

Bangkok school sets balanced lunch example

Prathom 2 (Grade 2) students at Wat Makut Kasatriyaram School happily lined up in the canteen when the school director announced that they were going to have *khao moo daeng* (barbecued pork on rice), chicken soup and watermelon for lunch.

"Khao moo daeng is my favourite dish because it's delicious. I also like *kaeng khiao wan* [Thai green curry]. When these two dishes are served for lunch, I'm very happy," said Monruedee Pab, a six-year-old student at the school, with a big smile on her face.

School director Khomkham Nimsuwan said the lunch menus at her school are planned on a monthly basis, and that a teacher who is equipped with adequate knowledge about nutrition is responsible for planning the meals. But before including any dishes on the list, the teacher has to allow each student to have a role in picking the dishes they like.

"With our limited budget, we don't have many choices on the list, but we ensure that every dish on the lunch menu will have all five of the essential nutrients and taste good," said Ms Khomkham.

Wat Makut Kasatriyaram School currently has 403 students enrolled from kindergarten to elementary level. The school now receives a budget of 30 baht per student per day — 10 baht for breakfast and 20 baht for lunch — from the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration under its free lunch programme for kindergarten and primary school children.

"A budget of 30 baht per head provided to schools may not be much, but

SPECIAL REPORT: Small budget won't hinder provision of healthy meals, writes Dumrongkiat Mala



A caterer prepares lunch for students at Wat Makut Kasatriyaram School in Bangkok. DUMROANGKIAT MALA

it is enough to provide healthy meals for students if there is no corruption," said Ms Khomkham.

Unfortunately, not all Thai pupils are as lucky as the students at Wat Makut Kasatriyaram School. Some schools have been accused of not using the state funds for meals, and instead misusing or siphoning off the rest.

The National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) division in Nakhon Ratchasima recently discovered that at least four state-run schools in the province supplied students with

substandard lunch meals.

According to the NACC, the management of each school only spent part of their allotted budgets and could not explain where the rest of the money went.

Some schools claimed that they did not embezzle it, but spent the rest of the lunch money on other student activities such as sports.

In some cases, the number of students registered for school lunch programmes was found to be higher than the number of students enrolled in a

school, suggesting that the student numbers were fabricated in order to receive more money.

The findings are another blow to the credibility of the state-run school lunch programme. Since 1999 when it started, the government has provided at least 20 baht per pupil per day for students at preschool to elementary levels.

Two weeks ago, the Office of the Basic Education Commission (Obec) transferred the director of Maheyong School in Nakhon Si Thammarat province to an inactive post, pending an investigation, after a video clip went viral this month showing a student with only rice, a soup containing vegetable scraps and watermelon for lunch.

Another director of a primary school in Surat Thani last year was also suspended after parents complained the school was feeding students lunches consisting of *khanom cheen* noodles mixed with fish sauce.

To tackle the problem, Interior Minister Gen Anupong Paojinda has vowed to take tough action against those involved in misusing funds for school lunch programmes, saying that stricter terms should be imposed on private caterers hired to provide lunches for students.

Gen Anupong said school directors under the supervision of Obec, as well as local governing officials have been instructed to ensure that contracts signed between school directors and caterers should include terms that allow schools to scrap the contracts if meals are found to be of low or insufficient quality.

He also said he had ordered

investigators to check if school directors were forced or coerced by anyone to sign the contracts.

"If the probes find that anyone has been involved in misusing the funds, they will face both criminal and civil action," said Gen Anupong.

Meanwhile, Obec has ordered Educational Service Area Offices nationwide to make regular random inspections of meals provided by schools, to ensure that students are receiving lunches with adequate nutritional value.

Obec secretary-general, Suthep Chitayawong, said that stealing students' lunch money is an unacceptable act as it is not only a matter of enriching oneself by siphoning money meant for public causes, but it is also "a crime that damages the lives of this nation's future generation".

Mr Suthep said poor nutrition, especially in kids, can have a lifelong negative impact on growth and development.

"Poor diets affect them both physically and emotionally," he said.

"This includes the development of organs like the lungs and heart, the immune system, as well as the ability to perform daily activities. Intellectually, inadequate nutritional intake leads to poor brain function, increased susceptibility to diseases, and slow learning."

According to a study conducted by Mahidol University's Institute of Nutrition, good school lunches should have a wide variety of items on the menu.

The institute suggests that every school have an in-house nutritionist or a teacher with a lot of nutritional knowledge to oversee children's meals.