to the SFS, assessed across the school day, averaged at only 43%, with some schools as low as 25%. None were found to be fully SFS-compliant. Compliance was low particularly at breakfast and breaktimes, with the greatest challenges relating to restrictions on food and drink high in fat, salt and sugar. Only 6% of schools met the standard banning confectionery, chocolate and chocolate-coated products, 17% complied with the restriction on cakes and biscuits outside lunchtime and just 11% met the limit on deep-fried, batter-coated or breadcrumb-coated foods. Evidence suggests that students buying food at morning break are eating a snack equivalent to 15% of their daily energy intake.⁵ Compliance with the drinks standards was also poor, with only 14% of schools meeting this requirement.⁶ Many school leaders and governors do not view monitoring food standards as part of their remit and the lack of enforcement mechanism creates little regulatory incentive for schools and caterers to prioritise compliance.⁷

The rise of grab-and-go and soft drinks in secondary schools should be understood within the context of decades of policy decisions, structural pressures and market trends that have reshaped school food from a public service into a market-driven, highly pressured system. Most school canteens now operate in a market-based model. Catering services are run as businesses, with a strong pressure to make money, even if at the expense of health.⁸ Inflationary increases in food prices, energy bills and labour costs have all contributed to the squeezing of catering services; since March 2020, the average cost of a school meal has risen by 26.5%.⁹ These costs, combined with FSM funding falling behind inflation, have made it challenging for caterers to produce appealing, financially viable menus that comply with the SFS.¹⁰ These changes have occurred alongside a wider expansion of the commercial food environment, creating gaps for large food and drink companies to extend their presence into school food provision.

In secondary schools, students are thought to have greater autonomy over what they buy to eat or drink,¹¹ yet the reality is more complex. A 2020 study by Page and Hart demonstrates how secondary school food is often framed as promoting choice or freedom for pupils, yet in practice pupils feel steered towards unhealthy options due to a lack of appealing and affordable alternatives:

“.....
 Many schools are positioning pupils with (perceived) freedom to eat healthily and to self-regulate, but providing them with a limited market from which to make food selections, many of which are hostile to healthy eating recommendations. This cocktail of freely available unhealthy food options marketed towards a captive and vulnerable population is a cause for concern.”¹²

METHODOLOGY

We employed a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative evidence from stakeholder interviews and student focus groups with quantitative pricing analysis and survey data.

Stakeholder interviews

We conducted eight semi-structured interviews with 11 stakeholders, representing a diverse range of expertise within the secondary school food system: one academic, five school representatives (from two schools), one caterer, two procurement professionals and two food suppliers.

Stakeholders were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across key segments of the secondary school food system. An initial longlist was developed by the research team, based on established knowledge of the sector and professional networks. From this longlist, participants were selected to ensure coverage across academia, catering, procurement and supply. Given the limited scale of the study, the stakeholders were selected to capture perspectives from different points in the school food system. The school representatives were recruited via Bite Back's 'Bite Back in Schools' programme. We asked Bite Back to suggest schools that differed in key characteristics, including catering model (private provider and in-house) and school size, and which had high rates of FSM registration and a diverse cultural and ethnic mix. This approach was intended to reflect a range of contexts and viewpoints within the small sample. The interviews explored factors driving grab-and-go and soft drink provision, nutritional quality, compliance with School Food Standards (SFS) and examples of good practice. As manufacturers were not represented in our sample, we may not have fully captured the supply-side perspective. Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research, findings are intended to illustrate system dynamics and stakeholder perspectives rather than to be generalisable across all secondary schools. Using GDPR-compliant software, we transcribed and analysed interviews for overarching themes.

Student focus groups

We conducted three focus groups with 24 students spanning Year 7 to university level. We explored what motivates them to buy grab-and-go and soft drinks, how they feel about these options and how provision could be improved.

Menu pricing analysis

We conducted a light-touch pricing analysis of example menus taken from the websites of 16 state secondary schools in England. Schools were selected to reflect a mix of governance structures, catering providers and geographic regions, so that no single model or regional pattern dominated the sample. Given the modest scale of the study, the sample was intended to capture a range of contexts rather than to be representative of all secondary schools in England.

No assessment of nutritional quality or student purchasing behaviour was undertaken. Menu items were coded into six categories - main meal, grab-and-go, snacks, drinks, water and other - based on how they were described on school websites. As terminology varied between schools, some items (for example, chips) appeared in more than one category, which limited direct comparability. This reflects the wider challenge of defining and reviewing grab-and-go provision in practice, where distinctions between snacks, sides and meals are often blurred. Unless otherwise stated, items were assumed to be available throughout the school day.

Student survey

We surveyed more than 2,000 students across roughly 50 schools participating in Bite Back in Schools to explore purchasing, motivations and desired changes. All responses from year groups 7 to 11 were included, resulting in a sample of 1,899 students.

As with all self-reported data, survey responses may be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects. However, the consistency between survey findings and the detailed accounts from focus groups strengthens confidence in the patterns we observed. The demographic breakdown of survey respondents shows that students eligible for FSM were under-represented relative to national figures, whilst students from ethnic minority backgrounds were over-represented, limiting the extent to which findings can be generalised.

