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# Healthy Eating Policy

This is designed for a MGLD special school, with a focus on promoting healthy eating, supporting pupils with additional needs, respecting individual differences, and ensuring that food and mealtimes are safe, inclusive and positive experiences.

As MGLD pupils may have a range of communication, sensory, developmental, medical and feeding needs, the policy places particular emphasis on individual care plans, safe eating and drinking, and working in partnership with parents and relevant professionals.

## 1. Policy statement

MGLD Special School recognises the importance of healthy eating in supporting pupils' physical health, growth, development, wellbeing, concentration and participation in school life.

The school is committed to promoting a positive relationship with food and encouraging healthy eating habits in a supportive, inclusive and non-judgemental environment. We recognise that pupils have different abilities, preferences, cultural backgrounds, sensory needs and medical requirements, and that these must be respected when promoting healthy eating.

The school aims to ensure that all pupils have access to appropriate, nutritious food and drinks and that mealtimes are safe, enjoyable, structured and adapted to meet individual needs.

This policy will be implemented in partnership with parents and guardians, school staff, the Board of Management and relevant healthcare professionals, where appropriate.

## 2. Aims and objectives

This policy aims to:

- Promote healthy, balanced eating habits among all pupils.
- Support pupils' health, growth, development and general wellbeing.
- Encourage positive attitudes towards food and mealtimes.
- Provide a safe and inclusive environment for eating and drinking.
- Recognise and accommodate pupils' individual dietary, medical, sensory and communication needs.
- Reduce the risk of choking, allergic reactions and other food-related incidents.
- Support pupils in developing independence and life skills around food, where appropriate.
- Promote consistent approaches to healthy eating between home and school.
- Encourage staff to act as positive role models for healthy eating.
- Ensure that food-related practices respect each pupil's dignity, rights, preferences and individual abilities.

## 3. Scope of the policy

This policy applies to:

- All pupils attending MGLD Special School.
- Parents and guardians providing food and drinks for school.
- Teachers, Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), nursing staff, where applicable, and all other school personnel.
- School management and the Board of Management.
- School meal providers, visiting professionals and others involved in food preparation, handling or supervision.

The policy applies during the school day, at breakfast clubs (if applicable) or other school meal provision, during school outings (community walks, café visits etc.), school events and activities where food and drink are provided.

## 4. Healthy eating guidelines

The school encourages pupils to enjoy a variety of nutritious foods in line with Irish healthy eating guidance, while recognising that some pupils require individualised diets or modified food textures.

### 4.1 Food and snacks

Where appropriate to the individual pupil, parents and guardians are encouraged to provide a balanced lunchbox containing a variety of foods, such as:

- Fruit and vegetables: fresh, cooked, mashed or otherwise safely prepared fruit and vegetables.
- Bread, cereals and other starchy foods: wholemeal bread, wraps, pasta, rice, potatoes and suitable breakfast cereals.

- Protein-rich foods: eggs, chicken, fish, beans, lentils, cheese and other suitable alternatives.
- Dairy foods or suitable alternatives: milk, yoghurt and cheese, taking account of individual dietary requirements.
- Healthy drinks: water should be readily available throughout the school day.

Foods should be selected and prepared in accordance with each pupil's developmental stage, swallowing ability, medical needs and individual eating and drinking plan.

### 4.2 Foods and drinks to limit

The school encourages parents and guardians to limit foods and drinks that are high in added sugar, salt or saturated fat, where appropriate. These may include sweets, chocolate, biscuits, cakes, crisps and sugar-sweetened drinks.

Such foods should not be routinely promoted as everyday snacks or rewards. The school will take a reasonable and proportionate approach to applying these guidelines, recognising that food may form part of an individual pupil's agreed feeding, nutritional or behavioural support plan.

No pupil will be shamed, punished or excluded from an activity because of the food provided from home.

