

Report No. 52 of the Director of Audit — Chapter 4

HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

Summary

1. In Hong Kong, the Department of Health (DH) has recorded a rising trend of obesity among primary school children, from 16.4% in the school year 1997/98 to 21.3% in 2007/08. The DH has also found that childhood obesity poses a growing threat to public health and creates significant socioeconomic burden to society. To help prevent childhood obesity, the DH has promoted healthy eating habit among the school children and provided free health assessment for them. The Education Bureau (EDB) has included the teaching of healthy eating in the school curriculum and has been helping school children develop their physical competence. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) has organised the School Sports Programme (SSP) in collaboration with the EDB to provide training in sports for school children.

2. The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review to examine the Government's efforts in fostering a healthier lifestyle for primary school children. To collect information from schools, Audit conducted a questionnaire survey and visited a number of primary schools.

School compliance with Guidelines on healthy eating

3. *Formulation of school policy on healthy eating.* The DH has encouraged primary schools to formulate a school policy to promote healthy eating among school children. In the audit survey, Audit found that more than half of 423 schools responding could not produce documented school policies on healthy eating. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Health should, in collaboration with the Secretary for Education, step up efforts to encourage schools to formulate and document their policies on healthy eating.*

4. *Compliance with the DH Lunch and Snack Guidelines.* The DH has issued guidelines on lunch food quantity and quality, as well as on the nutritional value of snacks. Based on a sample check of lunches served at schools and snacks sold at school tuck shops and vending machines, Audit found that the majority of the schools examined had not

complied with the DH nutritional Guidelines. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Health should, in collaboration with the Secretary for Education, step up efforts to promote schools' compliance with the DH Lunch and Snack Guidelines.*

5. ***Monitoring of nutritional quality of school lunch.*** The audit survey revealed that only 83 (22%) of 380 schools responding had used the DH's checklist to monitor the nutritional quality of school lunches and had kept record of the results. Furthermore, 198 (57%) of 350 schools responding stated that they had encountered difficulties in using the checklist. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Health should, in collaboration with the Secretary for Education, look into the schools' difficulties in monitoring the nutritional quality of lunches and provide necessary support and assistance to them.*

6. ***Challenges encountered by the DH.*** In implementing its Guidelines on healthy eating, the DH encountered challenges such as insufficient commitment of some schools to work collaboratively with parents and lunch suppliers in ensuring healthy school meal arrangements. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Health should consider enlisting help from the EDB in advising and supporting schools with problems in implementing the Guidelines on healthy eating.*

7. ***Compliance with the EDB Guidelines on lunch suppliers.*** Based on a sample check of information provided by schools, Audit found that 2 lunch suppliers did not appear to have a proper licence issued by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, which is not in compliance with the EDB Guidelines on lunch suppliers. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education should: (a) ascertain whether the two lunch suppliers had been operating without a proper licence and take appropriate remedial action if warranted; and (b) remind schools to carry out checking in accordance with the EDB Guidelines to ensure that lunch suppliers are licensed to supply lunch boxes.*

Implementing a healthy eating school project

8. ***Schools' participation in the School NutriAgent Project (SNAP).*** SNAP aims at empowering teachers and parents, through DH training and support, with the self-efficacy in nurturing a healthy eating habit among school children. An audit analysis indicated that from 2006/07 to 2008/09, 394 (60%) of 658 primary schools in the territory had never participated in SNAP. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Health should, in consultation with the Secretary for Education, devise measures to engage more schools in SNAP.*

9. **Visits to SNAP schools.** The DH conducts visits to SNAP schools to strengthen rapport and offer advice on their work in healthy eating promotion. The DH had visited 138 (68%) of the 203 schools that joined SNAP in 2007/08. However, 65 (32%) of them had not been visited. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Health should arrange visits to SNAP schools that have not been visited.*

Student Health Service

10. **Provision of information on obesity to primary schools.** The audit survey revealed that over 75% of some 420 schools responding: (a) were not aware that the DH's Student Health Service (SHS) could provide schools with obesity information of their students upon request; and (b) considered that the information would help them understand their students' obesity situation and plan for improvement measures. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Health should: (a) inform schools of the availability of students' obesity information; and (b) critically consider the desirability of disseminating such information to schools on a regular basis.*

11. **Provision of health assessment service to primary school students.** Audit found that in 2007/08, 50 schools had student attendance rates of less than 50% for the SHS health assessment. With the low attendance, obesity problems in students who had not attended the health assessment might remain undetected. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Health should: (a) collaborate with the Secretary for Education and schools on encouraging students to attend health assessment; and (b) identify and approach those schools with low student attendance rates for health assessment with a view to offering them assistance.*

Promotion of physical activity among primary school children

12. **Physical education (PE) lesson time.** The EDB has advised primary schools to allocate at least 5% (which is about 70 minutes per week) lesson time for PE class. The audit survey revealed that in 2008/09, 95 (23%) of 409 schools responding allocated less than 70 minutes of lesson time for PE. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education should encourage schools to allocate sufficient PE lesson time.*

13. **School policy on physical activity.** The DH has advised primary schools to consider developing policy on physical activity alongside that on healthy eating. The audit survey revealed that 125 (30%) of 423 schools responding had not developed any policy on physical activity. *Audit has recommended that the Secretary for Education should: (a) in collaboration with the Director of Health, encourage schools to develop policy on physical activity; and (b) remind them to document the policy and disseminate it to stakeholders.*

14. ***Participation in the SSP.*** The audit survey revealed that in 2007/08, 91 (22%) of 411 schools responding had not participated in any of the seven SSP subsidiary programmes organised by the LCSD. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services, with the support of the EDB where necessary, should continue the effort to further enhance schools' participation in the SSP.*

Implementation of other supportive measures

15. ***Community resources.*** The audit survey revealed that only 171 (40%) of 423 primary schools responding participated in the health promoting activities of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from 1 September 2006 to 30 November 2008. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Health should, in collaboration with the Secretary for Education, encourage schools to consider using the health promotion services of the NGOs.*

16. ***Monitoring and evaluation.*** A comparison of the performance indicators currently compiled by the DH and the EDB with those recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) shows that there is scope for developing more indicators to monitor the progress of the Government's effort in promoting healthy living. The WHO research of 2007 also found that changes had occurred in the global regulatory environment concerning food marketing to children. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Health should: (a) in consultation with the Secretary for Education and drawing on overseas experience, develop more performance indicators for measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the Government's initiatives in promoting healthy diet and physical activities among primary school children; and (b) keep in view overseas developments and practices when conducting research projects for promoting healthy eating and physical activity.*

Response from the Administration

17. The Administration accepts the audit recommendations.

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