

Meal Arrangements in Hong Kong Schools

Background

In Hong Kong, almost all children aged six to eleven will go to school due to the compulsory nine years of free education policy. Currently, there are 759 primary schools with a total of 447 137 students and 519 full time day secondary schools with 474 054 students. In general, snacks can be purchased by students at tuck shops, while lunches are provided by commercial lunch caterers. However, some secondary schools allow their students to go out for lunch. There are approximately twenty-one commercial school lunch providers in Hong Kong.

Government Guidelines

About 23% of total government expenditure is spent on the Hong Kong education system. However, there is no current policy on providing free lunch for students in need. Families with financial difficulties may approach the Social Welfare Department for “Comprehensive Social Security Assistance” or school grants can be obtained by those eligible to cover meal allowance.

The Education and Manpower Bureau of the Government of Hong Kong has a circular titled “Meal Arrangements in Schools and Control of Licensed Food Factories Supplying Lunch Boxes” which provides guidelines for schools making meal arrangements for their students. These guidelines include food safety and suggested choice of ingredients and cooking methods. However, these guidelines are not enforced or regulated. There is no official policy on school lunches.

In order to promote nutritional balance of school lunches, the Department of Health produced an educational pamphlet for distribution to lunch box suppliers, and primary and secondary schools in 2001. The pamphlet provides information on the food pyramid, what constitutes a healthy lunchbox and some examples of healthy lunchboxes. According to this pamphlet the proportions of a balanced lunchbox are one half rice, noodle or pasta, one third vegetables and one sixth meat with a fruit for dessert.

Nutrition messages are also reinforced at the community level, through activities held in collaboration with the District Councils and local groups. Activities including workshops, health talks, cooking competitions, exhibitions and newsletters targeting children, women, teachers, students and parents were launched. In addition, healthy eating in Hong Kong is promoted through the mass media, the Internet and the Health Department’s 24 hour Health Education Hotline.

Successes

During these last few years there have been increased efforts to promote nutrition in schools. In 1998, the Chinese University of Hong Kong in conjunction with a group of multi-disciplinary health and education professionals, concerned with childhood obesity, developed a nutrition education and physical activity curriculum for primary and secondary students in Hong Kong. At that time, there was very little emphasis in the curricula on nutrition and health.

The result was '**FUN-IN-SEVEN**', a seven-theme healthy lifestyle campaign for primary and secondary students. The curriculum included Breastfeeding, Physical Activity, Healthy Diet Pyramid, Healthy Breakfast, Healthy Lunch, Healthy Snacking, and Healthy Eating Out. Funding obtained from the Quality Education Fund allowed the curriculum to be tested during the 2000-2001 academic year in 12 schools throughout Hong Kong. From that year's efforts they developed a website to continue to spread the healthy lifestyle messages.

Areas for improvement

Through awareness programs, more schools are conscious and looking for school lunch providers with nutritious lunch boxes. However, most lunch providers still cater to the tastes of the students who would prefer less nutritious choices.

According to a Hong Kong survey conducted in 1996, only about 6 percent of students (including both primary and secondary) considered "nutritional value" when choosing their lunch. Instead, most of them were concerned more about the taste, price and satiety of the food. Such poor awareness of the importance of healthy lunches among Hong Kong children and adolescents means they are eating less healthy than they could be.

The most recent figures of the Department of Health showed that among the students who enrolled in their Student Health Service program, 18.7% primary and 15.8 % secondary students were obese in the year 2003-2004. Obese students were defined as those greater than 120% the median weight for height. This obesity prevalence rate is an increase from previous years.

Surveys of Hong Kong students showed that obesity levels resulted from a lack of physical activity and poor eating habits. The increase in obesity of Hong Kong students shows that there is a need for government regulation on the nutrition content of school lunch boxes and students would benefit from nutrition education in school curriculum.

Conclusion

It is well known that food choices help to prevent a variety of chronic diseases such as obesity, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers. However, diets may also affect learning potential. Inadequate and imbalanced diets may lead to restlessness, inattentiveness and hyperactivity in class, thus affecting children's performance and ability to learn. It is of paramount importance that younger generations be provided with the knowledge, guidance and skills to help them make correct food choices to equip them for both current and future challenges. If tomorrow's adults are to lead productive, healthy lives, today's children must be guaranteed an adequate nutritional diet.

Food choices are shaped early in life. Experts agree that food preferences and dietary habits are established during childhood, and that children base food choices very much on tastes and food experiences acquired early on. Children's nutritional behaviors are influenced by a variety of factors -- parents, teachers, peers, school meals, the food industry, the community and the media. The home and school are

therefore good starting points to help shape good nutritional choices.

Raising the awareness of parents, schools, youth and children about healthy lunch choices provides a first step in the education for a lifetime of healthy eating habits. Parents are the first teachers and gatekeepers and their education in correct food choices for their offspring is exceedingly important. School meals, on the other hand, provide good opportunities to promote and practice healthy food choices for their children during the developmental years. Healthy school meals that meet dietary recommendations for the child's age group can play a vital part of a child's nutrition while forming an enjoyable part of the dietary education for the child.

The role of school lunches holds an important message for students. School personnel are encouraged to interact more with parents in the decision of school lunch arrangements for their students. In addition, some form of supervision and standardization is needed in the provision of school lunch boxes by commercial catering services. Further, education must be the key for the large number of secondary school students who eat out.