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A little lunch

by Gary Boyle



Photo by Apichit Jinakul

Read the following story by Arusa Pusithipan from the *Bangkok Post*. Then, answer the questions that follow.

First it was rotten eggs in soup served to schoolchildren in Prachin Buri province. Then it was criticism over a school lunch in Nakhon Pathom where people on social media complained about both the quality and quantity of a lunch meal served to primary pupils.

SMALL PORTIONS

"[The food] can be finished in three spoons," a Facebook user wrote, describing a photo of the school lunch with only five small slices of fried chicken on top of a tiny amount of rice. A small drop of ketchup and a piece of guava were served on the side.

And perhaps the most scandalous meal was last year in Surat Thani province where students at Ban Tha Mai School were served *khanom jeen* with fish sauce as a school lunch. Following complaints by parents, the school director was dismissed from the job in May.

This was just the first of many poor-quality school lunch scandals across Thailand. Deputy Director for Research and International Relations from Mahidol University's Institute of Nutrition, Asst Prof Kitti Sranacharoenpong, said these substandard school lunch cases should be considered an extremely significant national agenda that should be taken care of immediately.

"Food is important. It's a basic right that every kid deserves. If children are left with an empty stomach, this would be a fundamental issue against their growth and development," commented Kitti who has been working with the Office of the Basic Education Commission (Obec) on Thailand's school lunch programme and with neighbouring countries to set up a healthy lunch campaign for their students.

Prof Kitti recalled the campaign 20 years ago when the lunch budget was only 7 baht per child. Over the years, it increased to 10 baht, 13 baht and now 20 baht which covers everything, from ingredients and gas to labour costs. Although it sounds like small money, he said the budget should be adequate if appropriately allocated. He said the problem doesn't stem from any monetary restriction but the awareness among all parties involved. "Money is essential but it can't buy everything. When it comes to school lunches, commitment is key," Kitti said.

JAPANESE LUNCH

The nutrition expert sees Japan as a model country when it comes to healthy school lunches. There, every school has its own in-house nutritionist who is not tasked with teaching duties but is only in charge of nutritional aspects of school meals. Also in Japan, lunchtime takes two hours. Buying more snacks never occurs in most schools because children are not allowed to bring money to class. Also their budget for lunch is five times higher than in Thailand.

As part of a solution to solve the school lunch crisis, researcher from Mahidol University's Institute of Nutrition Pasamai Egkantrong recommended an in-house nutritionist in every school or at least a nutrition teacher who can look after school meals. Prof Kitti suggested educating the entire school system. Every party involved -- be it schools, parents and even cooks -- must take part in the problem solving. Students themselves must also be educated. But in all, everything must be done through a positive reinforcement ideology.

"Students must also be taught about the importance of opting for healthy diets and opting out of unhealthy stuff as well as the value of food given them. They must be made to understand their rights and responsibilities. If they don't care for themselves, they will grow up with obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and more. Ask them if they want to get sick. Add such topics in a school's curriculum. Make sure they know why they should choose plain milk instead of sweetened milk."

Section 1: Read through the story and answer the following questions.

1. Where was a small meal with guava served?
2. Which school lost a staff member because of its lunch?
3. Kitti said hungry kids can't grow or develop. True or false?
4. Twenty years ago the budget per child was less than half what it is today. True or false?
5. Kitti said money is the key to good school lunches. True or false?
6. How long does lunch last in Japan?
7. The Thai lunch budget per child is 20% of the Japanese budget. True or false?

8. Students should be taught about healthy food choices. True or false?

Section 2: Write the noun form of the following words.

9. empty10. neighbouring11. allowed12. suggested13. opting

Section 3: Read the following passage. Then, fill in the blanks with the correct words from the choices given.

Thailand's ...14...-funded school lunch programme first ...15... around 1952. Back then, students with malnutrition in some areas were ...16... with free lunch. In 1992, the Fund for School Lunch of Primary School Students Act was ...17... to provide lunch to all students in state schools across the country -- from kindergarten up to grade six. Right now ...18... 27,000 schools or almost 4 million students ...19... are in the programme.

14. a. state b. stated c. statement
15. a. begin b. began c. beginning
16. a. given b. provided c. feed
17. a. enforce b. enforced c. enforcement
18. a. approximate b. near c. approximately
19. a. nation b. nationwide c. nationally

Section 4: Find words that match the following definitions.

20. shocking and unacceptable
21. not as good as normal
22. the willingness to work hard and give your energy and time to a job
23. a person or thing that is considered an excellent example of something
24. a person who is an expert on the relationship between food and health

For the answers, find the story online at www.bangkokpost.com/learning. If you have any questions or feedback, please contact the Editor at garyb@bangkokpost.co.th