### 4.3 Water and hydration

- Drinking water will be available to pupils throughout the school day.
- Staff will support pupils who need assistance to access, hold or drink from a cup or other appropriate device.
- Individual hydration plans will be followed where required.
- Any prescribed fluid restrictions or specific drinking instructions must be followed in accordance with the pupil's healthcare plan.

### 4.4 Food as a reward

The school aims to avoid using sweets or other less nutritious foods as routine rewards. Positive reinforcement may instead include praise, encouragement, preferred activities, social interaction or other individualised motivators.

Where food is used as part of a structured intervention or an agreed individual plan, staff must consider the pupil's nutritional, medical, sensory and feeding needs and ensure that the approach is appropriate.

## 5. Individual dietary and feeding needs

St. Ultan's Special School recognises that some pupils may experience food selectivity, sensory sensitivities, difficulties chewing or swallowing, limited food acceptance, or medical conditions that affect their diet.

The school will work with parents and guardians to identify each pupil's requirements and agree appropriate arrangements.

These may include:

- Allergies, intolerances and medically prescribed diets.
- Vegetarian, religious or culturally appropriate dietary requirements.
- Texture-modified food and thickened fluids prescribed or recommended by the appropriate healthcare professional.
- Support with chewing, swallowing, pacing, portion sizes and safe positioning.
- Sensory accommodations, including familiar foods, suitable utensils, reduced distractions or a predictable mealtime routine.
- Assistance with eating, drinking and using cutlery or adapted equipment.
- Individual nutritional or hydration support, where required.

Where a pupil has identified feeding or swallowing difficulties, the school will follow the pupil's current written eating and drinking plan and relevant professional advice. Staff must not independently change prescribed food textures, fluid thickness or feeding techniques.

### 5.1 Food allergies and medical diets

Parents and guardians must inform the school of any diagnosed food allergies, medically significant intolerances or prescribed dietary requirements and provide relevant written information.

The school will:

- Maintain up-to-date records of individual dietary requirements.
- Communicate essential information to relevant staff.
- Follow the pupil's allergy management and emergency action plan.
- Check food labels and ingredients where necessary.
- Take reasonable precautions to prevent accidental exposure and cross-contamination.
- Ensure prescribed emergency medication is managed in accordance with the school's relevant procedures.

The school will consult parents and relevant healthcare professionals when dietary information is unclear or requires review. Dietary restrictions should not be introduced solely on assumption, without appropriate discussion and assessment.

These arrangements are consistent with HSE guidance on managing food allergies and the need for appropriate school emergency plans.

## 6. Safe eating and drinking

Pupil safety is a priority at all mealtimes.

The school will ensure that:

- Pupils are appropriately positioned and supervised while eating and drinking.
- Staff follow individual eating and drinking plans and any required risk assessments.
- Food is prepared from home to an appropriate texture and size for the individual pupil.
- Pupils are supported at a pace appropriate to their needs.
- Staff are aware of the signs of choking and know the school's emergency response procedures.
- Appropriate hygiene measures are followed before, during and after meals.
- Food and drink are not given in a manner that conflicts with an individual pupil's documented needs.

Staff must not force pupils to eat, use food or drink as a punishment, or insist that a pupil finish a meal. Where a pupil regularly refuses food or drink, or staff notice a significant change in eating, drinking or swallowing, this should be recorded and communicated to the appropriate member of staff and, where necessary, to parents or guardians.

HSE advice emphasises supervision during eating and adapting food preparation to reduce choking risks. Individual needs in a special-school setting may require additional precautions.

## 7. Mealtime environment and positive eating experiences

The school aims to make mealtimes calm, enjoyable and respectful experiences for all pupils.

Staff will, where appropriate:

- Establish consistent routines and allow sufficient time for pupils to eat.
- Use visual supports, communication aids, objects of reference or other communication strategies to help pupils understand mealtime routines.
- Provide suitable seating, adapted cutlery, plates, cups and other equipment.
- Respect pupils' sensory needs and provide reasonable adjustments to the mealtime environment.
- Encourage pupils to explore and try foods without pressure or coercion.
- Support pupils to develop independence in choosing, serving and eating food where appropriate.
- Respect each pupil's dignity, preferences, communication and signs of discomfort or refusal.

