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Panel on Health Services

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 13 November 2006**

Promoting healthy eating among school children

Purpose

This paper gives an account of the past discussions by the Panel on Health Services (the Panel) on promoting healthy eating among school children.

Background

2. Obesity poses a growing threat to public health and creates significant economic burden to the society. Childhood obesity, in particular, is getting increasing attention in many developed places and Hong Kong is no exception. The Student Health Service of the Department of Health (DH) recorded a rising trend of obesity among primary school students, from 16.4% in 1997-1998 to 18.7% in 2004-2005. That is to say, almost one in five children in Hong Kong is obese. As studies have shown a tendency for obese children to remain obese in adulthood, the Administration therefore considers that nurturing of healthy dietary habits should best start from one's formative years. To this end, promoting healthy eating among school children was set out as one of the new initiatives in the 2005-2006 Policy Agenda for rolling out in 2006.

3. To prepare for the launching of the territory-wide campaign to promote healthy eating habit among primary school children in the 2006-2007 school year, a Baseline Assessment of Promoting Healthy Eating in Primary Schools (the baseline study) was conducted by DH in the first quarter of 2006. The objectives of the study were to study the knowledge, attitude and practice on healthy eating among primary school children and the attitude towards healthy eating in school among the parents, and to investigate the nutritional environment and factors affecting eating habit of students in local primary schools, among others. The study covered more than 9 000 students and their parents in 44 primary schools. The findings and recommendations of the study were published in September 2006, details of which are contained in DH's website (<http://www.eatsmart.gov.hk/eng/template/home.html>).

Past discussions

Measures to address the problem of childhood obesity

4. The Administration briefed the Panel on 9 January 2006 on the new initiative on promoting healthy eating among school children. Hon LI Fung-ying and Hon Andrew CHENG expressed the view that more forceful and mandatory measures, such as requiring food suppliers to provide healthy lunchboxes and banning tuckshop operators from selling unhealthy snacks, should be taken to address the problem of obesity in children. Hon Andrew CHENG and Hon CHAN Yuen-han were of the view that schools should increase the proportion of sports activities in school curriculum and require each student to take up a sports activity in each school year.

5. The Administration advised that it would consider implementing mandatory measures to contain the problem of childhood obesity if all else failed to do so. In the meantime, efforts would be focused on raising the awareness of the importance of healthy eating among students, teachers, parents and the public; improving the knowledge, attitude and practice towards healthy eating among primary school children; and creating a school and wider environment that supported healthy eating. The Administration further advised that encouraging students to take up more sports and eat healthily was already set out in the guidelines to schools, and work in this regard would continue and be stepped up.

6. Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG pointed out that given the vast number of schools in the territory, district-based advocacy plans should be drawn up and the support of parent teacher associations (PTAs) should be enlisted to take the initiative forward. Dr Hon KWOK Ka-ki was of the view that without the involvement of the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB), it would not be possible to promote healthy eating habit among school children.

7. The Administration responded that EMB would certainly be involved in taking the initiative forward. The support of PTAs would also be enlisted, as a partnership approach based on strong inter-sectoral collaboration involving integrated programmes with the participation of Government departments, school staff, students, parents, food suppliers, professional bodies and academia.

Targets for measuring the effectiveness of the initiative

8. Dr Hon Joseph LEE asked whether the Administration had set down any targets for measuring the effectiveness of the new initiative, such as the percentage of obesity among primary and secondary school students.

9. The Administration advised that the extent to which the proportion of obese school children could be reduced would depend not only on the success of the new initiative which targeted the school environment, but also on other factors such as

eating habit at home and the overall eating culture in the community. The Administration would consider the new initiative effective if the trend of obesity among school children had ceased to rise or better still, was found to be on the decline, say, one to two years after implementation. A baseline study of the knowledge, attitude and practice on healthy eating among primary school students and school's existing environment in support of healthy eating would soon be conducted. The results of the baseline study would be compared with those of the comprehensive review to be conducted in 2008 for the formulation of longer term strategies.

10. At the special meeting of the Panel on 13 October 2006 to receive a briefing from the Administration on the new initiatives and progress of on-going initiatives relating to health matters set out in the 2006-2007 Policy Agenda, Hon Audrey EU queried the claim made by the Administration in its paper to the Panel that community responses for the initiative on promoting healthy eating among school children had been positive and encouraging. Ms EU noted from the findings of the baseline study that among the 41 schools which offered lunch for their students, none of them met all the five criteria of healthy eating. For instance, no school was able to provide whole grains, reduced fat dairy products or other high calcium food items in at least one lunch choice on every school day. More than 85% of the one-week menu did not mention vegetable in all lunch choices on every school day.

11. The Administration explained that it had made the statement as the public at large was very receptive to the initiative. The Administration well understood that changing eating culture in the community could not be achieved overnight. This was evidenced by the findings of the baseline study that children generally had good knowledge on healthy food but fair attitude and practice towards healthy eating, and parents tended to be more concerned about whether their children had enough to eat than the nutritional value of the food they consumed. The Administration was committed to making the prevention of childhood obesity a long-term objective. Efforts would continue to be made to actively engage stakeholders, such as parents, school staff and food suppliers, in taking forward the initiative. Hitherto, DH had developed various nutritional guidelines and guidebook for food suppliers to follow, for schools to develop relevant policies and for parents to ensure that their children were served with nutritionally balanced school lunch.

Relevant papers

12. Members are invited to access the Legislative Council's website (<http://www.legco.gov.hk>) for details of the papers and minutes of the relevant meetings.