The School Feeding Practice in China

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1. Quick facts about the country

• China is the biggest developing country all over the world, which is politically divided into 31 provinces and with more than 1.3 billion peoples.

• In total, there are about 215 million students studying in 890 thousands of primary and secondary schools. More than 70% of the students are living in the countryside.

• In 1950, about 35%-40% of the Chinese children were suffered from protein-energy malnutrition (PEM), and the mortalities of infants, young children under five years and the school-age children were 250‰, 300‰ and 94‰, respectively.

• Accompanying with the rapid socioeconomic progress in the latest 20 years, the food intake and the life quality of the Chinese have significantly improved. The prevalence of PEM swiftly decreased, and the mortalities of the corresponding ages had already down to 34‰,43‰ and 9.4‰, respectively, in 2003.

• However, nutritional problems are still widespread among Chinese children, especially in the remote rural areas. According to the WHO norms, about 10.2% of the rural children in northwest China were "wasting", 9.4% of the young children in southwest China were "stunting", and about 9.2% and 14.2% of the children in Chinese urban and rural areas are suffering from iron-deficiency anemia. By contrast, overweight and obesity has become a serious problem in Beijing, Shanghai and other coast metropolis ----the most prosperous areas in China. From 1985 to 2005, the prevalence of overweight/obesity has increased twice every five years. More than 17% of the primary schoolboys in Beijing are overweight/obesity in 2005, according to the US CDC/NCHS definitions.

• It clearly shows that there are still many things have to do to improve the nutrition status of the Chinese children. School feeding is one of the most effective intervene measures for getting these objectives.

2. The history of school feeding in China

School feeding has a rather short history in China, but has made great achievements during the latest few years.

•Since the early of 1980s, “school lunch arrangement ”has been set up spontaneously in several coastal big cities.

•In 1988, the Chinese Students Nutrition Promoting Association, an independent organization, was established, with the goal of uniting all stakeholders (public and private) to extend to all children the school feeding program and to improve the quality of the services.

• The school feeding program was strongly supported by Chinese government authorities, especially the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health.

•In 1994, a complex school feeding network, formed by national, regional and public operators and also by NGOs, were set up in this country. In most of the provinces, there is a branch of this complex. The number of the students who participated in the school feeding system swiftly increased from 2.35 million to 8.45 million only in one year.

•Nutrition messages are reinforced at the community level, through activities held in collaboration with the local community groups. Activities including workshops, health talks, cooking competitions, exhibitions and newsletters targeting children, women, teachers, students and parents were launched.

•In 2005, the Chinese Students Nutrition Promoting Association in conjunction with the National Institute of Child and Adolescent Health, with a group of multi-disciplinary health and education professionals concern with childhood obesity, developed a nutrition education and physical activity curriculum for primary and secondary students.

3. Areas for improvement

•Because of the absence of registry supports, still no current official policies on producing, supplementing, distributing and servicing of the school feeding system are

available in this country.

•The parents should pay for all of the lunch box. There is no free lunch for students in need. Only in several big cities, families with financial difficulties may, with the help by the Social Welfare Department, approach the school grants obtained by those eligible to cover mean allowance.

•Most of the schools with school lunch system can not reach the standard of the yearly minimum services: 165 schooldays.

•There are few educational pamphlets for distribution to lunch box suppliers, and primary and secondary school, and there is very little emphasis in the curricula on nutrition and health.

• Most lunch providers still cater to the tastes of the students who would prefer less nutritious choices, though more and more awareness programs have been provided to let schools be more conscious about nutritious lunch boxes.

• Because of the above reasons, school lunch network only covered 30%-50% of schools in the big cities, and 18%-35% of schools in the middle and small cites, respectively, in 2005.

• For the schools in the rural areas, especially in the poverty western China, actually no school feeding system exist until now.

4. What will be done in the near future?

• The first and most important task is to promote the acts of school feeding system be registered, and assist the government to make official policies to support the system.

• In the annual meeting of the Chinese Students Nutrition Promoting Association in 2005, several public school feeding guidelines were made:

•Focus on the rural areas, and the poorest social strata 1 and 2 in the urban areas; ethnic groups and displaced populations. Using the resources of national, local governments, public and NGOs, to let all meals free.

•Primary public schools.

•Minimum of yearly services: 165 schooldays.

•Two services daily (breakfast plus lunch) are recommended in the cities. After getting success and achievements, spread the experience to other areas as soon as possible.

•Service to all children of the select schools.

•Few operators. We tend to one local or regional operator, or, a local social board controls all the services.

•A common fund with all different resources.

• The Ministry of Health jointly with the Ministry of Education in China, will promote a circular titled “Meal Arrangements in Schools and Control of Licensed Food Factories Supplying Lunch Boxes” which provides guidelines including food safety and suggested choice of ingredients and cooking methods. The Chinese Students Nutrition Promoting Association should try its best to enforce or regulate these guidelines.

•Some form of supervision and standardization is needed in the provision of school lunch boxes by commercial catering services.

•There will be increased efforts to promote nutrition in schools.

•The role of school lunches holds an important message for students.

•School personnel should be encouraged to interact more with parents in the decision of school lunch arrangements for the students.

•To produce an educational pamphlet for distribution among schools which provides information on the food pyramid, what constitutes a healthy lunchbox and some examples of healthy lunchboxes.

• To promote the “healthy eating in China” program through the mass media, the Internet and the 24-hour Health Education Hotline.

• To organize annual national conferences and national exhibits since 2007, accompanying with an annual training plan (workshop on design and management of SF projects and monitoring and evaluation).

•Raising the awareness of parents 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.

•School meals help to prevent a variety of chronic diseases such as obesity, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers.

•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.

•Food choices are shaped early in life. Their preferences and dietary habits are established during childhood, and that children base food choices very much on tastes and food experiences acquired early on. The home and school are therefore good starting points to help shape good nutritional choices.