Food exploration and the introduction of unfamiliar foods should be approached sensitively. Staff should follow agreed individual plans and seek advice where eating difficulties are persistent or affect a pupil's nutrition, hydration or wellbeing.

## 8. Food education and the curriculum

Healthy eating will be promoted through relevant learning activities and the wider school environment, taking account of pupils' individual abilities, communication methods and learning objectives.

Opportunities may include:

- Learning about different foods and drinks.
- Exploring food through sensory activities where appropriate.
- Preparing simple meals and snacks.
- Developing practical life skills, including shopping, food preparation and making choices.
- Community walks including visits to cafés for breakfast, lunch, a snack, or ordering a hot or cold drink.
- Learning about hygiene and food safety.
- Using visual resources, stories, photographs and communication systems to support food-related learning.
- Developing an understanding of healthy lifestyles, personal wellbeing and independence.

Activities will be adapted to ensure that pupils can participate meaningfully, regardless of their communication, physical or learning needs.

## 9. Roles and responsibilities

Board of Management

- Approves and reviews the Healthy Eating Policy.
- Supports its implementation across the school.
- Ensures the policy is consistent with relevant school policies and guidance.

### Principal and school leadership

- Communicate the policy to staff and families.
- Ensure staff understand their responsibilities.
- Coordinate the management of dietary requirements and relevant safety procedures.
- Arrange for concerns and incidents to be addressed appropriately.

### Teachers, SNAs and relevant support staff

- Follow individual pupil plans and agreed mealtime procedures.
- Support safe eating, drinking and hydration.
- Promote positive, respectful mealtimes.
- Report and record relevant concerns in accordance with school procedures.

### Parents and guardians

- Provide accurate and up-to-date information about dietary, allergy and feeding needs.
- Supply suitable food and drinks where required.
- Inform the school of changes to a pupil's medical or dietary requirements.
- Work collaboratively with school staff to support the pupil's wellbeing.

## 10. School outings, celebrations and special occasions

The principles of this policy will apply during school trips, community walks, visits to cafes, celebrations, fundraising activities and other events.

Where food is provided, the school will take reasonable steps to ensure that:

- Dietary requirements and allergies are considered in advance.
- Food and drinks are appropriate for pupils' individual eating and drinking needs.
- Pupils are not unnecessarily excluded from activities because of their dietary requirements.
- Alternative arrangements are considered where needed.
- Staff maintain appropriate supervision and follow relevant safety procedures.

## 11. Communication, implementation and review

The Healthy Eating Policy will be shared with staff and parents/guardians and made available through the school's usual communication channels.

The school will seek feedback from relevant members of the school community as part of its review process. Concerns relating to the policy should be raised with the Principal in the first instance.

The policy will be reviewed every two years, or earlier if required because of changes in national guidance, school practice, pupil needs or relevant procedures.

## 12. Related policies and guidance

This policy should be read alongside the school's relevant policies and procedures, including:

- Health and Safety Policy.
- Administration of Medication Policy.
- Enrolment Policy and relevant pupil support plans.
- Child Safeguarding Statement and Risk Assessment.
- First Aid and Emergency Procedures.
- Relevant individual healthcare, allergy and eating and drinking plans.

The policy draws on the following Irish guidance and resources:

- Department of Education and Youth — Healthy Eating for Students.
- Department of Health — Nutrition Standards for School Meals.
- Health Service Executive (HSE) — Healthy Eating Policy Toolkit for Primary Schools.

- HSE — Food Allergy: Living With and Food Choking Risks.

## Policy adoption and approval

St. Ultan's Special School

Date approved by Board of Management: 9th November '26

Review date: December '28

Chairperson, Board of Management: [signature]

Principal: Jean Cunningham