Finally, we drew on anonymised transcript data from two studies. The FUEL study (focused on evaluating school food standards implementation and impact on dietary intake) provided interview transcripts from secondary school students, staff, governors and catering teams.¹³ The GENIUS project (focused on examining food environment changes in secondary schools) contributed interviews with caterers.¹⁴ These data helped contextualise findings and triangulate emerging themes.

FINDINGS

Cheap and unhealthy grab-and-go

Interviews, survey responses and our own light-touch menu analysis paint a clear (and unappetising picture) of the grab-and-go options on offer at secondary schools. The students we spoke to described the quality of grab-and-go as mixed at best, with few making positive comments. Grab-and-go could be acceptable when fresh but was often dry, soggy or stale, especially when left out for long periods. Hot items, such as sausage rolls, pizza and chips, were described as greasy, bland or reheated, and students reported that the food was “caked in oil” or like “a concrete slab”. Students also highlighted the lack of variety, referring to the predictability of the same grab-and-go items being sold day after day.

“They’ve been selling sausage rolls like two weeks straight, it’s getting a bit boring. Whenever I go into the cafe and I want to get a snack at break, it’s always sausage rolls.” — Student

We conducted a light-touch pricing analysis of food and drink items across a sample of 16 secondary school menus in England. This analysis suggests certain types of items compete with, or undercut, the main meal. Our analysis revealed a clear price hierarchy in which grab-and-go items are consistently cheaper than main meals, with a median price of £1.76 – well below that of the main meal at £2.14. Comparing the cheapest grab-and-go and main meal items also showed a consistent pattern. The lowest priced grab-and-go item was always cheaper than the lowest priced main meal, with an average gap of £1.07 (Table 1). The smallest gap between these categories in a single school was £0.20, but the largest reached £2.31, meaning the cheapest main meal in that school costs almost 5 times the cheapest grab-and-go item.

As part of our menu analysis, we identified all food items priced below £1. These included 118 items from all food-based categories (grab-and-go, snacks, other,



I think that the foods in grab-and-go are, like, pretty much the same thing continuously, every week, they just rotate the same three foods, like pizza, baguette and maybe a different ingredient in it, like pepperoni instead of cheese, or something like that. But it’s essentially the same thing, just over and over again.

— Student

Table 1

Difference in cost between cheapest grab-and-go vs. main meal

	Menu with the largest gap	Menu with the smallest gap	Average
Cost of the cheapest grab- and- go item	£0.60	£0.50	£1.03
Cost of the cheapest main meal	£2.91	£0.70	£2.09
Gap	£2.31	£0.20	£1.07

as well as two main meal items). The grab-and-go items at this price range were predominantly carbohydrate-based foods, such as pizza items, filled rolls, pastries, chips and similar products. This pricing structure encourages students to purchase cheaper grab-and-go items, thereby increasing the dependence on these nutrient-poor, high profit-margin items.

Popularity of grab-and-go

It’s not surprising then, that grab-and-go makes up a large proportion of secondary school students’ school food purchases, particularly during the morning break, when the main meal tends to be unavailable. In our survey, a third of students (32%) reported buying grab-and-go during the morning break 3-4 times a week or more, whilst over half (56%) bought grab-and-go at least once a week. Adding to this, our survey also found that 40% of respondents buy grab-and-go during the lunch break at least 3-4 times a week. If grab-and-go purchases at lunchtime are being used as a substitute for the main meal, this figure suggests that a significant proportion of students are regularly missing out on a complete lunch.

