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Panel on Health Services

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 9 February 2009**

Promoting healthy eating habit 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 habit 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 new initiative to promote healthy eating habit among primary school children, namely the "EatSmart@school.hk" Campaign (the Campaign), in the 2006-2007 school year, a large-scale questionnaire survey entitled "Baseline Assessment of Promoting Healthy Eating in Primary Schools" (the baseline study) was conducted by DH from February to March 2006 to study the knowledge, attitude and practice on healthy eating among primary school children and school's existing environment in support of healthy eating. The study covered school representatives and over 9 000 Primary Four and Five students with their parents in 44 primary schools. Findings from the baseline assessment would form the basis on which DH would work out a long-term

strategy and programmes for the Campaign; it would also serve as a reference to assess the Campaign's effectiveness. The survey report, published in September 2006, has been made public and sent to all primary schools and stakeholders for reference.

Past discussions

4. The Administration briefed the Panel on the new initiative to promote healthy eating habit among school children on 9 January 2006, and on the progress of taking forward the initiative on 8 January 2007. Major views/concerns expressed by members and the Administration's responses are set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

5. Some members expressed the view that more forceful and mandatory measures, such as making legislation to prohibit the sale of unhealthy food by school tuck shops and vending machine providers and revoke of the licence of food suppliers who provided school meals containing unhealthy food items, should be implemented.

6. The Administration responded that it would consider implementing mandatory measures to contain the problem of childhood obesity as a last resort. In the meantime, efforts would be focussed on improving the knowledge, attitude and practice towards healthy eating among primary school children and creating a school and wider environment that supported healthy eating.

7. Members noted the following findings from the baseline study as follows -

- (a) over 60% of the school lunch recipes contained food categorised as "Limited Food Items" or "Strongly Discouraged Food Items" according to DH's Nutritional Guidelines on School Lunch for Primary School Students;
- (b) only about 40% of the school lunch recipes provided an adequate amount of vegetable; and
- (c) most of the snack items supplied in the school tuck shops were those categorised as "Snacks to Choose in Moderation" and "Snacks to Choose Less" according to DH's Nutritional Guidelines on Snacks for Primary School Students.

8. To address such deficiencies, DH was requested to -

- (a) come up with effective measure(s) to ensure that nutritious school meals were provided by food suppliers;

- (b) consider the programme of having a nutritionist stationed in each school, as practised in some overseas places; and
- (c) restrict the sale of unhealthy food in school.

9. The Administration responded as follows -

- (a) to rely on food suppliers to instill a healthy eating habit among children, say, by requiring food suppliers to strictly follow the nutritional guidelines in preparing school meals, might not necessarily be the best way forward. This was evidenced by such incidents whereby parents complained to the schools over an increase in the price of school lunch charged by food suppliers because of the healthier food items in the recipes or that healthy food did not taste good. As the fostering and the nurturing of healthy eating habits among school children required the concerted efforts of schools, parents, food suppliers and the community at large, DH considered a better approach was through the multi-pronged strategies covering research and evaluation, education and support, creation of a supportive environment, and publicity and advocacy;
- (b) although schools played a strong role in shaping dietary patterns of children and adolescents, requiring schools to hire nutritionists was not the only solution to help students develop healthy eating habits. The 'School "NutriAgent" Project' (SNAP), which aimed at empowering teachers and parents of primary schools with confidence and self-efficacy to implement healthy eating policy and activity, could serve the same purpose in creating and enhancing healthy eating environment and culture, and nurturing healthy eating habit for children; and
- (c) in order to restrict the sale of unhealthy food in school tuck shops, some time was needed for schools to establish healthy snack policy and make contractual agreement with their tuck shop operator.

10. In response to some members' request of providing financial assistance to needy children to purchase nutritious school meals, the Administration advised that individual schools had funds to be used at their discretion to aid needy students to meet their special needs. The Administration further advised that the price of a nutritious school lunch box generally cost under one dollar more than a lunch box containing less healthy food items, if at all, due to greater amount of vegetables and lesser amount of meat used and the portion was made smaller to suit the dietary intake of children.

11. Hon Audrey EU hoped that the focus of promoting healthy eating among school children should be on adopting a healthy lifestyle, as the threat to public health posed by being too thin was equally serious as being overweight.

12. On whether the Administration had set down any targets for measuring the effectiveness of the new initiative, the Administration advised that it 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.

Relevant papers

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

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