

For Discussion on
13 November 2006

Legislative Council Panel on Health Services

Progress Report on Promoting Healthy Eating Habit among School Children

PURPOSE

This paper reports the progress of promoting a healthy eating habit among school children.

BACKGROUND

2. Based on the “Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health” advocated by World Health Organization, we encourage the public to improve their eating habits. As obesity has become an increasingly serious problem among school children, it is important to help them develop and form a healthy eating habit since childhood. In this connection, we proposed in the 2005 Policy Agenda to promote a healthy eating habit among school children to protect the public from life-style related diseases. The Administration briefed the Panel on the aim, approach and strategies of this initiative in January 2006. We have pressed ahead with the preparation of our action after consulting the Panel. A new initiative, namely the EatSmart@school.hk Campaign (the Campaign), has been launched in all primary schools in Hong Kong since the start of this school year.

DETAILS OF THE INITIATIVE

3. The Campaign aims to improve the eating habits of school children so as to enable them to grow healthily and thereby enhancing their learning abilities. Schools, parents, food suppliers and the community at large share a common responsibility of supporting the nurturing of healthy eating habits among school children. We have taken forward the Campaign through inter-sectoral collaboration. The Department of Health (DH) set up a Steering Committee in December 2005 to direct the Campaign. The Steering Committee comprise representatives of the Education and Manpower Bureau, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Radio Television Hong Kong, Union of Government Primary School Headmasters and Headmistresses, Union of Heads of Aided Primary Schools of Hong Kong, Subsidised Primary Schools

Council, Committee on Home-School Co-operation, Hong Kong Education City, professional bodies (including the Hong Kong Nutrition Association, Hong Kong Association for the Study of Obesity and Hong Kong College of Cardiology) as well as an academic institution (Centre for Health Education and Health Promotion under Faculty of Medicine of The Chinese University of Hong Kong). As at the end of October 2006, the Steering Committee had met five times and formulated comprehensive strategy with an implementation plan and evaluation arrangements. In addition through the work of its three working groups, the Steering Committee has also come up with recommendations on matters relating to publicity, education and creation of a school environment conducive to healthy eating. To achieve the best possible results, DH promotes the Campaign through a multi-pronged approach covering the following areas:

- Research and evaluation
- Education and support
- Creation of a supportive environment
- Publicity and advocacy

Research and Evaluation

4. A large-scale questionnaire survey entitled “Baseline Assessment of Promoting Healthy Eating in Primary Schools” was conducted by DH in 44 primary schools from February to March 2006, covering school representatives and over 9 000 Primary Four and Five students together with their parents. The response rate was over 90%.

5. It was found from the survey that 90% of the students were aware of the proper dietary intake proportion of the food groups in the “food guide pyramid” and knew which to choose from paired items of food or drink. The students generally had good knowledge about healthy food but were only rated “fair” with regard to adoption of a healthy diet.

6. The survey also showed that in early 2006, about 70% of the primary school students had lunch provided by their schools. Over 60% of the school lunch recipes contained food categorized as “Limited Food Items” or “Strongly Discouraged Food Items” according to DH’s Nutritional Guidelines on School Lunch for Primary School Students. Besides, only about 40% of the lunch recipes provided an adequate amount of vegetable.

7. As for snacks, most of the snack items brought from home or supplied in the school tuck shops and vending machines were those categorised as “Snacks to Choose in Moderation” and “Snacks to Choose Less” according to the Nutritional Guidelines on Snacks for Primary School Students issued by DH.

The survey found that 62% of parents indicated that their children had the habit of bringing snacks to school. Among the snack items listed by the surveyed parents, 87% of them were those categorised as “not very healthy”. As for the snacks being sold at the school tuck shops and vending machines, 87% of them also fell into the “not very healthy” category. While over 70% of surveyed parents reported that nutrition and freshness of food were their primary concerns when choosing snacks for their children, 64% of them had no idea of what snacks their children bought at school.

8. We are of the view that the lack of nutritious food choices in the school environment would hinder students’ development of healthy eating attitude and practices. To create a school environment conducive to healthy eating, concerted efforts of schools, parents and food suppliers are needed. Findings from the above-mentioned baseline assessment would form the basis on which DH will work out a long-term strategy and programmes for the Campaign, it would also serve as a reference to assess the Campaign’s effectiveness. In view of the survey findings, DH will, through sustained education and publicity efforts, strive to help students and their parents enhance their awareness of healthy eating and correct their misconceptions and undesirable eating habits. On the other hand, in collaboration with parents and schools, we will encourage food suppliers to provide healthy options, and enhance parents’ knowledge of food choices, so as to create a healthier eating environment. The survey report has been made public and sent to all primary schools and stakeholders for reference.