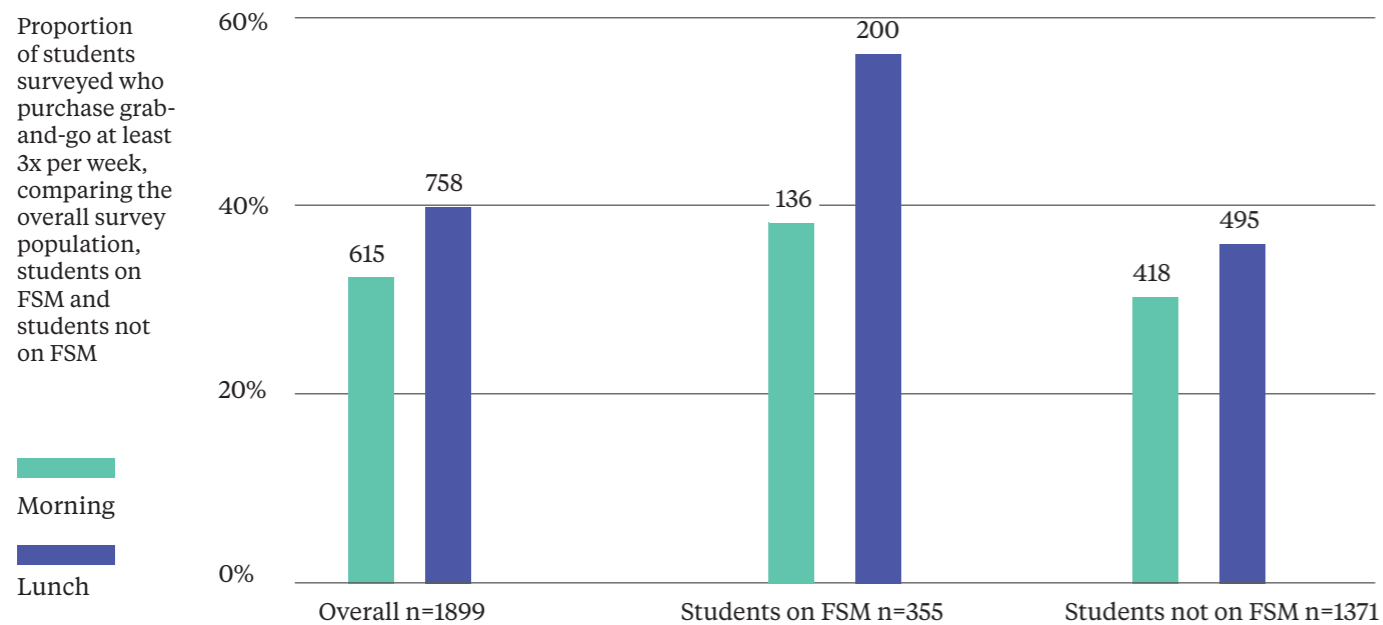
Impact on students on FSM

Our survey data also revealed how this dynamic plays out unequally across student groups. Among the 355 students surveyed who receive FSM, 38% reported buying grab-and-go at breaktime at least 3-4 times weekly, compared to 30% of the 1,371 students not on FSM. The disparity is even more pronounced at lunchtime: 56% of students on FSM bought grab-and-go at least 3-4 times weekly at lunch, compared to just 36% of students not on FSM. This pattern suggests that students on FSM are more reliant on grab-and-go throughout the day and potentially less able to access the main meal option at lunch.

“The free school meal kids, they have £2.80 but that could easily be spent on a drink and a croissant at break time, and then they’ve got nothing left for lunch. And that’s a real concern, obviously, because they’ve not really had a proper meal.”— School staff

Figure 1

Frequency of purchasing grab-and-go



Investigating why students on FSM purchase grab-and-go more frequently than those not on FSM was beyond the scope of this research project, however some interviewees theorised that the lower price point of grab-and-go items was appealing to students on a lower budget.



Another reason that they may be popular is that they would typically be the smaller, slightly lower priced items, so you could just sort of grab something. It gives the opportunity for those with a lower price point to have something. And the flip side of that is that it could also serve as a bit of an upsell from the contractors. But the big, big driver is the contractor will always make a bigger margin on a grab-and-go item. The smallest profit they make is on the sit-down meal. So that, again, is a big driver.”

— Procurement

The lower price point of single items can be misleading for students, as those buying multiple non-main meal items may spend a significant amount of money, particularly when compared with the price of one main meal. School staff and students highlighted that for budget-constrained pupils, particularly those on FSM, spending on grab-and-go reduces what they can afford later in the day, forcing them to choose between buying something when they’re hungry at break or going for a more nutritious option at lunch.

“Another thing with the [FSM] budget, if I buy something at break, just small fruit or something, then I won’t have enough to buy something at lunch. If I want to buy a meal, like a big portion size, I can’t afford it because the school meal budget is so low.”
— Student

Pupils can experience a long gap between breakfast and lunch (or perhaps don’t have breakfast at all). Multiple focus group participants described being hungry by morning break, when grab-and-go items dominate the cafeteria offer, describing the need to manage their hunger whilst preserving enough budget to afford a filling meal at lunchtime.

COMMERCIAL INCENTIVE

Margin pressures incentivise grab-and-go

Interviews highlighted the significant financial incentive to push grab-and-go and soft drinks in secondary schools. Although cheaper per item, prepackaged and nutrient-poor grab-and-go items can be sold at a higher profit-margin.

“Higher sales mean lower subsidies, and schools are literally facing catering subsidies versus courses and teachers. The underfunding crisis is significant and it is very real, so the school has to minimise its cost burden with catering services. I think the catering operator wants to make lots of profit because you’ll find that drinks, cookies and muffins, and rubbish like that, make higher gross margin than main courses.”

