

## Food and Cultural Diversity in the Classroom

“Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, craving and identity.”  
 – *Jonathan Safran Foer*

There is much to consider surrounding food in the school or in the classroom. Not everyone eats the same food at the same time or in the same way. Here are some foods and problems I have seen in my classroom or potential ways food can cause problems within a diverse population.

<b>Food/ Observance/ Preparation</b>	<b>Potential Problem</b>	<b>Potential Problem</b>	<b>Possible Solution</b>	<b>Possible Solution</b>
Hotdog Day. Hot dogs are being served as part of a fund raiser for the school.	Some students are vegetarian	Some Muslims don't eat hotdogs	The school could serve veggie dogs as an alternative or offer halal dogs if the Muslim population is large	The school could come up with a different fundraiser like a bake sale, for example
Burgers are being served as part of a fundraiser for the school	Some Hindus do not eat beef as cows are considered sacred	Some 7th Day Adventists and some Buddhists don't eat meat	The schools could serve veggie burgers as an alternative	The school could serve tofu burgers as an alternative
Ramadan	Students may feel tired and weak	Students may need a place to distract themselves from lunch away from others eating	Students can be given more frequent breaks and they can be permitted to take it easy during Gym class without penalty	Most Muslims don't expect non-Muslims to fast during Ramadan, but Muslim students could be permitted to stay in the class to read, or work without having to sit in the cafeteria during lunch break.

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Hot Lunches: Some students only eat hot food for meals	There is only one microwave in the classroom, so not everyone can heat up their food in a 20 minute lunch break (When students eat in the classroom)	The cafeteria only serves cold lunches like sandwiches, fruit and vegetables, yogurt, cheese and cold meat	Students/Parents can be asked to send in a thermos to keep hot lunches hot, without having to wait for the microwave	Students can bring food to heat up in the microwaves in the cafeteria and or the cafeteria can offer one hot dish daily or a weekly hot lunch to accommodate more students
Smells/allergies	Some students can be sensitive to smells of other student's lunches	Some students may be allergic to certain foods	All students can be reminded about being respectful to everyone else regarding their food choices. Students can be told that they may politely move to a new spot to eat if a sensitivity to smells is an issue	Teachers and parents must be very strict and very clear about which foods will not be acceptable in the classroom. Allergies can be life threatening and <b>not</b> an issue up for debate
Pizza	Some Jewish students only eat kosher and could not eat the Hawaiian or Pepperoni pizza being offered in the cafeteria	Some Jewish students don't eat pork and would not be able to have bacon or ham on their pizza.	Cheese pizza can be an alternative for students who eat kosher and cannot mix meat and cheese	Vegetarian pizza could be offered or students could be surveyed to find out alternatives to cater to more students
Caffeine	Students or teachers may want to bring in treats for a class party including pop or iced tea, but some students like Mormons, for example, don't consume caffeine	Students or teachers may offer chocolate treats or chocolate cake to students which can actually be very high in caffeine depending on the darkness of the chocolate	Establish a strict policy about providing treats in the classroom. Non-caffeinated drinks should be the only choice offered as well as water.	Students can stay away from providing chocolate if you have Mormon students in your classroom and ask students to bring pretzels, chips or popcorn for class parties for example

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Alcohol	At community events alcohol may be served, which can be offensive to some families who abstain from alcohol. For example at International Night which showcases food and drink from all nations.	Students may have access to alcohol at community events due to inattentive parents at the tables or parents who do not know the ages of the students	The event can be a dry event, and participants can be encouraged to serve non-alcoholic beverages or offer both an alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverage at each country stand. Water coolers can also be placed around the gym for access to water.	Parents can be provided with a wristband to better ensure students are not being provided alcohol at a school sanctioned event. Alcohol must be given to each person, rather than a self-serve option on the table.
Food Preparation	For many students and parents cleanliness goes hand and hand with food preparation. Since cleanliness is subjective, some students or parents may not eat homemade food from other people.	Some students enjoy eating on the floor and others in certain cultures find this practice to be uncleanly.	If a student will not eat, or has been asked by their parents not to eat food prepared by another person, the student should be reminded to bring their own food for a potluck, for example.	If students are wanting to have a picnic, ensure that tables or desks are also offered as places to eat and that a picnic is not mandatory for all students.
Extremely restrictive diets	Some people, especially Jains, eat a very restrictive diet, since Jainism is a religion founded on non-violence. Jains don't eat meat, or anything that grows underground.	Jains are also conscious of small bugs that find their way into our food, and for this reason they may not eat pre-processed foods.	Students who practice Jainism would likely bring in their own lunches to ensure they know it is acceptable to eat and free of bugs. If a student orders food from the cafeteria, a variety of vegetables should be offered individually instead of in a salad, since some of the vegetables such as beets, for example, would be off limits.	If a student would prefer to order from the cafeteria instead of bringing their lunch from home, the students, their parents or their teacher/principal can work with the cafeteria to ensure there are choices available to Jains, with the caveat of not being able to guarantee the vegetables will be free of small bugs.

While this is not a complete list of issues surrounding food, it is a good start for people who teach at an international school. In my experience, students love to receive treats, but some parents are not too pleased with teachers offering students sugary treats without their permission. I have stopped giving my students treat bags and opting for school supplies, a book, coupon books, dice with Farkle instructions, or I make my students a video or a Wordle. I find that food can be quite contentious, but having said that, food can be something that can bond us together and something that is obviously necessary, so I think we need to find a way to make it work effectively in our classrooms, and not allow it to become contentious.

“Food is culture, and we need to listen to it”  
-Robert Irvine

Here is an example of a survey sent home to parents regarding allergies, dietary needs and personal preferences:  
<https://forms.gle/BUtnaEdcREVF2xNp8>

Here is an example note sent home to parents regarding allergies, the cafeteria, and birthday celebrations:



Please keep this memo handy or you can also find it  
on our class and school website

# Dear Parents and Guardians

We at Queens International School value inclusion, diversity, and respect all dietary needs

Due to an allergy in the school, **you may not send in shellfish of any kind**. This includes shrimp, crab, lobster, clams, mussels, oysters, octopus, and scallops. We thank you for cooperation and for keeping our students safe.

The cafeteria has complied the results of your surveys and they will implementing some of your suggestions over the next few weeks. Be sure to check out the monthly, weekly, and daily menus here: [queenscafeteria.ua](http://queenscafeteria.ua)

There is also a comment section for additional suggestions or comments about dishes your child likes and would like to see remain on the menu.

# Birthdays



If you would like the class to share in a simple, easy-to-serve birthday cake (or cupcakes) for your child, please speak to the class teacher at least three days prior to make arrangements for the most suitable time on the lesson timetable. We aim to keep this process as simple and unobtrusive to the learning program as possible. Please do not supply fizzy soft drinks, candy, gifts, or additional food as part of these birthday celebrations at the school. Please note, the cafeteria can also make cupcakes at your request and deliver them to your child's class once contact has been made with their teacher. Please see the attached form: [Queenscafeteria/birthdays](#)

As always, if you have any questions, please contact us at any time at [qis.ua](mailto:qis.ua) or contact your child's homeroom teacher.

Thank you for your input and cooperation.

Leah Nette

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There are many personal factors which affect food choices and selections of different foods. Teachers and schools need to be aware of these factors in order to cater to people from a wide range of different cultures and ethnic groups. As a result, it is necessary to appreciate and acknowledge the large impact culture and ethnicity has on food choices, eating styles and patterns. Do you know the dietary restrictions of your students? How can you find out this information? What are some ways you can help alleviate issues over food in the classroom?