

LCQ20: Quality of lunch boxes of primary school lunch suppliers

Following is a question by Dr the Hon So Cheung-wing and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (February 19):

Question:

It is learnt that as most primary schools in Hong Kong are whole-day schools now, students of these schools have to have lunch at school, and many students eat lunch boxes pre-ordered by schools from lunch suppliers (pre-ordered lunch boxes). However, many parents have relayed that the quality of pre-ordered lunch boxes varies, and some students find them unpalatable or discard them just after having a few bites, causing worries about inadequate nutrition uptake in students. There are views that while requiring lunch suppliers to provide nutritious lunches, the Nutritional Guidelines on Lunch for Students published by the Department of Health provide no specific recommendations on the overall food quality of the lunches. On the other hand, it has been reported by Mainland media that many primary schools on the Mainland are equipped with their own canteens, providing students with lunches prepared by cooks on site that are both nutritious and delicious. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will consider formulating guidelines on the overall food quality of pre-ordered lunch boxes to ensure that students can enjoy lunches that are both nutritious and delicious;

(2) in the past three years, whether it received complaints from parents about the food quality of pre-ordered lunch boxes; if so, how the complaints were dealt with; and

(3) whether it will consider emulating the practice of some primary schools in our country and set up canteens at subsidised schools to provide students with nutritious and delicious lunches prepared on site?

Reply:

President,

The Government attaches great importance to healthy eating among children and has been encouraging schools to formulate a policy on healthy eating conducive to promoting students' good eating habits and healthy lifestyle. Schools generally take into account factors like scales of suppliers, food quality and hygiene, prices, views of parents holistically when choosing school lunch suppliers.

In consultation with the Health Bureau, the Department of Health (DH),

and the Environment and Ecology Bureau, our consolidated reply to the question raised by Dr the Hon So Cheung-wing is as follows:

(1) The current Nutritional Guidelines on Lunch for Students was published by the DH in 2006 and has been updated ever since. The main objectives of the Guidelines are to ensure that primary and secondary school students can have nutritionally balanced school lunches that meet the needs of their growth and development, and serve as a reference for the quantity and quality of food as stipulated in the contracts signed between schools and lunch suppliers. The Guidelines also recommend the use of ingredients low in oil, salt, and sugar, and more natural ingredients, herbs, and spices to enhance the flavour of dishes, making lunches more appetising. The Education Bureau (EDB) has also issued circulars to call on schools to refer to relevant guidelines when arranging lunch for students and observe the principles of healthy eating such as the suggested ratio of grains, vegetables and meat in a lunch box, and reducing intake of fat, salt and sugar by students. Moreover, it was announced in the Chief Executive's 2024 Policy Address that the Whole School Health Programme launched by the DH will be strengthened. Health reports will be compiled for each participating school to recommend targeted school-based health promotion measures, which will include diet arrangements focusing on nutrition, growth and development needs.

(2) The EDB has been promoting home-school co-operation to encourage schools to explain to parents the schools' policy on healthy eating and encourage parents to echo with schools' efforts by guiding their children to consume food with high nutritional value and having the meals with them in order to help children develop healthy eating habits. Schools are also encouraged to engage parents in the discussion of lunch arrangements such as inviting them to join the lunch supplier selection team to formulate lunch requirements, selection criteria and marking scheme. Schools should also maintain communication with parents on the nutritional value and quality of the lunch provided, collect views from parents and students regularly and provide timely feedback to the lunch suppliers so as to jointly monitor and improve the quality of school lunch. If necessary, parents may prepare healthy lunchboxes for their children. From the 2022/23 school year up to January of the current school year, the EDB received a total of two complaints about the food quality of school lunch boxes from parents. The cases were found unsubstantiated after investigation.

(3) Given the different conditions and needs of schools, schools may opt for lunchboxes prepacked by lunch suppliers, or adopt on-site meal portioning as encouraged by the EDB. In on-site meal portioning, school lunch suppliers may cook rice and vegetables on-site and reheat other food (e.g. meat) at the school campuses. Schools built according to the EDB's Schedule of Accommodation updated in 2009/10 are provided with a tuck shop-cum-central portioning area as part of the standard provision of school facilities for implementation of on-site meal portioning.