— Procurement

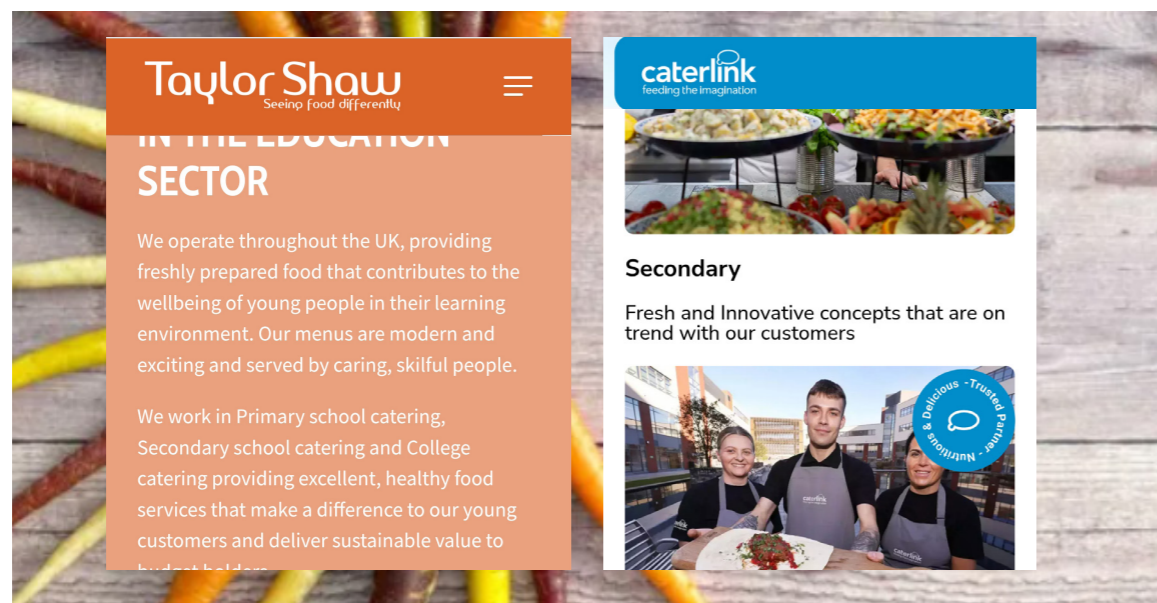
“The provision will be largely dictated by what the school wants, but it will eventually creep more and more towards the grab-and-go because the contractors will be on a fixed price agreement. They will push for more and more grab-and-go to keep things buoyant.”— Procurement

Secondary schools as a marketplace

Our research indicates that secondary school food is increasingly viewed as an expanding and commercially attractive market. Several interviewees noted growing interest from manufacturers and suppliers, who play a significant role in shaping what is available to schools. Marketing materials - from imagery mimicking high street brands to language referring to students as “customers” - show how the canteen has become a marketplace that puts profits over health.

Image 1

Screenshots from leading caterers’, Taylor Shaw and Caterlink, websites referring to students as customers. Caterlink references ‘young customers’ elsewhere on its website.¹⁵



This context has led to a growing ‘school-compliant’ drinks industry, on trend with the rapid expansion of the UK’s wider children’s food and beverage market, which is forecast to expand from \$6.96 billion in 2024 to \$11.87 billion by 2033.¹⁶ Radnor currently dominates this space, a position reflected in grab-and-go menus nationwide.

Students highlighted the unfairness of Radnor and other soft drinks being more expensive at school, compared to prices beyond the school gate. These drinks can contain four to five teaspoons of sugar, over half the recommended maximum daily intake.

“Soft drinks are a big, big market. It just grows, you know, it’s a huge market in secondary schools. So you’ve got a variety of manufacturers out there but obviously Radnor is the key one – that’s the market lead within secondary education.” — Supplier

“Because it’s [Radnor Fizz] very nice and only 85p, you can buy it on Amazon. You go to a Morrisons, you can get 24 for £4. The school just makes it so expensive.” — Student¹⁷

Image 2

Screenshot of a page dedicated to Radnor, taken from the BidFood website.¹⁸



A couple of interviewees highlighted the influx of suppliers and manufacturers at the LACA national conference as an example of the growing interest in the secondary school food market. Whilst LACA promotes innovation in healthy grab-and-go on its website,¹⁹ this message stands in contrast with some of the commercial sponsorship at their trade expo (Image 3). Here, companies promoted products designed specifically for schools, simultaneously signalling the commercial value of the secondary school food market and shaping what is seen as acceptable within secondary school food provision.

“If you take a look at the likes of ‘LACA: the school food people’, they’re sponsored by Wafflemeister. Wafflemeister? Really? Hardly freshly cooked, healthy school food. I think the manufacturers want to jump to kids because it’s profitable. The commercial pressures aren’t to serve wonderfully fresh, healthy food. It’s to serve junk because there’s money in it.” — Procurement

Image 3



Photos taken at the LACA Conference 2025

Another example of the influence of the supply chain on secondary school food provision was provided by the headteacher of an in-house catered school. This interviewee reported routinely receiving free products from suppliers, such as ice creams during the spring and summer. They emphasised that these offers do not influence decision-making, stating that products are selected solely on the basis of price and quality.

To be fair, they generally will very much follow the policies. But then they would also try to slip things in – ice creams and ice lollies are very interesting on that one when you get to the spring and summer because clearly, from a commercial perspective, there is massive potential for them in selling those. And they will just send a case of something. It would just be their gift.” — School

Commercial influence shapes food provision

The commercialisation of secondary schools as a marketplace impacts school food provision – the canteen is increasingly being seen as an extension of the high street, with a concerted effort among those in the supply chain to entice students as ‘customers’ using the same trends as popular food chains. This is reflected across supplier and catering information and marketing materials. These brochures emphasise the need to ‘compete with the street’, where on-the-go products are thriving.