Education and Support

9. Schools play a strong role in shaping dietary patterns of children and adolescents. To enrich and reinforce children’s knowledge on balanced diet, DH has developed a series of interactive learning resources for use by teachers, parents, students, food suppliers, etc., which include thematic website, interactive games, teaching kits, educational video and health education materials such as posters, leaflets and exhibition boards.

10. A training programme for parents and teachers, known as the School “NutriAgent” Project (SNAP), was also implemented this October. Under the programme, two teachers and two parents from each participating primary school received training on nutritional knowledge and monitoring of the school eating environment. The focus of the training is to equip participants with simple yet practical tools to monitor the nutritional value of school meals, in order to communicate and negotiate with lunch box suppliers and tuck shop operators in a timely and objective manner based on data obtained from monitoring activities. The empowerment programme aims to provide school children with healthier food choices in accordance with the Nutritional

Guidelines on School Lunch for Primary School Students and Nutritional Guidelines on Snacks for Primary School Students. Upon completion of the programme, each participating primary school is required to organise not less than two activities to promote healthy eating in the 2006/07 school year, with priority given to activities to monitor the school eating environment. The training programme stresses the need for school-parent-food supplier communication and collaboration. It facilitates the participation of parents and teachers in formulating school policies and practices on healthy eating with the assistance of DH's professional outreach support throughout the school year (including site visits to schools to inspect school eating environment, and to vet and advise on schools' project proposals on healthy eating promotion programmes).

Creation of a Supportive Environment

11. DH issued the Nutritional Guidelines on School Lunch for Primary School Students and Nutritional Guidelines on Snacks for Primary School Students to all primary schools, parent-teacher associations, lunch caterers, tuck shops, etc. in March and June 2006 respectively. The Guidelines serve as important reference on the daily nutritional requirement of primary school students. In addition, DH has compiled a guidebook for frontline staff of the school lunch suppliers to explain the principles, key points and application of the Nutritional Guidelines on School Lunch for Primary School Students. Briefing sessions are also organized for them. DH has maintained close ties with the food suppliers and exchanged views with them regularly on preparing healthy, delicious and nutritious lunches and snacks for students.

Publicity and Advocacy

12. On the publicity front, DH has held five press conferences to promote the Nutritional Guidelines on School Lunch for Primary School Students, Nutritional Guidelines on Snacks for Primary School Students, Guidebook for School Lunch Suppliers and various school-based activities surrounding the theme of healthy eating. The findings of the "Baseline Assessment of Promoting Healthy Eating in Primary Schools" was also released through the press conference.

13. Two series of Announcement of Public Interest (API) on healthy snacks and lunches were aired on television and radio since July and August 2006 to increase the awareness and understanding of healthy eating by the general public and school children. DH also invited media coverage and reporting on different aspects of the Campaign. Over 50 relevant media interviews have been recorded so far.

14. In addition, DH has held a number of briefing sessions for different sectors. The target audience included nutritional professionals, Federation of Parent-Teacher Association, non-government organisations and voluntary agencies, members of school principals' associations, District Councils and their committees as well as members of the public. The aim was to encourage schools to foster and support a healthy eating culture. Over 25 briefing sessions have been conducted so far.

15. To further publicise and promote a healthy eating culture in schools, a series of school-based activities have been or will be launched by DH in the 2006/07 school year:

- An inter-school slogan and e-card design competition in October
- Popular Lunch Box Election in November
- Fruit Day in April next year

16. Besides, DH is planning to organise major publicity events in January and June next year, so as to rally support from various sectors to participate in the Campaign and give recognition to those organisations and individuals with outstanding performance.

WAY FORWARD

17. To successfully motivate school children to develop healthy eating habits, it is essential for various sectors in the community to make sustained and concerted efforts, and render strong support to the development of a healthy eating culture at the community level. DH will continue to promote healthy eating among school children in accordance with the above working strategies, closely monitor the participation of all stakeholders and where necessary, adjust the working strategies. DH will also conduct an evaluation study at the end of 2006/07 school year for a comprehensive review and evaluation of the Campaign.

ADVICE SOUGHT

18. Members are invited to note and comment on the content of this Paper.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
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