I think students are very much brand-led as well. They like to see what’s happening on the high street replicated within the offer within their school. We find that on development days as well, our customers that are secondary students do like brands, like colour, like vibrancy, and they buy with their eyes.”

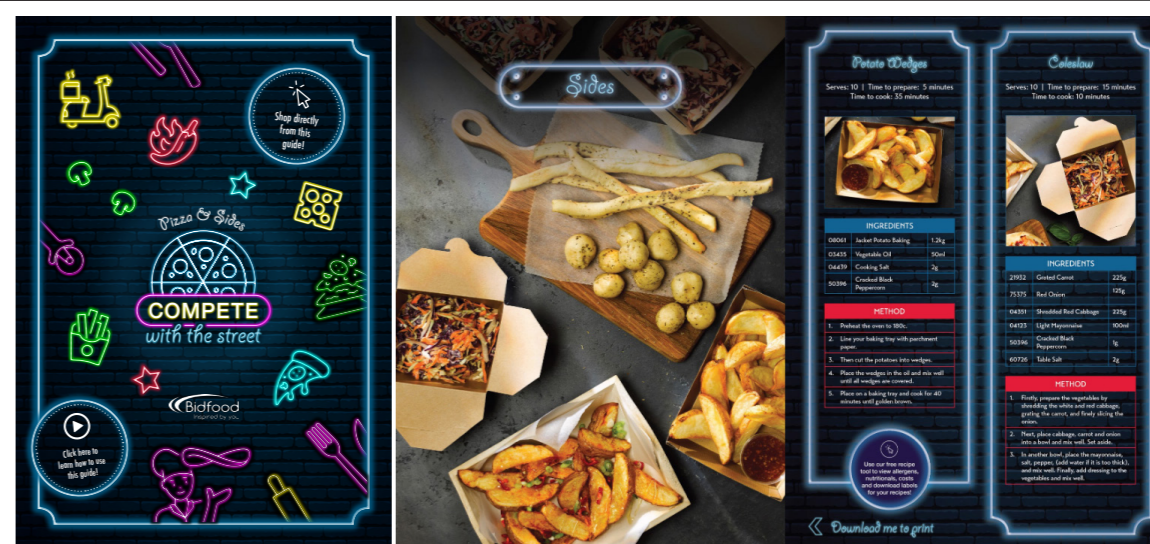
— Supplier

“They want to see what’s on the high street really, they want to see what’s in Pret, a wider range of salad options, so thinking more about the vegetable side of things? Again, very easy to implement I think, and as me and [interviewee] have already said, I think in a box to grab and go, that would really go well.” — Caterer²⁰

As noted in the above quote, if used intentionally, street-food concepts have clear potential to broaden choice and improve the nutritional quality of the school food offer; however, there is currently an emphasis on carbohydrate-heavy grab-and-go favourites, such as pizza, potato wedges and garlic bread. In this context, mirroring the high-street reinforces existing snack-heavy diets, rather than shifting eating habits towards more balance and varied options.

Image 4

Bidfood’s ‘Compete with the street: Pizza and Sides’ guide²¹



LACK OF MONITORING & ENFORCEMENT

Fragmented procurement system The Department for Education states that school governing bodies are responsible for monitoring compliance with the School Food Standards and should have processes in place to oversee all food and drink provision and receive regular reports²². However, interviews from this research and the FUEL study suggest that responsibility for monitoring standards across the whole school day is often unclear, with limited awareness that compliance should be checked beyond lunchtime.

Commercial incentives, combined with fragmented accountability and a lack of robust SFS monitoring and enforcement mechanism, mean non-compliant products continue to feature prominently. When we questioned two suppliers about this issue, they pointed to the diffuse responsibility across the system, combined with commercial pressures, which together shape what is made available in schools. They argued that whilst the wholesalers provide nutritional and compliance information, decisions about which products are sold sit with the caterer. One interviewee noted this ambiguity fosters a generalised assumption that due diligence has already been completed elsewhere. Schools typically view SFS compliance as the caterer's responsibility or assume it is assured through the use of trusted supplier ranges. Catering teams on the ground rely on centrally-approved menus, with little expectation that they should independently assess compliance beyond the lunch service. Where responsibility is unclear or shared, compliance slips through the cracks, particularly when nobody is actively checking provision beyond the core lunch menu.

“Well, any product that we list on our customers contracts has to be signed off by the [catering] head office, so then it's up to the caterer, they decide what they want to contract, then they decide products, and obviously with nutrition and ingredients, etc, etc. But from a wholesaler's point of view, it's up to the client what they list, and we provide them all the information they require for them to make their decisions.”
— Supplier

Opportunity for non-compliant products to slip through Interviewees also highlighted that whilst many products are now designed to be SFS-compliant, these are frequently listed alongside non-compliant products with similar packaging and branding. This creates confusion, making it hard for schools and caterers to identify which items meet the standards and raising the risk of non-compliant products being offered, particularly in the absence of robust SFS monitoring.

“A lot of schools thought their drinks were compliant because they were buying a certain brand that was seen to be compliant because they're a school drinks provider, but they were selecting drinks that weren't in the compliant range. And I think that that also happens to some extent with the cakes and snack type items as well.”
— Academia

As an example, Image 5 shows a Brakes sales brochure dedicated to secondary schools. Brakes is one of the UK's largest and most influential foodservice distributors. It was bought by Sysco (the world's largest catering supplier) in 2016 for \$3.1bn.²³ Within this sales brochure, grab-and-go and soft drinks are promoted as an important part of the secondary school sales package:

“Cold drinks, crisps and snacks help to generate extra spend within a secondary school and are an important part of the offer. Your range should cover the top-selling lines as well as create interest with new product launches. It's important to offer a range of products to suit students needs, whether it's hunger, fitness, sharing, energy, reduced sugar or dietary. Sweet treats also play in a balanced offering.”²⁴

Yet the brochure lists non-compliant drink brands, such as Coca-Cola, Fanta and Sprite. These products sit alongside foods high in fat, sugar and salt, including KitKat and Walkers Quavers (which are both advertised as “best sellers”). In one school we visited, confectionery, including KitKat, was positioned directly beside the till (Image 6).

“And there's like, small snacks by the tills, which are always really cheap, and then like bags of crisps for like £1 each, which are near the tills.”— Student

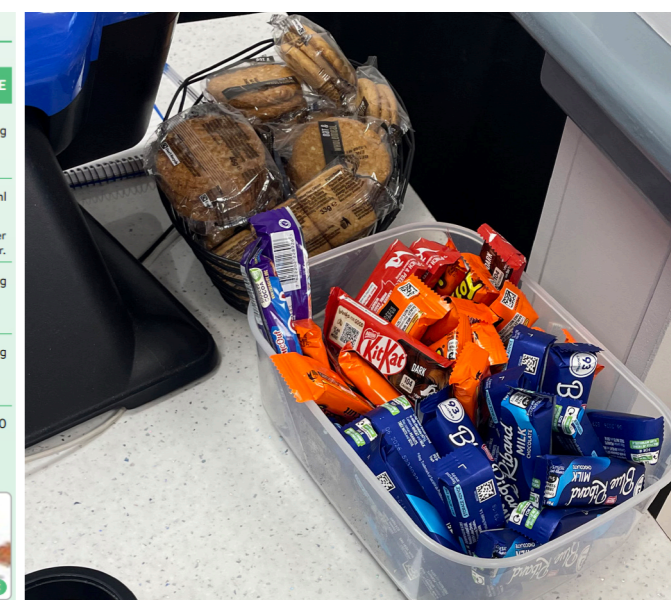
“It will be mainly drinks which they're pushing, but then they also have, you know, chocolate bars, crisps and things like that...It's difficult because, obviously, they're here to make money, and if they can push those products out through a grab-and-go system quickly and make money, and then that's what they're going to do, aren't they?” — School

Image 5-6

Left: 'Best sellers' product list taken from the Brakes' Secondary School 'Food to Go Guide'²⁵

Right: Kit-Kat on offer at the till in a secondary school

BEST SELLERS		
CODE	NAME	PACK SIZE
F 4655	La Boulangerie Blueberry Mini Muffins	72 x 30g
Mini-plain cake muffin with blueberry pieces. In low pleat cases and with a shelf-life of 2 days from defrost. Delivered unwrapped, just wrap in suitable packaging. Fully baked		
A 84688	Priority Spring Sparkling Spring Water	24 x 500ml
A clean, refreshing-tasting water with a balanced mineral content, sourced from water-bearing rocks 45 metres below the ground in Harrogate, North Yorkshire. Harrogate has over 400 years of bottled water history, and its water is low in sodium with a slightly sweet flavour.		
A 123474	KitKat 4 Finger Milk Chocolate Bar	24 x 41.5g
In the top three – still the UK's favourites for that impulse purchase or for placing in your vending machines		
A 114760	Walkers Quavers Cheese Snacks	32 x 20g
A favourite across all ages these cheese flavoured snacks are a must for your impulse section or vending machines		
A 118256	Crawford's Minipacks 6 Varieties (3 pack)	1 x 100
Mixed mini packs of biscuits. Digestives, ginger nuts, bourbon creams, custard creams, shorties and fruit shortcake. Wrapped in threes		



YOUTH VOICE

Grab-and-go is inadequate

Focus group participants expressed strong dissatisfaction at the portion sizes and perceived lack of value for money of grab-and-go. They referred to rising prices and shrinking items, and stated grab-and-go is not filling, leaving them hungry, tired and unfocused later in the day. The survey findings reflected this experience. Only one third of students (33%) agreed or strongly agreed they feel good and have the energy to concentrate in lessons after eating grab-and-go; a quarter (22%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and a further third (32%) were neutral or unsure.

“It’s not satiating at all. It doesn’t keep you full. And to be honest, especially in college, I think it tempts people to consider alternatives, so to go outside and grab food just because the food isn’t good value for money and doesn’t fill you up.” — Student

“I’d say in my school, recently, they’ve cut down the portions even more and then increased the price again. I’m actually realizing the impact that the school food actually does have because by period four, I’m like, completely famished, and then we have lunch, and I’m like, ‘Okay, I’ll get my power back’, but I don’t, because the food’s just not fuelling in that way, so it makes the school day even more gruelling.” — Student

Lack of culturally appropriate grab-and-go

Over one in five students (22%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that there are enough grab-and-go options to meet either their dietary or allergy requirements or their culture or religion. Just over two in five students felt the offer was sufficient, with 43% agreeing or strongly agreeing there are enough options to meet their dietary or allergy needs and 42% agreeing or strongly agreeing there are enough options to suit their culture or religion.

Dissatisfaction was notably higher among students from ethnic minority backgrounds: over one in four (28%) disagreed that grab-and-go options met their cultural or religious needs, compared to fewer than one in five (19%) White students (Figure 2).

When we explored this topic during our focus groups, many students said their schools generally met their dietary needs and preferences, with vegetarian, halal and sometimes gluten-free options available most days. For some, this was sufficient, but others felt the offer did not reflect the diversity of the student body. For example, one student noted that ‘international foods’ were usually limited to a narrow set of cuisines. Although dietary requirements were often accommodated, students felt the range lacked imagination and cultural breadth.

“I just think all the foods come under the same category. There isn’t a variety of foods, like, from different backgrounds, which doesn’t reflect the people who go to school.” — Student

Limited options that are healthy and appealing

When asked to elaborate on why they buy grab-and-go during the focus groups, most students explained that they often select grab-and-go not out of preference, but because other options are limited, unappealing, too expensive or unavailable.

“There’s, like, no alternative. If there’s one thing that looks all right, you’re gonna buy it because everything else is a bit not great.” — Student

The students we spoke to consistently reported that healthier options, particularly fruit, are often more expensive than cakes, cookies or sugary drinks. Students gave examples of very small fruit pots costing around 60p, while cookies were available for 35p.

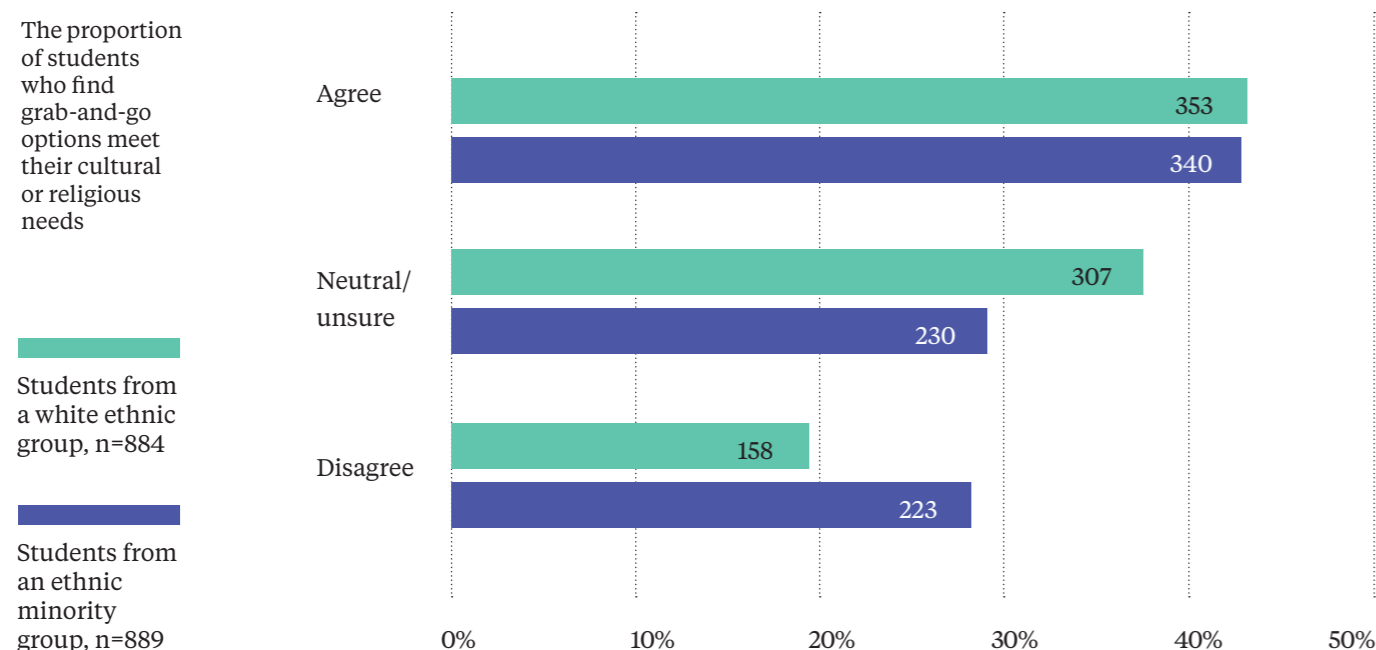
“I feel like the unhealthy food is definitely cheaper because, the sandwiches, and stuff like that, are £2 something, but then if you want a sausage roll, they are usually quite greasy – they’re 85p.” — Student

Some noted that fruit was excluded from meal deals, while confectionery was included, actively discouraging healthier choices. These students felt that when cheaper options are less healthy, price strongly shapes what people buy, with lower-cost items being more appealing regardless of nutritional quality.

“They sell these tiny little packets of grapes and they’re £1 for only, like, what? Like six grapes.” — Student

“I think they used to have bananas and apples but no one bought [them] because they were overpriced.” — Student

Figure 2 Grab-and-go meeting cultural & religious needs





I think the relationship between students and catering staff at school is really important, especially if you want to have diversity in food. A lot of the things we're saying can be easily solved if we are actively speaking to the people in schools and asking them, 'what would they want to see in their grab-and-go bags?' Really, what we want to see is a bit more care, a bit more consideration for what's going into our stomachs because, ultimately, that has an impact on so many different things. It has an impact on concentration levels and, inevitably, performance as well."

— Student

Student influence

When asked if they have enough opportunities to shape the grab-and-go and drinks offer at their schools, many survey respondents indicated feeling excluded from decision-making. Almost a quarter (24%) said they did not have opportunities to give feedback but would like to, whilst a further 17% reported that although they had shared their views, these had not been acted on. Only 16% felt that their feedback had shaped what was offered.

Students consistently highlighted that they want to be better consulted on what food and drink is served and how. Several students enthusiastically described experiences where caterers actively sought feedback on menu design. Students suggested a range of practical and ongoing feedback mechanisms, including regular taste-test days, informal conversations in the canteen, surveys and menu voting. Where student voice was embedded, food was perceived as higher quality and more thoughtfully prepared.

Students want to see diverse food options that reflect their school communities. They emphasised that involvement should not be limited to a small leadership group, but include different cultural backgrounds and dietary needs.

"When it comes to having more culturally diverse food, I think they should involve people from all different backgrounds because if it's just one demographic of people who are making the food, or, like, discussing what food is to be made, not all voices might be heard." — Student



If you were taken out of a school setting, you would never reach for the food that you do in school, and I think especially with grab-and-go, it's never anything that's overly appealing. It's more out of convenience."

— Student



Q: In an ideal world, what would you want to see that would be a bit more nutritious?

A: Not sure, to be honest, [I'm] so used to like all the stuff that we normally see. Not quite sure."

— Student and interviewer

Contrary to assumptions that young people prefer junk food, focus groups participants expressed desire for more nutritious options. Nearly half of students (48%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would choose healthy food at school more often if it were as tasty and affordable as other options. Some also described a food environment that has narrowed expectations of what school food can be, making it harder to imagine what healthier alternatives could look like.

"They have salad bar with, like, the hot lunch, but you don't see like salad pots or anything. [Interviewer] Is it the sort of thing you want to see? [Student] Maybe, it could be like a healthier option. [Interviewer] In an ideal world, what would you want to see that would be a bit more nutritious? [Student] Not sure, to be honest, [I'm] so used to like all the stuff that we normally see. Not quite sure." — Student

"I do think, on the whole, healthier food, especially in school, is a lot more expensive than unhealthy food, so I think if you lower those prices, then you will find a lot of people [will] be more inclined to buy your healthier alternatives." — Student

CONCLUSION

Our findings demonstrate that ‘student demand’ cannot be used as an excuse for the prevailing grab-and-go culture. Students were clear that the grab-and-go options currently on offer are not suitable to fuel them through the school day, yet dominate the canteen, which is why updating the School Food Standards is so important. There are many factors that contribute to the dominance of grab-and-go, including tight budgets, rising costs and operational constraints. However, we also found evidence of commercial interests throughout the supply chain profiting from these conditions by actively shaping the school food marketplace into one that prioritises high-margin, unhealthy grab-and-go and soft drinks, and looking at students as customers, not children. The lack of monitoring and enforcement of the School Food Standards allow these commercial interests to prevail.

It is important to note that there are of course examples of good practice, where fresh, healthy and affordable grab-and-go items are developed with input from students. But this is not the norm.

Young people are being ignored despite wanting an active role in shaping their canteen environment. They want meals that are filling, properly portioned and made up of a range of food groups, rather than relying on quick, carbohydrate-heavy or highly processed options. Student demand and voice represent an under-used opportunity to drive healthier, more appealing grab-and-go that provides the nourishment and energy for them to thrive in the classroom, and beyond.

“More variety, healthier food and better portions.” — Student

APPENDIX

BUSINESS RESPONSES

The following businesses were given the opportunity to provide a written response to our research: Taylor Shaw, Caterlink, Radnor, LACA, Bidfood, Brakes and Nestlé. Publishing the comments does not reflect any endorsement or support of their position from Bite Back. The following was provided:

Taylor Shaw

“Taylor Shaw welcomes the focus this report brings to the role of grab-and-go food in secondary schools. We agree that convenience should not compromise nutrition, affordability, or pupils’ wellbeing. While grab-and-go plays a practical role in busy school days, our priority is to offer freshly prepared, balanced options that genuinely fuel learning and reflect the diversity of school communities. By working closely with schools and listening to student feedback, we aim to ensure healthier choices are visible, appealing and accessible, supporting a food culture that puts young people’s health first.”

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